

Second thoughts on the good old
days in the old home town

Merrily We Roll Along

Condensed from The Rotarian

William F. McDermott

FROM MY RADIO the other night came a familiar melody: "How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood -" And it sent my own mind back over the trail of memory - back to the white cottage with a whole block of ground for a yard; back to the hammock swinging beneath the apple trees; back to neighbors exchanging jams, jellies, tidbits of news; back to the leisure and serenity of small-' town life at the turn of the century.

Few of us there are who, having spent their youth in the open spaces of yesterday and then migrated to the city, do not grow misty-eyed, as I did, at the thought of those less troubled days. But, as I dwelt on them, through the glamorous mists of memory some of the harder facts of life in the old home town began to appear.

Mine was a good town by the standards of the time; it won a \$1000 prize for being "the model community of Kansas in which to rear children." But what happened to some of these

children? Well, two of the gang I used to run with as a shaver became bums. Three others, two of them deacon's sons went to the penitentiary. Another had a clever lawyer. The rest turned out good, bad and indifferent.

In those good old days we supplemented our juvenile income peddling handbills, running cows to pasture, cleaning stables; by sneaking into the back door of illegal saloons and selling for two cents each the empty whisky and beer bottles we had found along roads.

Our mischief consisted in toppling over outhouses on Halloween, and in putting an acid called hoky-poky on dogs' hearing them howl as away in a frenzy of pain. Or we would loosen the nut on a wagon wheel and then hide nearby, watching with glee as the farmer drove away. When the wheel came off the Wagon toppled half-over. A runaway sometimes resulted.

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(The Rotarian, May, '41)*

On the Fourth of July it was great sport to throw cannon crack- beneath jittery horses. Four- to eight-inch firecrackers were freely sold to children and the Fourth was a day of runaways, fires, injuries and sometimes death. Fatal lockjaw was frequent.

By way of a thrill, we used to have "chariot races" with the family vehicles. Meeting on a country road wide enough for two or three buggies abreast, we would mark off a course. Then, whooping and yelling and laying on the whip, we worked those staid animals into a dead run, buggies clattering dangerously close to each other. Other times we would play runaway, one driving the horse at a gallop, seesawing on the reins to make the vehicle swerve crazily, and the other, posted 100 yards or so ahead, making a dive to catch the horse by the bit and the nose to stop him.

We hung around the livery stable -the source, I am sure, of all the obscenity in the world. We stole watermelons and fruit, milked farmers' cows, broke gas lights, and played hooky from school.

If we were mischievous, even destructive, remember we were left mostly to our own devices. We Just grew, and often that meant we grew wild. Boy Scouts and 4-H Clubs were unknown. Supervised playgrounds would have been laughed at. Summer camps had hardly been heard of. If we had had the organized school sports of to

day, the equipment and trained leadership available to cities and towns, we wouldn't have perpetrated the devilry that we did.

In those days public sanitation was a pitiful misnomer. Our communities buried babies almost by battalions. Raw river water was pumped into a reservoir, crudely filtered, and piped into homes. Once a year the reservoir was drained and cleaned. Dead animals were nearly always found, a cat or dog or rabbit. Many homes had wells a privy and barnyard, all on the same lot. A well was used until the water tasted or smelled bad.

Outhouses were cleaned by a city "scavenger." His implements were .a covered wagon, a muck fork, and a barrel of lime. The dump was the riverbank below town, but only 12 miles above the water intake of another town. No wonder typhoid was common. It was a disease to strike terror to many hearts. Several of my playmates, including my high school sweetheart, died of it.

In those days anybody could run a dairy. The milk was strained through a cloth to get rid of drowned flies and dirt which dropped off the cow's udder. Raw milk in huge cans was toted about in spring wagons. A quart cup was used to measure the milk, and the fluid was placed in any container, such as a crock or a dish, the housewife might put out on the

porch. There was no inspection of cows, no tuberculin tests, no compulsory cleanliness.

In grocery stores, food was kept in open containers. Careless clerks didn't worry about covering edibles when sweeping. Down each side of Main Street was a continuous string of hitching posts. A businessman would drive to work in the morning, hitch his horse out in front all day and drive home at night. Manure would pile up, dry out in the wind, and go sweeping down the street in blinding dust, while the flies spread to the grocery store. The flies plagued us in droves. Every home had its home-made fly-shooing device - strips of paper nailed on the end of a stick, which was swished through the air to keep flies out of our food.

There was a lot of town pride, but it took strange forms. We were proud of our churches, but they battled continually over doctrine, and each claimed a monopoly on the Lord. When a devout Methodist woman married a Baptist widower and joined his church, bigoted tongues wagged furiously. In the stores, women clerks stood from eight until six at their counters, and until 10 p.m. on Saturdays -for \$6 a week. Nobody protested.

The town was without a hospital. Once, when I was eight years old, a growth in my throat shut off my breath. I was blue from strangulation and apparently had only a few minutes to live. The old family doctor laid me out on the kitchen table, put in a silver tube, and I breathed easily again. He had never seen the operation done. He had read about it, and took a chance.

We didn't have a gymnasium or game room In the town. Finally a revivalist held a meeting and raised \$12,000 for a YMCA building. It had a gymnasium, a library, and baths. The novelty of anything but a washtub bath caused the townsmen to work those facilities nearly to death.

Most school children went only through the eighth grade. The high school occupied four rooms on the second floor of an all-service building. In my graduation class were four boys and 17 girls. Today 200 graduate in a year.

We were well intentioned, but smug. We sang sentimental old songs, and liked the new ragtime, but we thought any music above that was only the foible of highbrows. We would have considered as sissy the great high school chorus of today which sings masterpieces of music. We didn't know the meaning of a symphony or an oratorio, and didn't care. How different our tastes were from those of the youngsters today who unaffectedly like good music, art and literature.

Public transportation was a matter of mule-drawn streetcars. Between collecting fares, the drivers would use blacksnake whips to get up speed. Downhill they would let the car run onto the mules' heels to make them move. It was considered anyone's inherent right to beat his horse, his dog, or his

children as he saw fit. One of the nightmares of my memory is the appearance of the half-starved, listless hack-horses which met the trains; their ribs stuck out like sores. And of the way their drivers kicked, yanked and tortured them. It's years since I've seen the sadistic cruelty we accepted as commonplace.

I haven't named my old home town until now, because I want you to see it as it is instead of as it was.

It's Winfield, Kansas, a fine home community of 10,000 people. Streets are paved, homes are lovely, and every conceivable convenience is available. Two fine hospitals serve the sick for hundreds of miles around. Schools are well equipped, playgrounds and gymnasiums are plentiful. The college gym will accommodate 4000 spectators at a basketball game or 5000 for the annual *Messiah*.

There is a community spirit which is a revelation to one who has been away for nearly a third of a century. There has been no municipal operation tax in Winfield for 20 years: the profits from the municipal electric light plant pay all city expenses except schools, and provide money to build parks, a city hall, a stadium, a \$300,000 dike to prevent floods.

In the churches, bickering over doctrine has disappeared. Yearly the leading churches join in a union meeting of spiritual instruction and inspiration. They support community funds for relief, work together for the Red Cross, advance religious education, have drama, clubs for youth, and their leaders are active in Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce projects for community betterment. Rotary has a loan fund which has aided scores of needy students, and a flourishing junior baseball league of 120 boys. The churches preach religion still, but work for heaven here as well as hereafter.

And how about youth? Well, they are thrill-seekers just like my generation. They get into jams for speeding, and have to be straightened out occasionally. But they have aspirations and ambition, prepare for vocations and citizenship, go to college in large numbers.

The only distressing thing about them is their pessimism. They've grown up to doubt that there's any progress in the world. If I could only make them realize what progress there has been just in my generation! Maybe they'd see then that there is a march of civilization worth preserving, and even worth fighting for. How can I prove to them that, with incomparably better environment, with a franker view on life, and with ideals that a turbulent decade has not destroyed, they run rings around anything we had in my generation?

Doubtless they'll discover that in time. Meanwhile - I note that the good old days are gone forever. And I see no cause for tears.