

RECOLLECTIONS OF MY HOMETOWN

By Nilah Turner

Littlefield, Texas, could have been named Utopia when I was a child. Despite the blue norther storms some winters, ever-lasting sandstorms in the springs and falls that blasted me with stinging pebbles, followed by drought or floods, to me, the town was perfect.

Littlefield is a little farm town on the Texas High Plains. Main Street is four blocks long and butts into Highway 84 and ends with a good view of the railroad station. Designing the town so that Main Street ran straight south from the depot, meant several streets angled off Main. From an early age, I walked every street between my house and town regularly, and to me the streets were perfectly straight.

Walking, I was careful not to step on a crack and “break my mother’s back.” Everyone did a lot of walking, rope jumping and bicycle riding. I don’t remember a single overweight child. We were too active to gain weight.

My freedom was unbelievable. I walked to my daddy’s store or the post office or library by myself.

We always lived in town, and I viewed this a distinct disadvantage because I couldn’t ride a bus to school or eat lunch at the school cafeteria because I lived too close to school.

Saturday nights in Littlefield were BIG. Before Daddy parked the car, we “drug” Main so we could see who and how many were there we knew. Saturdays brought in everyone from all outlying area towns and communities. Among other activities, Saturday was the day almost everyone shopped for groceries. Daddy had to drag Main several times before finding a parking space.

Dragging Main continued a tradition among young people through the 60s and early 70s, with plenty of parking space in front of the businesses.

As youngsters, my sister and I usually got a quarter each on Saturdays. We knew who made the best hamburgers. Fifteen cents bought a hamburger with a hefty round of ground beef, topped with a fat tomato slice, dill pickles, lettuce and a fat wheel of onion. Both buns got a generous smear of tangy mustard. Both sides of the bun were toasted and the hot burger almost burned our hands as we lifted the big square parchment paper-wrapped package.

Behind the line of stools covered in red leather was a row of booths, but we always sat on the stools so we could twist and turn and see everything and everybody. Shapely bottles of Coke, Pepsi, orange and chocolate soft drinks were a nickel each.

The dime we got back from the café would get you in a movie for a double feature. (There were three theatres on Main Street, and later two drive-in theatres were

built.) Across the street from our favorite café, there was a soda fountain at the front of the grocery store. A single dip ice cream cone was a nickel, a double dip, a dime. We licked our cones as we walked up and down the main blocks.

On Sunday we all went to church, and sat by Kelly and Harper, elderly ladies we called by their surnames for some reason. They each put a quarter in the collection plate from their meager income, and gave us a nickel a piece which we spent as fast as we could walk to the store a block away while our parents visited. You can't believe what a nickel would buy. Jaw breakers, candy canes and peanut butter balls were five for a penny... A nickel's worth filled a candy sack full.

Littlefield had two bakeries on Main that filled the air with the wondrous smell of bread baking and donuts frying. After church Daddy usually bought a cream pie with meringue a mile high.

West Texas had cool summer nights. This was before air conditioning. We just opened the doors and windows. And speaking of doors, I guess we had a lock, but if we had a key I don't know where the key was kept. No one ever locked the doors to their houses. And when you got out of your car, you left the key in the ignition.

I could lie under the cherry tree all day and read and watch clouds. The best clouds in the world floated overhead. The clouds turned into people, animals, trees, rivers and mountains.

We played in the street. Early on our street wasn't paved and we marked off our hopscotch games with sticks. When the fire whistle sounded from the top of City Hall, we deserted the street fast so the Wild Man, who was a volunteer fireman and lived further up the street, had the whole street to fly down, lickety-split. All the firemen were volunteers. I think the Wild Man's free rein to press the pedal to the medal was the main reason he volunteered. If there ever was a disastrous fire, I don't remember it, but that fire siren went off on a regular basis.

After the Wild Man got to the bottom of the hill we resumed our games. We made our own can walkers and stilts and spent hours playing red rover. Every walk was filled with nature. Horned toads and lizards abounded, as well as grass snakes and prairie dogs. We put chewing gum on a string and tied it to a stick and walked over the prairie and "fished" for tarantulas, or carried buckets and buckets of water trying to "drown out" a prairie dog for a pet. In the spring the prairie in front of our house, which was an undeveloped block of land, was filled with bluebonnets, evening primrose, Indian paintbrush and buttercups.

I can't remember the last time I saw a profusion of these flowers blooming in this part of Texas. Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen a horned toad in the last 35 years or more, much less those beds of red ants the horned toads frequented. Their long tongues lashed out whip-like, snapping up the red ant candy.

Are there still tarantulas around? They were in such profusion we'd see them in the middle of the roads and streets.

And terrapins, turtles we called them, crossed the roads and streets every time a rain or shower threatened or wet the earth.

When it rained, our city park became a playa lake overnight with thousands of tiny fish and salamanders swimming around. I never knew where they came from. Did they bury themselves waiting for the next rain, or were they rained from the skies?

The park was an interesting excursion. The city park was where everyone went for picnics, to play ball, neck and drink. Often, even in broad daylight, someone would be there necking.

The concrete tables, when they weren't under water, were often covered in half-eaten watermelons, and picnicking remains. Empty whiskey and liquor bottles littered the premises. Never mind that our town was "dry." A dry town only meant there were no *legal* liquor sales. Even kids knew the names, or nicknames, of the bootleggers.

Thinking about our carefree days and freedom makes me feel concerned for all the children in today's society who never have any free time to think and dream and watch clouds and be children.

This brings to my mind some of my grandchildren who seldom sit down at the table for a family dinner. We sat down to a home cooked meal around the table three times every day. They can't believe how we spent the whole summer without camps, classes, lessons and structured activities every day.

Even I find it hard to believe what a quarter would buy back in the good old days.

I told a granddaughter how far a quarter went and about the huge crowds in Littlefield on Saturdays and on first Monday "Dollar Days" when we had to watch where we were going so we wouldn't bump into someone. She looked at me like she'd believe my story after I passed a polygraph test.

Littlefield, like most small towns far and wide have lost residents and population fast as pouring whey off clabber through cheesecloth. But my childhood memories of Littlefield will never diminish.

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