

THE BEST OF TIMES?

To paraphrase a well-known book title, "Children Remember the Darndest Things." They store up bits and pieces of irrelevant knowledge; their impressions of people, places and events are largely subjective.

Life rushes by and then one day someone asks, "Do you remember ....?" Oh my, yes! A spate of memories flood the mind in isolated pictures and well remembered voices, interesting only to those who had been there with you in that place and time.

There is always a large canvas, painted upon by a successions of generations, that serves as a backdrop to the stage upon which this younger generation struts its hour.

My backdrop was Bowling Green in the nineteen twenties.

On Saturday mornings whole families of farmers came to town in their wagons. They gathered at the Courthouse to buy and sell produce in season, horses and cattle at any time of year, to buy supplies at the feed store and to exchange views with their far-flung neighbors. Wives shopped for kitchen staples and household items not provided by the itinerant "tinkers" who traveled endlessly around the countryside with pots and pans, needles and thread and a scissor sharpening machine, and they visited with other farm wives. The young children played quietly together. It was off-limits to us, but townsmen mingled with farmers every Saturday.

On Saturday afternoons we were allowed to go to the movies. The films were silent; the audience was not. We laughed at Ben Turpin, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin; we groaned as we shared Pauline's terror when her perils seemed likely to overwhelm her, and hissed the villains with a vengeance. The piano player ran the gamut of her repertoire from light hearted trills, through pathos, to menace inducive of nightmares.

After the movies we trooped into Callas' drugstore for a chocolate coke or a cherry phosphate. There were round white tables and little "ice cream" chairs. It was a gathering place for everyone.

On two sides of the town square, built above street level, were shops - the dry goods Emporium, the Bazaar, McElroy's Five and Dime, Mr. Toy's barber shop and, my favorite, the stationers where I could buy a book for 50¢.

My friends and I were hooked on "The Little Colonel" and "The Outdoor Girls", both prolific series. We read "Hans Brinker and His Silver Skates",

Louisa M. Alcott, the brothers Grimm, Hans Andersen and even dipped into Horatio Alger whose marvelous titles - "Rags to Riches" and "Poor But Honest" etc. were a joy.

Most of us found The Bobbsey Twins boring and gagged on Pollyanna. My great grandmother gave me Elsie Dinsmores (I wouldn't have wasted my own money on that paragon of virtue) and I dutifully read them on Sunday afternoons. Books took the place of dolls on my Christmas list and I don't recall ever having a dolls' tea party with friends.

After the pleasures of Saturday, there was Sunday school and church at 11:00, Sunday dinner with the family (usually the only day in the week when we were all together), then Mamma would go into the parlor to play the piano, Grandmother to her room for a nap and Mother off to spend the afternoon with friends. I read Elsie Dinsmore.

At 7:00 it was time again for church, but it was only Grandmother and I who went. For her it passed the time; for me it was a family duty. Mother escaped both services entirely more often than not.

In the big Baptist church the pulpit area was very broad side to side, behind it were sliding panels that opened onto the river Jordan, backed by mural of the appropriate landscape. The river was actually the baptismal pool. The large choir loft was above the pulpit.

The ceremony of baptism was quite impressive, and no doubt it is still followed in same way. I rather fancied wearing the white robe and being the center of attention and so I needed little urging when Miss Cherry suggested that twelve was just the right age for me to be baptized.

The very next Sunday, as the last hymn was being sung, I walked up to the front pew (dubbed by many as "the sinner's bench") and waited for Dr. Violet to ask whether I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior. I had naturally assumed that everyone did, but obviously one had to so inform the congregation.

My great moment came two Sundays later, but it was not quite as I had imagined it. I walked down the left hand steps and beheld Dr. Violet in hip waders. I got a fit of giggles, slipped and sank right into the river, swallowed a cupfull of the Jordan and went back up the steps looking a very sorry mess.

We were not finished with church for the week - there was Wednesday night prayer meeting. Again it was Grandmother and I who attended. The service was short, mostly prayers and hymns, and was held in a small room at the side of the main church.

I was to redeem myself on Wednesday evenings by reciting poetry to the captive congregation - it probably made a nice change from prayers.

This came about as a result of elocution lessons. I don't know whose idea this was (certainly not mine), but Saturday mornings found me trudging up many flights of stairs to a big, bare room with a desk, a chair, a stage and a large American flag. Could this have been the Business College building?

At any rate, a very pleasant woman taught me proper gestures and intonations. It brought out the ham in me, and I soon expanded my horizons beyond Wednesday night prayer meeting to "appearances" before diverse groups and a place on the bill when piano and dancing teachers gave recitals to show parents and friends how well they had taught my contemporaries. These performances were held in a place with a proper stage, boxes and season tickets for events far beyond the scope of local talent. I vaguely recall that appearances by professionals were sponsored by the University.

My forte was war poems, but I could dash off Kubla Khan, Thomas Campion's "Cherry-Ripe" and any number of Shakespeare's sonnets. I also knew every bit of "The Ancient Mariner" but found this was likely to make an audience restless.

For some arcane reason, my elocution teacher chose me for a most peculiar mission. She and I toured the county to very small rural schools where I demonstrated the proper way to recite the pledge of allegiance to our flag. I enjoyed the tour, but I have never figured out why we went.

We started school when we were six and most of us could read by that time. We did not need "social adjustment" as we had been playing with other children from infancy. I don't recall a school bully and good manners, taught by example at home, prevailed. Teachers were free to pound knowledge into our heads and to discipline us when we transgressed the rules of good deportment.

I do not remember whether the elementary school had three floors or four, but it was old and some thought it should be replaced. Fire drills were frequent and well organized. A large metal escape chute ran from top to bottom of the building, with an entrance door located on each floor. The doors were kept locked between drills and the senior teacher on each floor was in charge of the key.

The top floor students went down first, the teacher finally yelling "All out" as a signal for the next floor to start.

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The inside of the chute was constructed of S curves, gentle enough for safety but steep enough to prevent any young joker from stopping midway. When one's turn came, one sat down in the entrance, pushed off, and were dashed zig-zag fashion down this dark cylinder, to be shot out into the schoolyard.

In history class heroic figures strode across our horizons - Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, Gengis Khan, Hannibal, Charlemagne and Suleiman the Magnificent. To this day, history is my preferred reading.

We took our geography neat - not thrown into the melting pot of "social studies". We could quickly locate any country on the class globe; we knew its topography, its soil structure, its crops and livestock, flora and fauna, for upon such essentials is the character of a nation formed.

Frequently, a particular country was studied in even greater depth. Students took turns making relief maps, bringing in items native to the country when available, making drawings, writing essays and even dressing in homemade native costumes.

Miss Dishman was responsible for my regrettable nickname. I was a whiz at written tests, but in class my mind wandered far afield. On one particular day, in reply to a simple question that I had not really heard, I replied "I don't know." Completely exasperated, Miss Dishman said, "You are the most dubious child I have taught since your Uncle Browder." The class loved it and I became "Dubie" forever after.

My dreams were of books bearing my name as author; Uncle Browder's dreams were undoubtedly of daring cavalry charges. Before he was twenty he had ridden into Mexico with Black Jack Pershing and had then followed him to France. There he died, not gloriously in a cavalry charge but quietly, in a field hospital, of pneumonia contracted while on sentry duty in that very wet autumn. The nursing sister in charge wrote to Mamma and sent a snapshot of Browder's grave. It was covered with wildfloweres, gathered by the nurses who had been charmed by the young American. They were making a bead wreath to send home with his body. At least there was a body to bury - the Davis family had not been so fortunate; their son had been blown sky high.

Mamma (my grandmother, Martha Hughes) wore black for the rest of her life. Her interests centered on the Gold Star Mothers whose project was a tree planted along the Dixie Hwy. for each fallen son. I don't know how far they

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got, but Mamma's involvement brought unexpected visitors to Bowling Green. Sir Harry Lauder, the Scots comedian, was on tour in America and Anne, Lady Lauder spent a few days with us. They too had lost an only son. She and Mamma exchanged letters and fruit cakes for years. Did Sir Harry perform on our local stage?

Another Gold Star Mother was Madame Schumann Heineck (I really do not know the correct spelling) who was imperial, imposing and very kind. Also very large. I am fairly sure that she sang on our stage.

And how could I ever forget our American Indian guests! I have no idea how Mamma enticed them to break their journey to Washington (where they were to present a petition to the Bureau of Indian Affairs), nor do I recall their tribal affiliation, but Sioux seems to ring a bell.

We met the two braves and one squaw at the railroad station. The Busy Bee Cafe nearby had a popcorn machine in the window and the younger man, whose name was long and complicated and who acquiesced to being called Tony (!), was fascinated. I told him it was Indian maize heated with salt and butter. Mamma bought a bag for each of us - they loved it.

There was a big production that night on our local stage. The older brave painted his body silver (shockingly, he wore only a silver loin cloth) and topped it off with a beautiful feather headdress. The girl wore a lovely tribal dress.

The backdrop was standard forest, and against a fake tree stage right stood the girl. The brave was at stage left, standing with one foot on a fake rock. Their first song was the popular "Indian Love Call" and gradually, as the song neared the end, they met center stage in a chaste embrace.

Leading up to this main event, two Boy Scouts marched onstage with a large American flag, the audience rose and pledged allegiance, someone led the singing of the National Anthem and somewhere in this warmup period I recited Hiawatha. Carried away, and feeling I'd done my duty by our native Americans, I did an unsolicited encore of Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier", hardly appropriate on this all-American occasion. I finished the evening in the wings with Tony who was sitting on a chair stringing beads on wires. This was to be a bracelet for me, and I wore it until it came apart years later.

There were so many diversions in Bowling Green back in the twenties. There were quiet dinner parties and musical evenings given by Mamma's generation. Friday night "hops" and Saturday night dances at the Country Club, interspersed with lively dinner parties, for my Mother's generation. There were

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lawn parties, croquet games, picnics at Beach Bend and tableaux presented by young matrons. For us, the younger generation, there were pajama parties where we experimented with coca cola and aspirin (it didn't keep one awake all night as promised), "mixed" parties where spin the bottle and post office were the big attractions. We played musical chairs and sardines indoors, hide and seek indoors and out, tag, blind man's bluff, jacks, mumbly peg, marbles, pitched horseshoes, roller skated, rode bicycles and ponies. And we too had picnics.

Our class had a picnic in a farmer's field and the farmer's wife brought us a big jug of milk, fresh that morning. The milk lovers among us drank deeply. A few days later we had high fevers and chills. I was ill for many weeks and when I returned to class there was a vase of flowers on a friend's desk; she had died the day before. A routine X-ray thirty years later showed my scars of bovine TB. There must have been a rich kid in our class; I remember him being driven to the picnic by a chauffeur.

A typical spring or summer day for my mother's crowd might start with breakfast at the Country Club, where the cook, Houston, specialized in ham, scrambled eggs and hot biscuit. Golf or bridge, depending upon the weather, lunch, then home to rest before the evening's party.

All things were not bright and beautiful in Bowling Green. A cross was burned on the lawn by the town fountain. The crowd was small and silent. I was not frightened; I was confused. A cross was the symbol of our Christian faith, so were these white robed men who burned it the heretics that Dr. Violet had preached about? I was A.W.O.L. again, and hoped I would be caught getting back so that I could ask questions. It was a long time before I connected that cross with Jim, who never came back to finish picking the gooseberries in the garden.

As far as I know, that was the only Klan incident in our town, aside from the time they taught a lesson to a chronic wife beater. They roughed him up and made him the butt of town jokes, but he never again laid a rough hand on his wife.

There was another hanging, but this one was self-inflicted. It was the very nice boy who sat behind me in school and wore polish on his fingernails.

One of the town's most popular young men drowned during a picnic on the river.

There was once a trolley car line in Bowling Green, but it was abandoned after a boy was fatally injured trying to hop on while the car was gathering speed. It was Halloween night, the boy was in high spirits and there were those who said that the conductor had pushed him off.

On the whole, however, Halloween was a time of innocent fun. It was dressing up and being a part of the parade downtown. It might even be a private party after the parade. We did not bang on doors and yell "trick or treat" though we might stick a pin in your doorbell and run.

The whole nation held its collective breath as we waited for the rescue of Floyd Collins, trapped in a Kentucky cave, and was shocked when the rescue attempt failed. For a long time after, "The Ballad of Floyd Collins" was a hit on victrola records. At this time there was another ballad entitled "The Match Girl" and this was connected with the untimely, violent death of a factory girl - or so I gathered at the time. Sad songs were enjoyed in that era, but there were happy best sellers also.

Everyone played the records of the Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Sheehan patter. "After you, Mr. Gallagher." "No, after you, Mr. Sheehan." There was "Frog Went A'Courtin'" and "Billy Boy" with verses that asked, "Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy? Can she bake a cherry pie, charming Billy?"

There were four generations of women in our house - my great grandmother Isabella (nee Wright) who had separated from her Civil War soldier husband before I was born, my grandmother Martha (Mamma), Mother (Mary Virginia) and me. Grandfather Richard Hughes spent most of his winters in Carizzo Springs, Texas.

My parents met during rehearsals for a local production of "Babes in Toyland" when Paul Twyman, a Hopkinsville boy, was a student at the Bowling Green Business College. There was a whirlwind courtship, a June wedding, a daughter late the following April, a difference of opinion on the size of a subsequent family and a friendly divorce.

One day when I was nine, Cousin Mary Garvin took me into Callas' drugstore for a restorative. The waitress asked why I was crying and I replied, "My Mother just got married and she's going away."

She could have been moving to France instead of Louisville. When Uncle Browder's body was shipped home in the early twenties, there was a big funeral. True to their word, the beautiful beaded wreath made by the nurses came with him. Entirely unexpected was the French officer, who had been in the hospital with Browder, and his horse. The Frenchman was a nine days sensation, especially when he donned shorts and walked down to the Y.M.C.A. for a workout.

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He fell for Mother and she was not indifferent to him. Aunt Sara, whose domain was the kitchen but was never backward with advice to any family member she deemed in need of straightening out, blew the whole romance into oblivion. The Frenchman had a mistress!

She is reputed to have said to Mamma, "Miss Martha, that woman in his picture frame is too young to be his ma and it sure ain't no lady lookin' back at me."

The nurses' beaded wreath was fitted into a niche in the specially designed headstone and glass was fitted over it. I wonder whether it is still intact.

There was of course no central heating in our house, but it was delightful to go to bed by firelight and to waken to a fresh blaze. Uncle Alec took care of all the fireplaces, fetched and carried for everyone, dug the garden beds and weeded, did the heaviest work during spring and autumn house cleaning. He was as quiet and gentle as Aunt Sara was vocal and tough. The last time I saw him he was an old man, still devoted to Mamma. She was sitting in her wheelchair and Uncle Alec was massaging her useless arm and leg, and he said, "Miss Martha, you gunna walk some day."

I don't know when Laverne came to us - it seemed she had always been there, my dear companion. Aunt Sara told us that there had been "an Indian behind the door nine months before Laverne's grandma was born" and this probably accounted for her straight shiny black hair and high cheekbones.

Between husbands Mother had "suitors" who brought me chocolates and books. The best of the lot was a man named Durant who gave me a beautiful victrola whose sides were painted with fairy tale characters.

He was early for a date one night and Mother was just out of her bath. I greeted him with, "Mother's clean and nearly ready." Another lecture from Aunt Sara on impropriety!

There was the woman who collected, washed, ironed and delivered the heavy laundry every week. There was the traveling seamstress who made my school clothes. She arrived with a portable sewing machine, a box of "sundries" and a batch of patterns and she stayed a week. My school clothes looked much the same from one year to the next.

Food tasted better in those days. There was calorie laden ice cream fresh from the churn, full of fruit in season. Milk was judged by the depth of the heavy cream at the top of the bottle; buttermilk was rich and thick.

Aunt Sara made wonderful beaten biscuits, but she hated every minute of this chore. The dough was turned out onto a marble slab and put through a



wringer (like a small mangle) over and over again until it was just right for baking. Warm salt rising bread, slathered with butter churned by a farmer's wife, was marvelous.

There was ham with red eye gravy and grits in the kitchen with Aunt Sara, Uncle Alec and Laverne. When one of their friends had had a good night's hunting, there would be possum, but the family didn't know about this delicacy. Snap beans were simmered with salt pork on the back of the coal range. They cooked for hours, and when they were ready to be served Aunt Sara added slivers of raw onion.

Aunt Sara was a specialist in herb vinegars. She bottled them in summer, using fresh herbs, especially tarragon. Those of Mother's friends who had found favor with Aunt Sara that year received a bottle at Christmas. Mamma and I joined others in delivering Christmas food baskets to the needy. When Mamma asked Aunt Sara to bake a few cakes for the baskets, the reply was, "I doan bake for trash." She had her own criteria of "quality". Aunt Sara was a dreadful snob.

On rainy summer days there was always the attic to re-explore. There were trunks of outmoded clothes to try on, dressmaker's dummies to clothe, old letters, papers and family albums (alas, now lost). There was a stereoptican with three dimension pictures of foreign climes. And then there was Aunt Sara's room. She must have been fond of her relatives, even unto death, for their last photographs hung on her walls. Perhaps the sight of them lying so peacefully in their satin lined coffins dispelled the horrors of Dante's illustrated "Inferno", which fascinated and repelled me.

When there was nothing better to do, I hung around the blacksmith's shop. The smithy stood beside a stream, under a spreading weeping willow. I think there was a small bridge nearby. I gathered up old horseshoes, made futile attempts to help and generally made a nuisance of myself.

In the springtime the gypsies started their wanderings through the countryside. They had the unfortunate reputation of being thieves, one and all. We were careful to leave nothing portable outside, house doors were locked at night, barn or stable doors padlocked.

One early summer week, when I was very young, Mamma and I came upon a very small encampment on her "bottom land" - a fifty two acre piece near the river. They looked tired and very needy and so of course Mamma brought

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them a food basket the next day. I went back with her, told them where we lived and sat on our front porch half the night, hoping they would kidnap me. I really wanted to travel in that gaily painted caravan; it was much more appealing than the parlour car on the L & N railroad to Louisville.

The annual county fair marked the end of summer's freedom. Everyone went - farm families and townspeople, young and old. There were tents full of cakes, pies, breads and everything that could be canned, preserved, bottled or pickled. There were prize vegetables, fruits and plants. Competition for blue ribbons was fierce. There were games and races and a fortune teller. And then we were faced with another year of school.

Was it really the best of times? Probably not, but we muddled through, sharing pleasures and sorrows with friends and neighbors, and we survived. I hope that Bowling Green has not outgrown those qualities that made it a very special small town for a child growing up there in the nineteen twenties.