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THEN THERE IS THOMAS

by Margie Cooke Porteus

It can be argued that all small towns in a geographic area during a given period of time have more in common than they have in differences. Of course, there are exceptions. One of these was Thomas, Oklahoma, during the twenties and thirties, and, to a lesser degree, today. Thomas, a small town eighty-five miles west of Oklahoma City on Highway 33, is where I grew up during that time. It wasn't until years later that I seriously began to realize the opportunities I had missed to absorb more of the area's diverse culture.

Like most small towns in the former Indian Territory during this period, a large segment of the population was homesteaders and their families. Many remembered, not only when the town was established, but when the Cheyenne and Arapaho lands had been opened for settlement. Many had helped to establish schools and churches before there was a town. When these pioneers moved into town they often brought a milk cow and some chickens, as my parents had. Some brought a horse, but most of these were gone by the mid-twenties. One exception was Floyd Vickers with his horse drawn dray which met the four daily trains. (Today grain elevators rising on the east and west sides of town mark where the trains ran.) Vickers hauled freight and occasionally passengers into town with his dray, which was still working at least into the late forties.

Among the citizens of these decades were the veterans of World War I, the Spanish-American War and even the Civil War. I can remember my grandfather, a Civil War veteran, telling of seeing Abraham Lincoln. What a thrill hearing him tell about it! Even though it was during the Depression, or maybe because of it, these veter-

ans helped bring a sense of patriotism to the community. Veterans were much in evidence then, as now, at Memorial Day observances which remain a big event in Thomas.

Although they weren't called entrepreneurs at the time, there were many enterprising business men. Maybe there were so many because they had the same need to be successful and had the same sense of adventure that had made them or their families willing to take the chance of getting a homestead.

Although some of these enterprises were before 1920, Thomas had the businesses one would expect for that era, plus, at one time or another, it had a brick plant, a broom factory, a cement factory, a canning factory, a cheese factory, a power plant, a feed mill and a flour mill. People talked for years about the smell when the latter burned. Sometime after the mill burned, the people in town were debating whether to pass a ten mill levy. Some of the young boys, not understanding about a mill levy, were quite concerned about where the ten new mills were to be built. Although I don't remember many of those early businesses, I do remember the cotton gin and the power plant whose heartbeat was a soothing, reassuring sound.

So, you ask, how did all of this make Thomas any different from many other small towns in the area? Maybe those things didn't, but other things did.

Southeast of town was the Amish community with their immaculate farms, well-built homes and sturdy barns. Common sights in town were their horse drawn buggies and in summer their horse drawn wagons loaded with wheat vying for space with trucks at the elevators.

We thought nothing of these sights even after the car had replaced this mode of travel for most other persons.

The business community catered to the Amish with hitching racks behind some of the stores. Stutzman's dry goods store kept dark solid color material for their clothes, especially the women's dresses, which were all made alike with no adornments.

Amish children went to rural schools, usually quitting after the eighth grade. Often when they started to school they could speak only the Amish dialect.

Southwest of town a community of Mennonites, who like the Amish were successful farmers, and especially the women, dressed pretty much alike. Both the Amish and Mennonite women wore head coverings in the form of a bonnet.

On a farm a mile southwest of Thomas, the Mennonites sponsored an orphanage which was run by a Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower. Later this was Jabbok Bible School with students attending from other communities, even from out-of-state.

Both the Amish and Mennonite communities were close knit, but this didn't keep them from helping others when there was a need. I especially remember after severe storms in Thomas and Woodward, they pitched in to help rebuild homes that had been damaged.

A third influence on the community was the Indians who lived on farms scattered throughout the area. Like the Amish, most of the children dropped out of school before the twelfth grade. It wasn't until 1938 that any Indians graduated from Thomas High School. It was a common sight to see the men with long braided hair and women with blankets walking along the rural roads on

the way to town, and once there to sit on benches outside the stores.

Growing up in Thomas during the twenties and thirties I never thought about these different cultures, they were just part of the community. It wasn't until my future husband, a New Yorker, visited and his comments and curiosity started to make me realize the uniqueness of the little town.

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