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Inez Schneider Whitney

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Simple celebrated luxuries

Western Oklahoma Memories

By Inez Schneider Whitney

How enjoyable it is to reminisce about the past! What memories I have of the early years of my life. I was born in 1906 on a farm in Oklahoma Territory three miles from the pioneer town Custer City. The next year, Oklahoma became a state.

When the Frisco Railroad came to Western Oklahoma in 1902, Custer sprang up almost overnight. Independence, a flourishing little community, was only a few miles away. Realizing that without a railroad Independence was doomed, businessmen began moving to Custer.

Henry Harmon moved his drug store, John Pyeatt his grocery and dry goods, and Frank Harding his lumber and coal company. Others soon followed. Everett Veatch brought his newspaper, THE INDEPENDENCE COURIER, and renamed it THE CUSTER COURIER. Before long, there were several more stores. Along came two banks and several churches. Then a saloon opened. There was a great deal of opposition from the citizens of Custer and the surrounding community, but the merchants were for it. They thought the saloon would attract new customers. Although it was some time before there was a hospital in Western Oklahoma, four doctors opened offices—Dr. O.H. Parker, Dr. W.W. Parker, Dr. K.D. Gossom, and Dr. C.H. Dean. The doctors delivered babies at home. When I was born, the fee was five dollars. When my brother was born a few years later, it had been raised to ten dollars. Mama used to say jokingly, "Edward is worth more than Inez; he cost twice as much."

One of the first things I remember is my trips to town with Papa. He'd come into the kitchen and say, "I have to make a quick trip into town."

"I wanna go, I wanna go!" I'd say, jumping up and down.

"Do take her," Mama would reply; "It'll be easier for me to get the work done."

Papa would already have old Deck hitched up to the buggy, so away we'd go. When we reached Custer, he would get out and tie old Deck to one of the hitching posts along a side street. Then he'd lift me out of the buggy and around the corner we'd go to Main Street.

"Do I get an ice cream cone, Papa?"

"Of course. Don't you always?" Into Harmon's Drug Store we'd go and walk up to the counter.

"An ice cream cone for this little lady," Papa would say. Then he'd hand me a nickel to give to Mr. Harmon. Papa would buy a cigar. Mama never let him smoke at home. We'd walk down the street with me licking my cone and Papa smoking his cigar.

There was always something going on in that little pioneer town. Nearly every summer, a carnival arrived. How I loved to ride on the merry-go-round and the ferris wheel. The sideshows were fun too. Booths were filled with toys and housewares lined the streets. The carnival usually stayed about a week. We'd go in every night and sometimes in the afternoon if Papa didn't have to work in the field.

Every two or three years a tent revival would come to town. The minister was always an eloquent "fire and brimstone" speaker. Many sinners repented. People were very generous with their offerings, and the revival left with a substantial amount of money. No one ever seemed to know exactly where they came from or where they went.

Then there was the tent chatauqua. It stayed seven days. There would be afternoon and evening programs of lectures, concerts, and plays. The main attraction one summer was a speech by William Jennings Bryan.

Every Saturday, families flocked to town from the surrounding farms. Mama and Papa took eggs, cream, and sometimes chickens to sell at one of the produce houses. Mamā also churned butter and sold it at Jeff Wilson's store. When she took it in, he'd say, "Mrs. Schneider, I have a lot of people waiting for your good butter."

In hot, dry weather the streets were very dusty, so a water-wagon sprinkler drawn by a team of horses patrolled Main Street to keep it more comfortable.

All the farmers registered for the Saturday drawing. Names were drawn from a hat, and the winners received cash prizes ranging from one to ten dollars.

Another enticement to go to town on Saturday was free tickets to Rex Theater run by Chester Kelley. It was the day of the silent movie. The audience sat enthralled by the exploits of the cowboy favorites William Hart and Tom Mix. Then there were the narrow escapes of Pearl White in THE PERILS OF PAULINE. These films were accompanied by music from a tall player piano with twinkling lights. The movie would conclude our Saturday afternoon. We'd get in our buggy and home we'd go.

These are only a few of my happy Western Oklahoma Celebrations memories. They were made special because they were interspersed with many hours of work and deprivation on the Oklahoma prairie. ●

INEZ SCHNEIDER WHITNEY of Arlington, Virginia is one of WESTVIEW's earliest and most prolific contributors