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# The Challenging 5's To 50's-- And Politics

By Opal Hartsell Brown

**BACKGROUND NOTES:** Youth today *can* go to college if they are determined to do so. This article, Chapter 3 from a book-length manuscript titled *THE CHALLENGING 5'S TO 50'S--AND POLITICS*, tells how the writer did that during the "Great Depression" and Dust Bowler era when there were no GI bills or government loans for students.

Having lost her job during a political upheaval, she and many others found jobs impossible to get, so she went back to college to finish her degree. Many students experienced that same poverty.

Four chapters of this manuscript have already been published.

**THE STORY: CHAPTER 3:** I had enough money saved in 1930-1931 to attend summer school and hoped to find another job. As often as I could get transportation, I scouted school boards and superintendents on weekends, but the answer was always the same.

"You must be the tenth or eleventh here this week. We have no vacancies and don't expect any."

I heard of an opening in a small town in the southern part of the state and hastened to apply. When I introduced myself to a board member, he was polite and then asked, "Are you a member of the church?" (denomination excluded in respect to those of that faith who did not approve of such tactics)

"No," I answered.

"Then you don't have a chance," he said and gazed at the ground.

I stared at him in disbelief. He sighed and looked up.

"I don't approve of that," he said, but the other two can outvote me."

"I've heard of teachers having to 'stroke the palms' of certain board members in order to get a job," I fired, "but this is the first time I've heard of rejections among different Protestant churches. I realize there is prejudice against Catholics, but Protestants, no!"

"I don't approve of that," the man said, "but that's the way it is. I'm sorry."

Bewildered, I stared at him a moment and then walked away. Back in the borrowed car, my mind whirled like a windmill in March. How could anyone do that? It was preposterous. Cruel!

Then like a slow change in the wind's direction, I wondered what was the difference in that board's attitude and the one at Seminole. One's actions seemed to be based on political prestige, the other on religious fulfillment. People with jobs usually contributed to the church and, like everything else, churches depended on contributions. Or assessments.

Times were pressing for everybody, including my dear parents. The depression had cost them their home in Sulphur, and drought was threatening to uproot them as renters.

Monday afternoon, I went to the dean of women. She had a long list of students looking for teaching positions or part-time work, but nothing to offer. "I don't even have a boarding house," she said, "where students can work for their meals." All I can do is keep your name on the list and hope for a miracle."

Then I went to the Administration Building to check the bulletin board. The only thing was a request from Gladys Gilstrap for a roommate for the fall term. Hurrah! Maybe we could suffer together. She was another teacher axed from the Seminole faculty.

Gladys had already rented a one-room, rawhide cabin for the fall term. It was in the back of a garden next to the alley. Bath and toilet were in the boarding house up front, but we could accept that. Rent was only \$5.00 a month. I could pay my fall enrollment and first \$2.50. After that? A curtain fell over the answer.

Gladys had a loan of \$12.00 a month from a women's club in Ardmore, her hometown. That was enough to pay her rent, buy supplies for her Business

Education major, and purchase a little food.

My fiance, Gorden Brown, of Seminole drove me home, where I worked until the fall term began. When he came to take me back to school, Mother and Dad loaded the car with vegetables, home-canned food, and eggs. They shared their basics: sugar, coffee, salt, flour; their linens, dishes, and coins. I was ready to set up housekeeping with Gladys.

We brightened the cabin with a chenille bedspread, frayed towels for curtains, and a Mexican scarf on the kerosene lamp table. We tossed a rag rug on the linoleum and called it "Persia." An old granite stew pan from the alley served as a night chamber.

We had no radio, record player, or telephone, and the only place we went on week nights was to the library to study. I had a Spanish text, but the rest of my lessons I studied wherever I could find books.

Occasionally, I went to a football game in the afternoon, primarily to watch "Dad" Fentem lead the band. Even though he said in sociology class he couldn't play an instrument, he could get more music from the band than any instructor I ever saw.

"I sing," he added, "with my sons. We have a quartet, and I'll take a music test with anybody." He was an excellent professor in social studies also and a friend to students.

There were days when Gladys and I had nothing for breakfast, except canned peaches I had brought from home. We fasted at lunch and scrounged in the evening. She bought crackers, and we made soup with shriveled potatoes, onions, and canned tomatoes. A couple of times, we filched carrots from the landlady's garden to enrich the soup and called it "caviar."

The spare minutes I had, I worked on a short story. When it was finished, I sent it to the editor of the *DAILY OKLAHOMAN*. He didn't use fiction,

but he offered me a job as stringer for college news. I seized it with gusto.

My courses in journalism with Ben Morrison had helped me to watch everywhere I went for news items. Not only did I make enough to pay my \$2.50 a month, but I got to interview the president, Dr. A. Linscheid, every week.

Sitting across the desk from him was like living a poem or a proverb. The epitome of grace and wisdom, he could weave the simplest topics into profundity. Sometimes I felt guilty for lingering too long in his office, but he never seemed impatient.

Gorden took me home Thanksgiving, and we brought back another load of home-grown food. That included pecans and eggs, some of which I sold and traded for such essentials as pens and paper. With the things Gladys could buy, we had enough to last until Christmas and mid-term. She graduated and went home at that time.

My next roommate was an intermarried relative, Eva Barbee, from Seminole. Like the rest of us, she had to survive on a thread and a prayer. Our landlady got new boarders--men working on a highline--and asked me to help serve meals for my lunch. That was help beyond measure, until the men moved to another job.

By the summer term, I was in dire circumstances. I was to graduate in July, but I had no money to enroll. My job as a stringer brought in barely enough to pay rent, and other jobs were non-existent. Determined not to drop out, I waded into the unknown, attending classes every day for two weeks. Then Dad sold some steers and sent me \$10. I hastened to the Registrar's

Office.

"You're too late," he said. "School has been in session two weeks already."

"I know," I answered. "I've been in classes every day."

The registrar stared at me, blinked, and then asked, "Why didn't you enroll before now?"

"I didn't have the money," I answered, "until today. Here it is."

His gaze was questioning. Uncertain.

"I'm to graduate in July," I said, "and I have to go on. I've sacrificed too much to miss it now." I had to clench my teeth to keep from erupting into tears.

"Why didn't you come to talk to me about it?" he asked. "We could have made some kind of arrangements for you."

"I didn't know you would do that," I said, "and besides I was embarrassed. I still..." I clinched my teeth again.

"If you will get a signed statement from each teacher," he said, "that you have been in class all this time, I'll enroll you."

I bounced out of there, got the signatures--some with difficulty--and hurried back to the office. The registrar enrolled me, wished me luck, and I sailed on through the term.

July 21, graduation day, Dr. Linscheid's presence on the stage lifted me from a billboard of poverty to a cloud of spiritual wealth. As the college orchestra played "Coronation March," I tripped down the aisle with several dozen more candidates for degrees, oblivious of straight hair, faded blue blouse, and dingy pleated skirt.

My gray cap and gown became a robe and a crown. My frazzled canvas sandals, pasted down with white shoe

polish, turned into glass slippers. Dr. Linscheid's speech, woven around "The Village Blacksmith," was a nit of coal, pressed into a diamond.

"It is a greater psalm of life," he said, "than Longfellow's classic by that title." Phrase after phrase, he pointed out the blacksmith's strength of body, mind, and character.

"The blacksmith was a hard worker," Linscheid said. "He loved children who stopped after school to watch him. He set the right example before his family. Instead of sending them to church, as some fathers do, he took them and sat among his boys..."

My degree, presented by W. B. Morrison, was a passport to success and happiness ever after, but only for the moment.

I became a housekeeper for my Uncle Mace and family, who had moved to my hometown. The salary of \$3.00 a week, room and board, was the same. I had made as a waitress the summer after graduating from high school.

But these were depression and dust bowl days. I was fortunate and grateful to earn that much. Thousands of homeless people roamed the country, frequenting soup lines. Others with homes had to sign up for free flour.

I was still young, and things would get better someday. ■

*OPAL HARTSELL BROWN, now of rural Davis, has been a moving force among Oklahoma writers for many years and a valued contributor to WESTVIEW since 1981.*

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