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Exemplary lives.

Osceola

Where the Tough Survived

By Tena Bailey

In the winter of 1934-1935, the effects of the Great Depression hung over Western Oklahoma like a cloud shrouding the sun. Many people gave up hope as they realized that lost finances wouldn't be regained. Others came up fighting, never dreaming of giving up. My parents, Phillip (P. J.) and Rosa Martin, were among the fighters. In December of 1934, they built the Osceola Store. Osceola was located seven miles north of Butler, Oklahoma, at a four-corner intersection.

The store was built of rough-hewn cottonwood that was sliced through neatly at the old mill on Barnett Creek, just south of the one-room school and original townsite of Osceola. Also, the cottonwoods came from that creek, where they had grown as majestic giants with towering limbs reaching for the sun, while leaves sparkled in the sunbeams like drops of dew, as only the leaves of the cottonwood can.

First Daddy built only one large room for the General Store, and he and Mama stocked it with canned goods from the wholesale houses in Clinton. Later a bedroom and kitchen were added and finally another bedroom so the family could be looked after while the store was open. Yet we children wouldn't stay put in the family dwelling; we wandered out into the store, visiting with the patrons, listening to the yarns, and learning about life. Youngest of the children, I was worse than the others.

When the store was built, my sister Omagene was 2½; my brother Otis was 14 months, and I was 6 weeks. We grew up loving the atmosphere of the trading area that was permeated by wood smoke from the Franklin stove and the shelves that were filled with fascinating things. Benches surrounded the inside of the store so visitors could "sit a spell" and customers had to reach across them to retrieve the items from their "want lists."

High on a shelf above a locked candy case filled with chocolate bars sat big jars of candy with huge, inviting mouths: jelly beans, licorice sticks, chocolate drops, and orange slices. These things were kept up high on purpose—out of reach. But little girls learn young how to charm and wheedle their whims out of grown-ups who should know better.



Tena Martin Bailey and her siblings in front of the Osceola Store: l-r: Tena, Otis Jay, and Omagene Martin

Every day, some farmer, sporting an uncut beard and striped overalls, would look at me with pity and ask, "Have you had any candy today?"

Because my memory was short, I always said, "No! My mama wouldn't give me any candy today."

Invariably the tough man, who braved zero weather and dust storms, faltered, and he lifted me high above the counter to fill grubby little hands with sugared treats.

Other delights filled the store. There were salt blocks that tasted very grimy and tart to little tongues that tried them out before the cows ever got a chance at them. There were barrels of beans and real banana stalks that swung from the ceiling—dangling their golden, delicious fruit.

There had been a depression, but children with full bellies didn't worry

about it. Only their parents worried.

How did Osceola Store survive with the economic upheaval of the times? Why did my parents dare to go into debt for their first "stock" or inventory of groceries? Why did they believe they could succeed while so many others had failed? Yet succeed they did, and they sold that little store later to purchase a bigger, more successful one in Butler.

Osceola patrons had their share of troubles, and they had little cash to purchase staples. But there was a cream station where Daddy could buy and test cream for the farmers, and he would "candle" eggs to be sure they were fit for market. Cash earned in this creamery allowed farmers to buy sugar, flour, and coffee. Sometimes they dared charge a few groceries until a crop came in or until a cow or pig was butchered. When it was butchering time for a farmer who was delinquent with his account, we fared well. Mr. Farmer, with a cud of tobacco in his cheek and a twinkle in his eye, would drag an eighteen-inch wash tub full of oozing, red, raw meat into the front door of our establishment. That was an awesome sight and scary at first. Later we younguns learned about tenderloin and steak, and those tubs of red meat looked good to us.

Farmers came for miles to trade with us, and few of them drove cars. Most of them came on horseback or with wagons pulled by teams of huge, muscled horses. There were hitching posts mounted on the porch of the store to secure those gigantic animals. The few vehicles that arrived looked like rejects from a salvage yard, and most of those rattletraps had to be cranked before they would sputter, chug, and finally start.

Like a true pioneer, I preferred the horses. Old Snip was the favorite steed to grace Osceola territory. He was a red bay gelding owned by the Ed Kauk

family, who lived a mile south of Osceola. The pony's coat glistened like copper, and he nickered delightfully. The Kauks raised a whole passel of kids, and daily somebody from that household would ride Ole Snip up to the store. While his owner came inside and bought groceries, I held the reins of that glorious mount. Not the biggest kid in the county, I felt hearty holding that horse in tow. I was petite enough to fit into a ten-quart milk bucket (Mother and I had many a round over my muddy footprints in the bottoms of the creamery buckets); yet that old horse with soft, wise eyes just stood like an angel and looked at me, totally compliant and subdued.

If Old Snip was Osceola's favorite horse, Ruth Kauk was Osceola's favorite rider. When Snip came lopin' down the road, stirring up red dust, we looked carefully to see if perhaps Ruth was riding. She always had time for little girls she called "Toots." She usually threw in a free horseback ride. Years later, Uncle Edgar Addington married Ruth Kauk in a wheat field, while she used sunflowers for her bouquet. Smart man! Not only did he get a jewel of a lady, but the farmers cut his wheat free because the wheat field wedding was a response to a dare.

Some folks weren't as congenial as the Kauks, and Dad had a ruckus or two over unpaid bills. One day when Daddy P. J. was in Butler, he looked up a delinquent customer in the lumberyard and proceeded to dun him. There's not much telling what Daddy's exact words were, but he must have made that enormous farmer mad. Although Daddy weighed 200 pounds and had participated in some wrestling, he was no match for his opponent. That farmer grappled him to the floor and chewed off part of his right ear.

On another occasion, Dad hauled wheat to market for a poor neighbor who was having trouble with his bill, with the understanding that the wheat money would be applied to the late account. When this fellow came to settle up, he felt he had been cheated; as he started outside, he said, "P. J., you're a damned liar."

Daddy didn't like cussing, and he believed a man was only as good as his word. As the farmer added a few more curse words, Dad vaulted the counter and caught the customer on the porch. He fared better in this fight, while his surprised daughter watched.

Most of the Osceola patrons were

white, mostly the Russian Germans, who had left Germany, migrated to Russia, and then had come to America because of persecution. But one day another group of people arrived in the building while I was left to keep store. Mama and Papa were enjoying a Sunday afternoon nap, and they had left instructions about being called if a customer arrived.

So isolated was the life of this four-year-old storekeeper that I had never seen black folks—before. Sitting on an empty lard can, just inside the open door, I suddenly sensed a frightening presence on the porch. They must have been folks because they were talking, but they were as black as thunderclouds on a purple tornado day, and



These candy scales were used during the 1930's and 1940's at Osceola. They survived a fire, then lay exposed to the elements for years. Tena Bailey and Shirley Lewis, a friend, found the scales on the old Osceola Store site in 1984; Bobby Lewis of Darrouzett, Texas, restored them; they now remain in Lewis' private museum in Darrouzett.

they were laughing, and they were pointing right at me. My tiny legs didn't have to be long to move fast. I still remember the fear that I felt as I crawled, absolutely speechless, to the bottom of the covers between Mama and Daddy. Mama grabbed my heels and dragged me out to see what the problem was, but it was safer under the covers and under I went again. Only after those "creatures" were far down the road did I venture out. It took me a while to get over that scare and to accept black folks for themselves.

WPA workers, who were given jobs via a government relief program, came

by Osceola almost daily, filling canteens with water and spending pennies for bologna sandwiches or candy bars. Some of them had no money for food. Many of these people came from surrounding farms, doing what was necessary to live. They handled shovels and picks, and they worked hard. Planting the nation's first windbreaks, they carried water, day after day, to rows of Chinese Elm and Cedar trees. They widened roads, straightened curves, and built bridges; thus, they were able to feed their families. Proud and industrious, they were among the depression survivors.

Most people were honest and paid their debts if they could. When tragedy struck a family, Mother would bind up all the delinquent tickets, mark them **paid**, and send them with a sympathy note to the bereaved family.

My father was a Christian who couldn't bear to see anybody hungry. Our family had a philosophy about never giving hungry people money, but never turning them away with empty stomachs. The few beggars who came through were offered work in exchange for their meals. Humanity was sacred. A person didn't humiliate other people or spoil them with handouts. Children were a different matter. If there were hungry children in the neighborhood, they got a visit from Rosa Martin. It was amazing how many sacks of flour and cans of soup a person could pack into the cab of Dad's old Ford truck. It was astounding how a person could survive that generosity.

Mother often said in later years, "Folks weren't selfish in those days; they always shared what they had."

The big-hearted Germans left the brightest memories at Osceola. Those folks knew about sharing. When a German family built a house, the entire community came together and worked. If a farmer needed to have a barn built or if a sick farmer's wheat needed harvesting, the group organized a team effort and got the job done. There was never any complaining or quarreling—just good-natured bantering and a willingness to help.

Most of these people still used the German language; in fact, many of the older people couldn't speak English at all, so Daddy learned some German in order to serve them in the store. They had their own German church near Osceola, where they worshipped and sang to their God in the language of the old country.

My father's old truck, like every-

thing else, had to pay its own way. It was used weekly for the grocery hauls from Clinton; and when Dad was lucky, he got a cattle-hauling job to the stockyards in Oklahoma City. For some crazy reason as a toddler I went on those drives, bouncing around in the truck cab like a twenty-pound ball while the cramped cattle grunted and shifted in the truck bed behind.

In those days, the roads between Osceola and Clinton weren't paved; and when it rained, red mire formed ruts up to the axle on the truck. The vehicle was shifted down to compound as it struggled to pull its vibrating load of cattle up steep hills through the oozing muck.

Cash was scarce, and on these trips we rarely stopped to eat. Lunch was a packed sandwich or a bowl of greasy chili at a roadside cafe. A hotel was a forbidden luxury. Regardless of the unloading hour at the stock yards, we could always look forward to the gruesome half-day trek back home in the dark—often in the mud.

Winters seemed harder in the late thirties when we had only wood stoves for heat and there was no electricity. North winds howled with fury across the rolling hills with only a few farm shanties and stunted tree rows to slow it. Swirling snow quickly blocked country roads, and sometimes the mail wouldn't arrive for days. Then the farmers would saddle their horses and carefully make their way through the drifts to the store for necessary supplies. When a customer, half frozen and bundled beneath huge coats and blankets, arrived, he always stayed an hour or two chewing the fat about neighbors and collecting the community news. Isolated with their families, without telephones and radios, human contact was deemed precious and kept many farmers from the blight of "cabin fever." But after a father had thawed out by the Osceola wood stove and

talked his heart out, he would don his sturdy frontier garb, pull on his damp, cowhide boots, and step into the cold to mount his pony and make his way back home.

When the weather cleared and the roads became passable, Daddy always scheduled a card party; and everyone within riding distance galloped in for an evening of fellowship. They brought decks of cards and dominoes, setting up tables on counter tops, and plumping down on empty nail kegs. Kerosene lamps and lanterns, with fragile mantles glowing, provided dim lights for the games while Grandmother poured mugs of hot coffee and made popcorn. If the wagons could proceed through the muddy ruts, the kids came along for their own party. The Frank Ramsey family alone had eight children. On one of those cold nights, I managed to tip over one of Mama's cabinets, spilling Karo syrup, sugar, spices, and pantry items all over the kitchen.

The evenings weren't all peaceful. Some Custer County residents couldn't handle their booze, and one neighbor came by parties only when he was intoxicated. During a regular Saturday night domino party, this drunk neighbor arrived, wanting to fight. He stood in the middle of the store and threw cans of tomatoes through the glass on the front door.

One fellow seemed to get zonked every Saturday night, and he would get arrested. The next day, one of his teenage sons would travel to Arapaho to collect his dad from the county jail. I can remember standing on tiptoe, looking into the car at a disgraced Papa sleeping off a binge while Son filled up with gas at the Osceola Station. On at least three occasions, this same farmer drove off the Barnett Creek Bridge, plunging into the water below. He walked away from each incident.

Custer County was cattle country, and the Ramsey and Todd Ray Ran-

ches ran a great deal of beef. Several times each year, they moved hundreds of cattle down the road by the store and out to a new pasture. We could hear the lowing and tramping for miles, while the cowboys whooped, waving their dark Stetsons, trying to keep the cows from taking the wrong turn. When Mother heard a herd on the move, she rushed to take her children safely indoors where everyone watched the waves of cattle rippling by. The cowboy that brought up the rear always stopped to buy a knapsack of food and fill the canteens. But nobody ate until that herd was safely penned away from farm crops and neighborhood gardens.

All good things do indeed end. Time passed, and our family sold the store to Uncle Ernest Martin; he later sold it to the Ray family.

Beautiful people with voices from the past stand out in Osceola's memories, shouting out lessons learned while colliding with life. Haneys, Kauks, Crows, Bakers, Hugheses, Joe Miles, Hendrix, Touchstone, and scores of others haunt the old corner where the store burned in the 1950's. The foundations still stand, and the cement porch that was poured by my father is still there—whispering ghosts of the past.

In June of 1984, after burying both of my parents, I went back to commune with those ghosts. Standing on that spot, I remembered the laughter, the hope, and the perseverance of a hardy, brave people of the past. Looking through the debris, I found an old pair of candy scales, made of brass, surviving the years. Those scales have been restored and placed in a museum in Darrouzett, Texas. They are a witness to the fact that Osceola existed, and they are a monument to the fact that the tough still survive. ❧

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