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IRON BEDS AND LILACS

by Joanna Thurston Roper

The Dust Bowl Days--the Depression Days of the Thirties --the Stock Market Crash and the Recession--all of them have been written about, even immortalized, in millions and millions of words. Writers from political analysis to comedians, from poets to novelists have made those days a major period in American history. And, indeed, they were. Everyone is familiar with the award-winning photographs from Oklahoma that first appeared in LIFE, and everyone has read Steinbeck's THE GRAPES OF WRATH. That novel is so powerful that every reader identifies with the Joads and their trek from Oklahoma to the Promised Land. We are so conditioned to the misery of the time that everyone has a mental picture of children who were deprived, skinny, abused little waifs.

Sure, there were waifs around--just as there are now. But some of us weren't waifs. I was born in 1926 and did my growing up during the notorious Thirties, and I adamantly defend the life style that Foster and Louise Thurston provided during the hard-time days between 1926 to 1944. What I took for granted on the farm my parents owned is so different from the popular view of the Thirties. It might almost rank as fantasy compared to children of the Joads. But I have good memories of my childhood in the Thirties, and I'm sure I'm not alone.

My parents, like other adults living then, felt and suffered from the sharp edge of the depression. Dad worried--the pressure was fierce. And Mother has told me how she "managed." From the sale of thirty dozen eggs a week (\$3.30, 11¢ a dozen), she bought the week's groceries,

and with the change, she bought material for clothes--or maybe something pretty for the house. I have a beautiful pitcher that she saw and coveted for months--and finally bought after the price was reduced from a dollar to seventy-five cents. These and other hard-time stories they told me later, but with an air of an adventure survived--not defeated.

Foster Thurston moved to Oklahoma from Texas after World War I--an ambitious, energetic man with a strong reserve of knowledge in areas as diverse as human relations and crop rotation. He met, courted, and married Louise Wartz, a local girl who had been away to A&M College in Stillwater and had come back to teach in the grade school.

They married in April of 1924 and lived on a rented farm south of town. There they made plans to move to the farm that Louise's mother had bought in 1904. They were still living there when I was born in the summer of 1926. In later life I was often teased by my brother, "You weren't born at home--you were born down south of town." True, pictures of that unpainted house south of town aren't too attractive! Eventually, though, I did go home to the new house that had been in the planning and building stages for two years. We spent my second Christmas there--not fully furnished and unlandscaped--but home! And before long, sidewalks of native white stone surrounded the house, trees grew in the yard, lilacs began to bloom, and a fence separated the yard from the pasture and its curling trail to the county road.

Of course, by that time the stock market had probably crashed in New York City, but the resulting shock waves

didn't reach Oklahoma for another two or three years. The black, hard depth of the Depression didn't reach Oklahoma until 1934-1935.

So life was good--from my point of view, it stayed good.

Time at home was probably what is referred to now as "quality" time. There was time to play in the huge grassy pasture--playing there might change with the season or the need of the moment. Running with the wind, sliding down the hill, "acting" on a stage-like ledge of limestone, or maybe just hiding to think. Night time in the winter meant each one of us reading--or their reading to me before I could read my own books. Magazines came regularly and stacked up behind the glass doors of the bookcase until they slid into jumbled profusion. One of my earliest household duties was straightening the magazine stacks. (My copies of CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES I stored in my own desk.) WOMAN'S HOME COMPANION, AMERICAN, DELINEATOR, SATURDAY EVENING POST, COLLIERS, McCALLS, and LADIES' HOME JOURNAL came every month along with Dad's FT. WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM, KANSAS CITY STAR, CAPPER'S WEEKLY, and the DAILY OKLAHOMAN. A trip to the mailbox always netted a good haul.

Nights were time for sitting on the front porch in the summer or around the big round stove in the winter and hearing stories from the past. My grandmother's stories always began, "When I was a child--" At the time I secretly doubted that anyone so old could have ever been a child--why the woman must have been forty years old! And sometimes--not often

--Dad could be persuaded to talk of France and World War I.

Summers were a wild carnival of events--summers were neverending. They were long days of playing and chores--of reading and running--of becoming nut brown in the sun from riding on the cultivator with Dad (when I could bargain with him for "just one more

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round") or running to turn the windmill off and on or bringing the cows in. Mother and I never did any field work. I never heard Dad say where he thought women "belonged" since the issue was non-existent then, but he made his opinion very clear about women in *his* field. He didn't want them there except to take cold water to the thirsty men. Sometimes the hired hands' families had children my age, and I had someone to play with. But if not--no matter. I could always rustle up enough to do.

Two summer events were the arrival of my cousin from Houston and our trip in later summer to Dad's family south of Ft. Worth. (I remember our constant planning to go somewhere else "next summer" after we went to Texas "this summer." It seems that "next summer" never came!)

Two things Mother did not cancel just because it was summer were weekly piano and speech lessons. Those meant two trips to Mangum each week. And it also meant practicing--daily. No excuses. My Houston cousin wasn't left out, either. Part of the agreement that brought her to Oklahoma was that she must continue her music with my teacher.

Part of the charm of summer time was getting to sleep outside on an iron bed under the chinaberry tree. At first sleep was almost impossible--the soft wind, the rustling sounds, the moon over the moun-

tain. And when my cousin was there, the urge to talk and giggle went on and on--until we attracted Dad's attention! And sudden thunderstorms at night meant piling all covers and mattresses into the living room to finish the night in jumbled disarray.

Winters were quieter--looking back now, my impression is that they were

more intense. Snow and ice slowed--or stopped--much outside activity. There were more chores to be done--the kindling, kerosene, and extra water had to be brought in, of course. And for some reason everything seemed to take longer. That was probably true because the sun went down so early. (Daylight Savings was unheard of then--at least on our farm in

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Greer County.) Over late suppers by kerosene lamp, there was talk, talk, talk--current world events, family events, community events, personal events. And maybe an especially intriguing story was carried over past the supper dishes to the living room circle around the big black stove. Cozy. Safe. Stable. Unthreatened.

Christmas had a special excitement that wasn't produced by commercial hysteria. No radio. Electricity didn't reach our farm until the late forties. My memories of Christmases center around native fir trees piled high with dolls

(Shirley Temple) and little sets of dishes and doll blankets--who could ever remember all the loot that accumulated under those trees. A few years were outstanding like the one when they gave me my desk, a bathrobe, and house shoes. For the duration of that day I sat at my desk dressed in robe and shoes and cut out paper dolls. Busy day!

One Christmas season our not-so-trusty Model A was out of running order--almost permanently--with a cracked block. Our Christmas shopping trip was thrilling to me--though I imagine Mother and Dad's Christmas spirit was low. The three of us walked down to Highway 9 and flagged the OTC bus to Mangum. On the way home I was fascinated by the big oblong package Mother carried--but hands off. And Mother could hide things with absolute finality, so that package disappeared until Christmas. It was a miniature cedar chest. It held many a secret treasure over the years, and it sits to this day on my roll top desk, still smelling strongly of cedar.

My first encounter with Santa Claus is not one of my favorite childhood episodes. But the huge net bags Santa provided must have held a half gallon of Christmas goodies!

Winters and their snow storms and heavy coats and long stockings finally disappeared, and not far into spring was

the most hectic, turbulent, upsetting time of the year--wheat harvest. (If, indeed, there was any wheat to harvest!) Dad, usually a cool, suave man, one in control of almost any kind of predicament, lost any semblance of his "cool." Every minute was a crisis. Every word was an ultimatum. Nothing was ever done promptly enough. No hired hand existed who could be everywhere Dad expected him to be. Nobody *ever* measured up! The place for me, I soon learned, was out of the way. No rider could be bargained for then. That situation lasted until I was old enough to

drive a grain truck, but that was well out of the Thirties and outside the scope of my Depression recollections.

However, when the last gray Gleaner combine lumbered off the farm, Dad's "cool" was restored and back in operation. All the high-pitched panic turned to standard operations again, and any emergency the rest of the year was dealt with calmly and efficiently. (I do know now, of

Part of the charm of summer time was getting to sleep outside on an iron bed under the china-berry tree.

course, that wheat-harvest panic isn't an affliction peculiar only to my father. Wheat harvest will always induce a violent case of jitters. Much as we teased Dad, the same phenomenon was being suffered on every farm around us.)

Saturdays were days looked forward to more eagerly than any other. It wasn't even too hard to get up the first time I was called, knowing that today we would go to Granite or Mangum--or maybe both.

If I spent Saturday with Dad, our route usually covered the feed stores, maybe the gin or elevator in season, and best of all, the hardware stores. One in particular was a never-ending delight of dark, gloomy, mysterious nooks and corners to explore. Or maybe it was a day to perch on a burlap-covered nail keg and listen to Mr. Gooch tell stories about the old days. A Saturday in town with Dad always included a stop at the City Cafe where I had a hamburger and Dad ate a bowl of Mr. Christy's red-hot chili. Dad nearly always treated me to a little brown sack of bulk candy, too. (Mother didn't approve of bulk candy!)

When I spent the Saturday trip with Mother, we began at Flossie's beauty shop with its white wicker furniture and chintz cushions where she had her hair "finger-waved"--shampooed, set, and dried under the big monster dryer: twenty-five cents. There was time for me to "read the pictures" in Flossie's magazines or admire the beautiful models on the wall. They always puzzled me--were they from Granite? I sure didn't know them. After that, shopping and buying the groceries. This was before shopping carts, so the

customer read her list to the clerk and waited while the clerk gathered up the grocery items. A visit to the dry goods store meant getting to twirl the wooden stools where the women sat to examine bolts of material taken from shelves behind the counter and choose patterns from the "big books." Those stools were notoriously noisy, so one good energetic twirl was about all a little girl could risk.

But the noisy, lopsided spin was worth it.

With Mother the afternoon treat was a dish of ice cream at the drug store. Haagen Dazs doesn't stand a chance in comparison to the Stephens ice cream of my childhood. Sitting at a black, wrought iron table, my black Roman sandal shoes dangling over the white tile floor and eating ice cream in a little cone-shaped bowl lined with lacy paper--that was real Saturday afternoon elegance.

The rest of Saturday, unless there was some urgent reason to return home early, was spent visiting and people watching.

As all of childhood seems to do, time moved slowly--so slowly that there was always some incredible adventure waiting somewhere out beyond the fringe of time.

Maybe we strolled the sidewalk and stopped to talk to people sitting in their cars. Or maybe we sat in our parked car and visited with those who stopped alongside. But Saturdays always ended with a return down Highway 9--either five miles home from Granite or seven miles from Mangum. There were chores to do, and there was Sunday to get ready for.

Sundays--they were a chapter in themselves! Mornings started out in a hectic rush. Inevitably, Mother had almost

finished a new Sunday dress for me--finished, that is, except for the hem, maybe, or sewing on buttons. So amid the scramble of breakfast, milking, separating, feeding livestock, my dress had to be finished. I don't remember ever getting to Sunday School on time. Then once we were ready, likely as not, there was a flat on the car--or it wouldn't start and had to be pulled off. Then Dad (in Sunday suit and white starched shirt) would go harness up a horse and tow the Model A down the hill!

Gospel meetings in the summer lasted two full weeks then--twice a day--at the open-air tabernacle. It was then that my town friends and I exchanged visits, to be delivered back to our parents at the evening service. On the way home from church was the stop at the ice house for a fifty-pound block of ice. That assured iced tea and jello with the fried chicken, potatoes, gravy, beans, squash, pickled peaches and apple cobbler we had for dinner.

Winter Sundays were much the same except that few little friends exchanged visits. It seems that the grown folks did their visiting on cold Sunday afternoons. And how often I remember riding home after the evening snuggled on Mother's lap nuzzling my face against her fur collar and breathing her Evening in Paris perfume and Coty makeup. I would

recognize those two odors today--even in Paris!

There were times, of course, when bad things happened, though I wasn't old enough to realize the severity. The year there was smut in the wheat--just how smut from the coal stove got to the wheat I couldn't figure out, but the whole situation, I knew, was grave. I remember walking through the remains of a hailed-out cotton crop. Splintered stalks stood in the ragged rows, brown and bare. I watched Mother stoop to scratch a tweed

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"Sometimes things get pretty wild out there."

According to a History of Lexington School, Sand Bar Town, made up of buildings, tents, shacks, and saloons, sprang up on the east bank of the river. One of these saloons was named First Chance and Last Chance, a name which may have been prophetic for some men who later lost their lives in the river.

Business was still booming at the Ark; then came a setback. According to one oldtimer, a "head rise" came, flooding the river and washing the Ark about half a mile down the river. After the water went down, Charley hired a house mover to bring what was left back.

It was patched up and business went on again as if nothing had happened.

In October of 1890, the PURCELL REGISTER stated, "Sand Bar town is growing--but what if a great rise comes?"

It did for in February of 1891, the REGISTER had this comment, "just one house and the Ark left."

This flood was the worst that the settlers had ever seen. Chouteau

Creek, coming from the north, pushed through Lexington with a roar and met the river flood. Together they made a mile-wide river, trapping the people of both the First and Last Chance and the Ark.

The town itself was having its bout with the flood water, too. Three feet of water was flowing down main street. The residents had too much to do to think of the river saloons. They were busy trying to save their own houses and business establishments.

One lone citizen, Bob Scott, a farmer who lived near the east bank of the river, made the two saloons' captives his concern. It was nearly night, so he had to work fast. Using a trusted big-footed plow horse as a conveyance, he made his way through the churning water to the First and Last Chance saloon where he found three men, two of them sober enough to mount the horse. He took them to high ground and returned for the third. Back at the saloon, Scott loaded the drunk man on behind the saddle.

The man was too intoxicated to stay on, so he slid off behind the horse, making a futile grab at the animal's tail. He was soon lost in

the swift, muddy waters, never to be seen again.

Darkness was coming, and the river was rising as Bob Scott started his hazardous third trip through the turbulent water toward the Ark. Charley Lissauer, the bartender, and a customer were hopefully awaiting a rescue. Only two of the men could ride on the horse with Scott; the third had to wait for the next trip. Lissauer and his bartender went first. For Scott, the third man's rescue was too much to hope for. When the farmer braved the merciless water to complete his mission, the Ark was gone--taking with it the remaining man.

The Ark was restored to its mooring and rebuilt by Tom and Ray Farmer, brothers, but its tenure was brief. By this time, the novelty of the birdcage saloon had worn off. Crime became rampant, made so by gamblers, robbers, and gunmen. The saloon, no longer profitable, was soon abandoned.

For many years, so one settler said, "Charley sat on a bench in front of Little Sam's saloon, talking and dreaming of the fortune he might have made."

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of battered cotton from the silted, solid dirt. Dad strode on, head down, hands deep in his pockets. But when he looked at me, I felt that his eyes didn't touch me. I felt sad.

And I remember the dust storms that made the Thirties notorious. But my memories are not the desperate ones shown in LIFE. I watched them (at least one I'm sure of) come rolling from far off across our farm. I remember thinking that the dust clouds looked like the wind ballooning Mother's sheets--only these sheets were brown. But the clearest memory is the sand those storms left. The floors were grainy and gritty underfoot, and Mother's sweeping seemed to go on and on. Twitching a window curtain brought down another veil of dust, and lifting a crocheted doily left its imprint on

the wood beneath.

But at that time during the early Thirties, I had no way of knowing that the times were unique. I had no point of comparison. To my way of thinking, things were worse when the cows got out--or when it was too muddy to go to town on Saturday--or maybe a special event was cancelled because the car wouldn't start. Those were the real heartbreakers--the ones that make my throat tighten even now. Or the day Old Major died. The death of that beautiful bay horse put a pall over the whole summer. I'm sure Dad's grief was deeper and more severe than mine. I had only lost a dear riding friend--he had lost half of a team.

Such was the texture and rhythm of childhood--or at least *my* childhood--in the Thirties. As all of childhood seems to do, time moved slowly--so slowly that there

was always some incredible adventure waiting somewhere out beyond the fringe of time. Maybe it was an ice cream social at a neighbor's; maybe it was going to visit a little friend who had a new blackboard and real chalk; maybe it was Mother and Dad playing Rook with neighbors (like the night I put a pink doll dress on their big white cat who then jumped into the middle of their game); maybe it was the Old Settlers' Reunion and parade at Mangum (always a birthday treat); maybe it was a birthday or Christmas--the time between those events stretched on endlessly then.

I know now, of course, that the times were hard financially--for us as well as everyone else. But at the time I didn't know it.