



10-15-1983

## The Town Miser

Sheila Cohlmlia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Cohlmlia, Sheila (1983) "The Town Miser," *Westview*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol3/iss1/15>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



---

## NOSTALGIA

---

trip, the kids' schools, plans for Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving! What am I going to do that day? Maybe I'll spend the day on horseback, riding fences and counting cattle.

Then the telephone rang again. He answered promptly. "Shandy speaking."

"Oh, Dad, I'm glad you're home." It was Linda's voice pouring out her words so fast they tripped over one another. "Dad, will you come to our house for Thanksgiving? Bob says to tell you we'll really be disappointed if you don't come. I just talked with Dena. She and Harvey and the kids can come from Dallas. Jim and Sandra and the boys will try to make it, and maybe some of the others. Will you, Dad? Besides, Bob and I have some special news for you. And we're not going to tell you until you are here!"

"Your enthusiasm impresses me, Baby Daughter. Of course I'll come. What can I bring you?"

"Nothing this time. Just come. After you hear our news, you'll think of something."

As Joe turned away from the telephone, he was smiling.

---

In two weeks he would see some of the family. The grandchildren would have changed. He could guess Linda's news — maybe. Now in a happier mood, he wanted to see some of his old-time friends. He went to the Stockman's Cafe for dinner. He could usually count on seeing someone he knew there.

But this evening everything seemed unusually quiet. Only Old Jake from the all-night filling station came in for pie and coffee. "Hello, Senator. Who're you bettin' on to win the game?"

Ah, yes, almost everyone was out of town to see the big football game of the season. How Morlee and he had enjoyed attending all the games when their children were playing! The excitement, the pride in their youngsters, the celebrations afterward — these and all the other family and hometown events had made life brilliant and satisfying though they were not fully appreciative of it at the time. Now he was left with only a hollow feeling. Not conscious that Old Jake's quizzical face was still turned toward his own nor aware that he spoke aloud, Joe exclaimed in a low voice, "Things will never be the same again?"

And they never were.

— an article about an unlikely seeming Western Oklahoma philanthropist —

# The Town Miser

— by Sheila Cohlma



*Medford Johnson: left at two years of age and right as a young man.*

Occasionally one reads of a wealthy philanthropist donating huge sums of money to benefit mankind. Medford Johnson was an eccentric miser in a small Oklahoma panhandle town but he was no less charitable. He left his entire estate to benefit my hometown.

Medford was "quite an old gentleman"

as my dad would say. But most people in Tyrone said he was crazy, and to a certain extent they may have been right.

Medford worked for my dad in the 1970's as a farmhand. He had worked for several farmers in his later years and was known to be a good hand although sometimes infuriatingly slow and methodical.

He always wore a khaki shirt, worn overalls, and a denim cap over his thick, white hair. His warm brown eyes glowed with a dry, quiet humor.

My family still laughs about his odd habits and ways. We especially remember his mealtimes with us. Once Mom had fixed a large roast with all the trimmings.

After the rest of us had taken a serving from the beef, Medford forked the remaining three pounds of roast onto his plate, poured the remaining gravy over it, scooped mashed potatoes on top, and grinned sheepishly at Mom. He ate every morsel.

Medford was born in Illinois in 1905 and came to Tyrone with his parents one year later. His father had been a championship boxer in Illinois and ran a hardware store in Tyrone. An only child, Medford was known as a bookish, lonely boy who was teased for being a Mama's boy. He remained a loner all his life. He kept to himself, seldom leaving the house except to work and get groceries once or twice a month.

After graduating from Tyrone High School in 1924, he attended Panhandle A & M College at Goodwell. He taught school in the area four years, was a clerk in the First National Bank of Tyrone, and peddled coal during his younger years.

Medford, or M. H. as he liked to be called, lived in an old weatherworn house on the edge of town. The windows were all boarded up, and the yard was overgrown with weeds. The place looked as if it had been abandoned years earlier. There was no running water. He caught rain water in barrels for his laundry and gathered drinking water in five-gallon cans at our house. He felt being hooked up to the city water was an extravagance.

Those people lucky enough to be invited over could sort through and buy his antiques. Dad had bought several things and was asked to bring my brother Don and me over. While Dad drove us over in the pickup, he explained that we needed to learn the basics of bargaining to get the best buys. I was determined to show Dad I knew how to bargain with the old man.

Dad honked as we drove into the weedy

driveway. As we pounded at the weatherworn door, Medford peered out behind the old dusty crocheted curtains. My brother and I waited with apprehension as he clicked open the seven locks. Seven locks on a door was very odd at this time as many people in town still never locked their doors. We were both "pretty spooked" about going into the local "haunted house." But being 15, I felt I should appear brave in front of the 12-year-old. After all, he was just a kid.

As we stood in the dimly lighted kitchen, Medford clicked shut the seven locks and replaced the knife he kept wedged in between the door and facing. It was hard to see by the feeble light produced by one small bulb, but M. H. didn't believe in wasting anything. Especially electricity. When leaving for work he turned off all the electricity to the house at the breaker box.

In the dusty parlor were his antiques and bookcases full of dozens of old books, many of which are dated back to the 1890's. I was fascinated by these and gingerly leafed through several. There were volumes on philosophy, religion, history, vitamins, and self-improvement. I asked if the books were also for sale.

"No. That would be like selling my friends. I still read them over and over again," he replied. He was a very intelligent person.

In one corner of the room was a magnificent grand piano with its ivory keys and immaculate condition.

The antiques were arranged neatly on an assortment of old tables. Almost everything on the tables was in the original boxes. A colorful sugar bowl and creamer caught my eye, and I asked casually (so I wouldn't appear too interested), "How much for these?" "How much you want to offer?" Medford's eyes began to glisten.

He dearly loved to haggle over prices.

"Oh, I don't know. I couldn't go over three dollars." I was certain he would want much more. Boy, was I going to get a bargain!

"Sold! Three dollars!" Medford grinned broadly and laughed. "Dick, you're going to have to teach the girl how to buy antiques. Three dollars! Sold!"

I was embarrassed. Dad and Don were beginning to snicker. I could only hope the faded, worn carpet would swallow me up. As I paid for the sugar bowl and creamer, Medford teased me about my red face and laughed again about the "bargain." Later Dad confessed the old man had set the price on the set earlier at \$1.50.

Years later Dad told me Medford often asked if I still had the "high dollar tea set." The old man seemed to get a chuckle every time the subject came up.

Medford died in October of 1977. Dad dropped by to check on him and found him dead sitting in his favorite chair. His handwritten will, which named Dad as executor and mentioned the existence of some government bonds, was nearby. My parents searched the house later after the funeral and found a locked metal box in the back of a closet. Inside this box was a smaller locked box. Upon opening the last box, they were astounded to find stacks of old government savings bonds amounting to \$83,000.

As the will stipulated, the bonds were left on deposit with the U.S. Treasury Department and the interest is sent to the city of Tyrone. Medford's house, personal belongings, and lots were sold for over \$12,000, which was put in the city treasury. Medford left all he had ever owned to the city of Tyrone — basically to a town of strangers he had never met. Indeed, Medford H. Johnson was quite an old gentleman.

## THAT COLD SPELL OF '33

— by Idena McFadin Clark

Once, in a springtime long ago,  
These Chinese Elm trees along the walk  
Were almost too young to cast a shade.  
But I remember how brightly green  
Their young leaves were  
In the spring of '33.  
That was the year a cruel wind  
Blew down upon us from the frozen north.  
(That springtime storm was fiercer  
Than many a winter gale.)

Next morning, all the new young leaves  
Hung limp and dark upon the trees.  
Their brittle forms looked like something  
Hammered out in ancient times

From a strange and star-born bronze.

But finally, the sun found a way to shine again.  
The fragrant, warming air  
Was soft and sweet. Tulips grew  
And bloomed. The iris, too.  
And all the trees were green again.  
(The small dead leaves  
Lay forgotten in the dust,  
But the trees, themselves, had lived.)

Fifty years have passed since then.  
And all the elm trees are green once more.  
But I pray to God there will never be  
Another cold and frightening storm  
Like the one in '33 — when we were young.