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Blisters On His Hands

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"A section boss stood on an old joint tie,
His hands all over blisters.
He made a swipe at a greasy spike
And the wind blew through his whiskers."

Author Unknown?

Perhaps one of my brothers or sisters made up this little verse. All I know is that we kids living in the red section house with our Mama and Papa at Woodward, Oklahoma, could and did recite it whenever an appropriate occasion arose. I know I did late one Saturday night, back in 1910.

"Peace, peace, oh for a little peace!" Papa had shouted, running his fingers through the thin fringe of hair circumventing his balding head. He and my big sister Dulla were working feverishly at his desk, trying to get the East Section time sheets sent in to the Santa Fe Roadmaster's office before dawn.

I thought it would be nice to give Papa the little piece he said he wanted. Being only five years old, I had misinterpreted what Papa really wanted. I disentangled myself from the various arms and legs of my frolicking sisters and rose to my feet. I made a proper bow to the pot-bellied railroad stove, and gave Papa my piece about the section boss. It was the only piece I could recite by heart.

I was greatly disappointed and wanted to cry, when I received the disapproving frown of my father instead of the smile he usually gave me when I had said something cute. Speaking that piece was the direct cause of the happy, and I'll admit — noisy trio, being chased off to bed by Mama. She sang in her low, sweet, tantalizing voice to the back of Papa's head.

"Go to bed you chilluns, and a-hush your cryin'

I'll get you another Pappy on The Salt Lake Line."

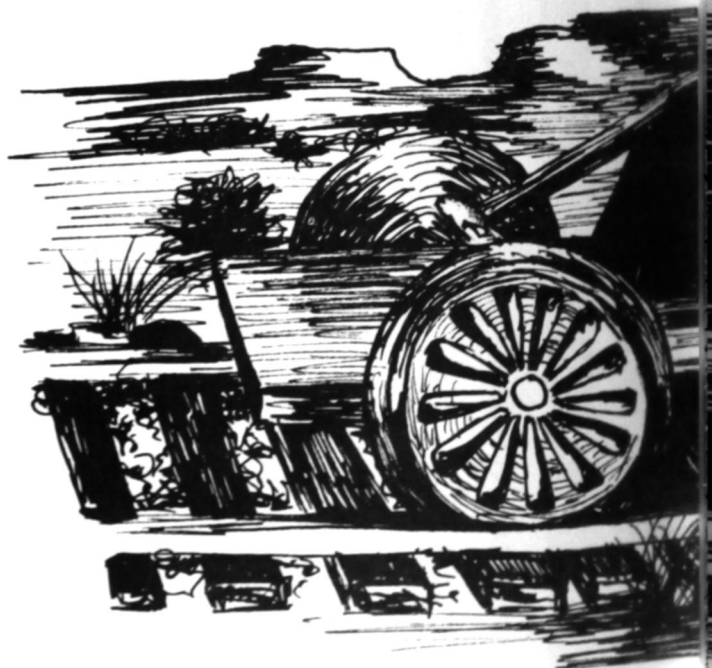
Mama hadn't meant the silly lines she sang. Papa knew that she would never get us kids another Pappy. He knew that she was a one-man woman. Mama knew that she had to stick by her man. He had an important job to do for the Atchinson, Topeka and the Santa Fe Railroad Company, and she wanted to help him do that job.

But now to get back to the railroads. I dearly loved living in the red section house by the side of the tracks. I had a ring side seat on the high board fence in front of our house where I could watch the trains go by. I waved countless hellos and goodbys to the many engineers and brakemen who worked on the trains.

Blisters On



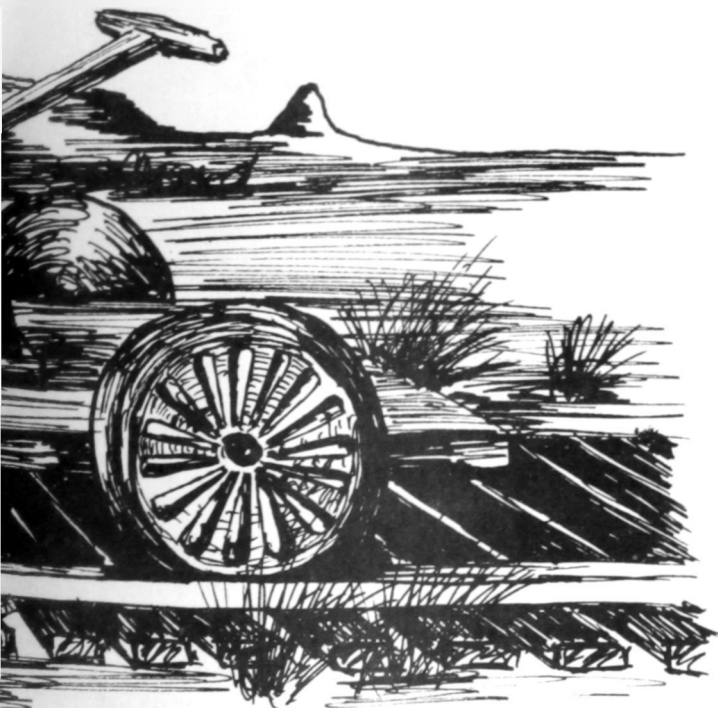
The Brownes, two timekeepers, and a colleague



is Hands...



ary man visiting on Sunday afternoon



A fierce, goose pimpling joy would overtake me when the steam powered engine would go by wagging her long line of cargo behind her. I always had faith that yet another train would come over the smooth and safe tracks my dad worked so hard to maintain. That same kind of faith made the railroad seem more human than mechanical to Papa, and gave him the conviction that the railroad could become no better than they who served it.

Papa was strong and sincere. He was of average height, and I remember him during his heyday as a bit on the heavy side. When my baby sister would kiss him on his bald head, — his barefooted place, she called it, — Papa's Irish blue eyes would light up with pleasure.

Papa told us that his forebears had come from England. Twelve brothers named Watkins had arrived in the United States on the same boat. Other than that, Papa said he didn't care to investigate the family tree. He said he was sure none of his ancestors had hung from trees by their tails. According to the figures he worked on the Santa Fe Railroad forty years, and retired against his wishes at age seventy-four.

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His first railroad job was with the Missouri Pacific road in 1889 at Almitz, Kansas. While he was section foreman there he met Mama, or Lou, as he called her. She was a waitress in a small cafe. The first glimpse Papa had of her, she was wearing a bandage over a sore eye. The story handed down in our family was that it was "love at first sight."

Papa said, "Can't see but one eye, but that's good enough for me." Mama was said to have told her fellow workers in the cafe, "That blue eyed man, — he's mine if I never get him."

Papa's first job with the Santa Fe at Woodward was that of a trackwalker. Since there was no house provided for his family, he and Mama took up a claim twelve miles north-east of town. He stayed in a boarding house until the weekend, then walked the twelve miles to the farm, carrying with him a large sack of groceries.

I remember Papa carrying things down the tracks to his family when we lived at Woodward. I used to go meet him when he came home from work or from the store. His corduroy trousers made soft swishy sounds as his legs rubbed against each other. I had to take two steps each time Papa took one. His easy measured stride skipped every other tie, while I had to step on each one.

Sometimes I'd carry his dinner pail. When I opened the lid to see if there were anything left

to eat, the hot dry smell of the afternoon sun would emanate from it. There would also be little black ants in the pail if Papa failed to throw away his empty sardine can.

At first Mama was lonely for old friends when they moved to Woodward. She was delighted one day when she saw a woman coming up to the door. Catching only a glimpse of the person, Mama thought it was one of her Curtis friends. She flung wide the door and enclosed the caller in a warm embrace. "Well Dolly Higgins," she cried and laughed at the same time, "I thought you'd never get over here!"

The visitor turned out to be a Mrs. Ralph Bonifield. She had merely come to make a social call. She and Mama remained close friends all their lives. I, too, have remained good friends with Lucille and Leo Bonifield, the caller's offspring. Lucille and I were Woodward High School graduates of 1925.

Suffice it to say that Mama was one of those rare persons to whom things were always happening. She was short and chunky in stature. With dark curly hair and big brown eyes, she was considered very pretty. She acted impulsively at all times, and was much given to laughter; but Mama had her moments! She could be either gay and amusing, or tempestuous and demanding. Her moods depended upon how well her household toed the mark, and whether or not her dander was already up, due to a variety of other annoyances or provocations.

Living near the tracks we had plenty of hobo visitors. Mama's dander got up one morning after she discovered that the "nice old Man" who seemed to be down on his luck, had sneaked off the back porch. He had partaken of her good home cooked meal; but had not waited to chop up a tie for firewood, as he had agreed to do.

After that incident Mama insisted that the wood pile be replenished before, and not after a vagrant's appetite was appeased. When word spread about the change of procedure at the section house Mama noted a definite slackening in her hobo trade.

One morning Mama saw a shy looking little man come upon the porch. He knocked timidly on the back door. He jumped backward about three feet when she opened the door, and extended a red printed card to her from the tips of his fingers.

"I have brought you this small pox quarantine card," he stammered. "Will you please tack this on your front door?" Mama said she could not convince the man that her household did not have

the dreaded small pox disease.

We kids arrived home in various stages of grief and elation. We had been dismissed from school, because someone at our house had small pox, the teachers said. When Papa came home he looked scared to death when he saw the sign fastened to the door. Mama had decided to put the sign on the door just to see what he would do.

"What's the matter now?" Papa wanted to know. "Well maybe you'd better tell us that," Mama answered him.



Mr. Watkins

A strange light swept across Papa's face when he surmised what must have happened. He tore the sign off the door, then spoke gently to Mama who had not been feeling well. There was humor showing in his eyes as he turned to face us.

"Well I'll be dog-goned," he said. "I'll bet that bum who stopped at the tool house spread this rumor around. Lou, I knew you weren't feeling well. When that fellow asked me about his chances of getting something to eat at the section house, I told him there weren't any. I said they

had small pox in that house. You should have seen that guy take off. You'd have thought I'd sicked a mad dog on him."

Mama and Papa had often gone romancing over the railroad on a hand-car. It's possible they went to the county seat after their marriage license that way. Mama told us she had dampened her chances of catching the young railroad man once. She threw dishwater from an upstairs window just as Papa was coming up the walk to see her. After they were married, she always stayed close to Papa's needs.

One rainy night Papa heard her scream out in her sleep, "Oh, we must save those poor children. We must save them!" He gently shook her awake. She told him she had dreamed the passenger train had gone off the Austin bridge into flooded waters. Although Papa had checked the east section just before quitting time, he got up and put on his rain clothes again, then went out into the night. Picking up men and hand-car at the tool house, he went out over the tracks.

He got back home just before the misty dawn broke. He shed his wet slicker and big rubber boots at the kitchen door, then blew out the flame in his bright lantern. He sat down wearily to the hot breakfast Mama had ready for him. He told us that the rails had washed away in the sandy fill, just west of the bridge.

"You know, Lou," he said looking into Mama's serious brown eyes, "we didn't need to have hurried so much. The passenger train was chalked up a little late anyway!" He grinned when he said that.

In the summer of 1915 Papa accepted the foremanship of one of the extra gangs the Santa Fe was organizing to surface and reline the tracks through Texas and New Mexico. Three months later Mama decided to make living "on the cars" a family affair. She said she didn't want Papa living alone in a dirty boxcar, ruining his digestive system on beans and hard-tacks.

With Mama's decision began a unique adventure for the Watkins kids. An adventure which would take them into twenty different Texas towns, and subject them to countless life experiences before it ended.

The Santa Fe had a fifty foot residence car pushed onto the siding by the section house. My brothers moved our household furnishings into it. Ney rode with the car to water Mama's plants and to feed Dick, the canary. Brother Wayne chose to stay in Woodward since he planned to be married there.

Mama and we girls arrived at Miami, Texas late at night, via a railroad pass on Passenger Train number 19. Papa and Ney greeted us at the station. They informed us that we would have to walk to the camp. I stayed close to Ney and the suitcases so I could hear his yarns, — such as how we would see cowboys riding fences, when the sun came up. Papa cautioned us to watch out for mud puddles.

The next morning I discovered what Papa had meant about the puddles of water since I saw great big ones all around the cars and rails. Ney commanded the situation as usual, and rowed us



Mr. Watkins (age 74): still on the road

by boatloads across the right-of-way water filled ditch to the "pequenas casitas rogas," which were commonly called comfort stations. Many unnecessary trips were made before the waters receded.

When I awoke the first morning on the cars I counted our five beds, including the one I found myself in. The beds were placed side by side in one long row. "Mama can put up drapes between the beds," I said to myself, "and we can have

INSPIRATION--GIANTS

a whole bunch of bedrooms." Then I spied the living room stuff and the pump organ way down at the other end of the car. Something was missing.

"Hey," I yelled out, "Someone! Where's our pots and pans we packed in that barrel? Where's the table and the chairs, and Dick?"

Nobody answered me. I jumped up and followed my nose which smelled bacon frying. I went through a screened-in vestibule, and on into the next car. "Guess what TraLa," Mabel hollered at me, "we get to keep this car too. That is," she added, "if Mama'll board the old timekeeper and the assistant foreman."

When the two gentlemen mentioned turned

Mexican men when they came in from work. The filled cones were pushed into the compartments of egg cartons, which in turn were hung by carrier from poles over our shoulders. We always came back with empty carriers; but not so our stomachs since we thought it only polite to eat all the cones bought for us.

Fresh eggs were plentiful since the possum-belly of our car had been converted into a chicken coop, where a dozen hens and a young rooster named Darty were housed. Tiny steps led up to the coop, and the hens had free access to the nests at all times. Darty was very much concerned about his harem's well being.

Whenever Darty heard the work train whistle



Watkins family with the timekeeper

out to be very young and reasonably young, respectively, both Dulla and Mabel couldn't do too much to help Mama in the kitchen. Both liked serving tables.

Staple groceries were bought at the camp commissary. Milk, butter, and vegetables were purchased from farmers along the way. Brakemen were more than happy to bring us meat from the towns. Trainmen on the refrigerator cars provided us with huge cakes of ice to fill our huge built in ice box.

Mama made use of the ice by freezing ice cream, which Gladys and I sold in cones to the

which signified moving day, he would cluck the hens up the steps and into the coop. Once he took the girls scratching too far away to hear the train whistle. It took all of us and half of Papa's work crew to get the chickens into the coop that day.

Gladys, who was called Bill because she had always wanted to be a boy, was given a lame lamb by passing sheep herders one day. The lamb was too weak to keep up with the rest of the flock. Her pet turned into a goat with horns, and was always getting into trouble. One day he dashed into a pair of red flannels hanging from

Mrs. Brady's clothesline.

With his head sticking through the slit in the back of the garment, the goat ran wildly down the row of cars. Ney, acting as back stop, promptly dubbed the goat Sid, *after Bill Groggin's goat that swallowed Bill's red shirt, then coughed it up to flag the train. Only Ney would never tie Sid to the railroad track, no matter how mad he got at him.

Papa's Assistant Foreman, Mr. Boone, who said the famed Daniel Boone was his ancestor, taught Dulla Spanish. There were some twenty children living in the six gangs camped at Black, Texas. Their parents asked my lively sister to teach a subscription school for the children. A suitable car was provided with grocery boxes as desks.

*Song — Bill Groggin's Goat

What the teacher may have lacked in knowledge, she made up for on the ball diamond at recess time. One day as she was dashing for a home run, the elastic in her long underskirt broke, entangling her flying legs. Dulla stopped short and dropped to the ground, thus covering the wayward garment with her full skirted dress. After that she just sat there, not moving a muscle.

"Ring the bell, TraLa," Dulla ordered me. As I marched the students back into the school car, I kept watching the teacher from the corner of my eye. I wanted to see what was going to happen. First she got to her feet, then she stepped out of the encircling impediment. Next she stooped down and grabbed the skirt up, and then she streaked like fury to our bedroom car via the vestibule steps, no doubt for safety pin repairs.

The school broke up when Papa's camp was moved to Canyon, Texas. As our cars were being pushed slowly onto a siding, we noticed these three little girls lined up along the fence row. They were waving wildly for the train to stop. After we stopped, Gladys and I skidded down the side ladder before the campman had time to put up the door steps. We ran over to see the girls.

"Is your mother in that railroad car?" the tallest girl wanted to know. "Because if she is, my mother wants to talk with her. You see, Daddy and Robert had to take our sick cow to town, and now Mama - - ." But by this time our mother had come to the door, and when she saw the children, she too came over to the fence.

"Lawdy me, what's the matter here?" Mama asked the children. Then she saw the tall woman in the Mother Hubbard dress coming toward the fence. As the wind blew against the woman's frame, Mama could tell definitely what was the matter.

Family rumor has it that the tall lady who turned out to be a Mrs. Hoover first waved to Mama, then shook her hand in a peculiar and significant manner. Mama returned the wave and hand shake in the same fashion. My older sisters explained to Gladys and me that this meant that Mama and Mrs. Hoover were lodge sisters; and that they were bound to help each other in times of stress. At any rate they held a quick consultation over the barbed wire fence, and Mama decided to go home with Mrs. Hoover.

Getting to the other side of the fence was not an easy task for Mama, since she was short and rotund in figure. So Dulla and Martha Hoover helped her. They both stood on the bottom row of the barbed wires, and held the top wires up as far as they would go. Then Mama gathered her starched skirt up at the bottom, stooped over as far as possible, and went through the opening.

Mama didn't come home until early the next morning. She told us that a darling little baby boy had come from Heaven to live with the Hoover family. When our camp was moved on down the Santa Fe tracks, saying goodbye to our friends made us all very sad.

Once the young people in the camp planned to hold a taffy pull and a dance. Mr. Boone and Pete, the campman, went into town via a hand-car to buy the necessary ingredients for making taffy. When they returned Mr. Boone carried a huge sack of flour over his shoulder, and Pete had four buckets of molasses dangling from a pole carrier across his shoulders.

Mama, looking like Mrs. Rip Van Winkle with elbows akimbo, greeted the men at the door.

"Good gracious," she laughed, "what will we do with all of that stuff?"

She found out that night at the party what would become of some of it. Ney's combo, composed of four Mexican men and himself, began to play "Turkey In The Straw" and then the fun began. Dulla's beau, a brakeman named Red, started walking toward her to claim the first dance. He inadvertently stepped into a mass of molasses, and found a sitting-sliding position to be a better mode of transportation.

Pete, the molasses spreading culprit, couldn't

get out of Red's path, so he went along with him for the slide. Dulla joined the fracas by impact, tearing open the sack of flour on which she had been sitting, as she did so. Pandemonium broke out! Taffy got into many fine heads of hair; molasses and flour ruined the seats of many new blue serge suits.

Since a foreman was not allowed to hire his own kin on the job, brother Ney often became a problem. He and his young friends would sometimes ride the work train to the nearest town for a lark, or to see a movie. In order to save money, only one of the boys would buy a fare to ride back on the passenger train which passed the camp. The others rode the rods underneath the train.

One evening the train didn't make the stop at the camp because no one had bought a ticket indicating a stop. Walking ten miles back from the next station, Ney and the other boys didn't make it home until the wee hours of the morning.

Papa was both sarcastic and dramatic when his wandering boy arrived. "I didn't raise my boy to be a hobo," he told Ney emphatically. This riding the rods episode, together with the taffy pull riot, were deciding factors in Papa's decision to send us all back to Woodward.

While we lived "on the cars," Mama insisted that we children attend church services whenever that was possible. Thus during the two years we spent in Texas we attended Sunday Schools of various churches in Canadian, Pampa, Panhandle, Kings Mill, Canyon, Amarillo, Hereford, Black, White Deer, Umbarger, and Dawn. Since Papa did not often go with us, Mama was especially concerned about his soul. Sometimes she would include religious tracts along with the sandwiches when she fixed his dinner pail.

My sisters decided to help Mama out in her campaign once, when they reported what happened at the revival meeting at Kings Mill, Texas. They told Papa that the church ladies would sing, "We will shout His Praise in Glory," and the gentlemen would chime in with "So will I, So will I." The girls told Papa that when Mama sang the Glory part, a real nice younger looking man would answer her back with the "So will I, — So will I," parts. Papa refused to become jealous; and he also refused to attend the revival.

Papa did not join a church until after his retirement; then he joined the United Brethren Church at Woodward, Oklahoma. He elected to practice his religion by seeing to it that the widow

and her children never went hungry. He treated all the men who worked under him fairly, regardless of their religious affiliations or their ethnic origins.

Although Papa had read the Bible many times through, and had sought to practice the teachings of Christ in his daily living, I sincerely believe that he joined the church at Woodward only because he thought that would make Mama's soul happier in Heaven.

After his retirement Papa used to hold forth in front of Pete Martinson's general store in Woodward, or down at the freight depot.

"The life of the railroad is not over," he would tell his old cronies. "With everything moving so fast it's gonna take the trains along with all the other means of transportation to move the traffic. It's gonna take something big and dynamic to win this war (W.W. II), — and the railroad is the answer."

"As for myself," Papa always ended his discourse with an authoritative grin, "if I'm in a hurry to get places, and want to get there all in one piece, you can give me the rails every time."

Papa's opinions and his faith in the reliability of the nation's railroads should be respected. He has had many blisters on his hands from doing hard work, seeking always to carry out the Safety First motto of the Santa Fe Railroad Company.



Hazel Watkins peeping through a fence; parents in doorway; sisters and a friend outside the fence