

# Coming of Age – Excerpt

Driving a car was a luxury we could not afford. Since we did not have the money to even license a vehicle in 1930, Dad put it up in the garage, raising the wheels off the ground by putting bricks under the axles. He told me that the rubber tires would rot if he just left it parked in the garage. He also drained the radiator and the oil from the car. In the thirties, there were no thermostats, and the only anti-freeze was alcohol. If a car got hot, the coolant just boiled away. When the coolant was gone, the water would freeze if the temperature was below 32 °F and possibly crack the engine block. Not wanting to take a chance, Dad drained all of the fluids, pouring the used oil on the street to keep down the dust.

We were not the only ones who had cars on bricks; they were all over town. Walking, which had always been common, became more so since those who owned cars put them in storage as we did. From 1931 to 1935, Dad stored our car in the garage for various periods, and we walked wherever we needed to go. The only families who drove cars had fathers who had not lost their jobs and received a regular salary every month. There were only a few families in that position in Childress.

At times over the next five years, we were unable to pay the electric bill or rent. Our rent was \$8.00 a month, and electricity was about \$3.50 monthly. Whenever money was tight or nonexistent, Dad had the power turned off and negotiated with our landlord to pay the rent when we could and stayed in the house. During the Depression, having the electricity disconnected when there was no money for the bill was common. Everyone used coal oil lamps or kerosene lamps for light from time to time. The lamps were not as bright as electric bulbs, and they stank as they burned, but a little light is better than being the dark. My family was lucky because we only relied on oil lamps occasionally and never for months at a time.

Times are especially tough when people cannot afford to have city water. From 1930 to 1935, our neighbor, who lived two houses down, carried water from our

outside water faucet to use for their cooking, washing and drinking. Neither the husband nor his wife could find steady work and depended upon friends, other family members, and odd jobs when they could find them. Other neighbors were afraid to give them water since many took in washing and ironing for their living. If they were unable to pay their water bill, they would lose their only source of income.

Unemployed men began sneaking on to freight trains to distant towns looking for work, most often riding in the boxcars, but occasionally hanging onto the ladders on each end of the cars. Men, young and old, rode the trains across the country, getting off in the towns where they hoped to find a meal or a little work. The train-traveling men - "hobos" – gathered in semi-permanent, sparse camps near the railroad yards at night; we called the camps "Hobo Jungles" or "Hoover Towns." A camp outside Childress existed for more than a decade. Fifty to seventy-five men at a time would sit in groups around little campfires to cook beans or coffee in empty tin cans, sometimes sharing a rabbit or a chicken from someone's back yard. There were boys too young to shave and old men with scraggly grey beards, their balding heads covered with dirty fedoras, bowlers, or caps, all of them waiting for the next train going in either direction to a new town and the possibility of a job. No one stayed long in Childress; as soon as they found out there was no work, they would catch the next train out.

Since we lived by the tracks, one or two strangers would come to the back door every couple of days and ask if we had any chores that they might do for a meal. We never had any work, but Mother always found something to make a sandwich for them. Sometimes, it was just potted meat or bacon and eggs, but she could not bear not to give them something. I heard that hobos had signs or marks that they used to identify those houses where the residents would treat them kindly. Still, I never saw anything around our home out of the ordinary. Maybe they just took their chances and hoped Mother was a Christian woman with a kind heart.

There were stories of railroad police who abused those riding the rails in those days. I do not know if the stories were true, but I never saw anyone at Childress hit or beat a hobo. Most railroad men understood the plight of the men, knowing

that “there, except for the Grace of God go I.” The trainmen, including most of the train guards, pretty much let the riders alone unless they were drunk, looked like they might steal something, or otherwise made trouble. Of course, if push came to shove, a railroad man would put someone off the train even if he did not like having to do so. In such desperate times, no one would risk a job and his family’s livelihood for a stranger.

Hobos were not the only people who had a tough time in those days. Some families in Childress were wholly dependent upon credit given to them by local merchants. The few national chain stores in the town were cash-only. The local merchants had little choice but to sell on credit and hope they got their money eventually; otherwise, their products would rot on the shelf. Merchants were in the same boat, dependent upon the wholesaler for credit to buy supplies. Everyone worried about a chain reaction where one failure would domino through the whole town. “What can I do?” “How will I feed my family?” These questions were on the minds of men and women, fathers and mothers, and especially widows who had children at home. The economy in the Panhandle was destined to get even worse before it got better.

In some parts of the country, the government-sponsored sewing rooms and canning plants for widows and women whose husbands could not find work. The pay was \$30 monthly. The general rule for government employment was one job per family until better times. The clothes and food produced from the sewing rooms and canning plants were given to people who could not find work. We did not have any plants or sewing rooms in Childress, probably because the town was too small.