EPHRATA MEMORIES

By Herb Jenkins, Ephrata Resident 1917-1985
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Excerpts

"When I was a kid there were lots of interesting things for a boy to check up on every day. One favorite place was the town blacksmith shop. There were two blacksmiths who worked in the shop and each had such a distinctive rhythm when he hammered on a piece of iron, we could tell just by listening which smith was at work.

The blacksmith shop was a fascinating place, with the growl of the forge, the sparks flying up from the coal in the forge, and the shower of sparks from the iron as the blacksmith deftly pounded it into the desired shape. Whenever they shoed horses we could be sure of excitement, especially if one of the horses happened to be skittish. There would be much profanity, lots of advice from the spectators, and the sound of the horse's hooves skidding and sliding on the floor as the horse tried to get free from his restraints while the smith nailed a shoe in place.

The livery barn also was a favorite place for the village loafers who gathered in the front 'office' where the night hostler slept on a cot complete with smelly blankets. The place had an ammonia smell blended with the odor of hay and oiled harness. Occasionally some of us kids would escape the vigilance of the livery barn owner and would play in the loft until the soles of our shoes became slick from contact with hay. As any of you know who have ever walked around in a haymow, it doesn't take long for you shoe soles to become quite slick. Consequently, when you started down the ladder from the haymow there was a good chance that one foot would slip off a rung of the ladder and you would crack your shin on the rung. If you had never sworn before, you would when this happened.

The wheat warehouse, especially when sacked wheat was being delivered, was another favorite visiting place. However, we had to be careful to stand to one side and not get in the way of the teams coming up the ramp or the men who were pushing the hand trucks. I remember one time we slipped into a warehouse, owned by the uncle of one of my friends, and were playing on a stack of sacked wheat when we knocked over one pile and one of us was pinned under the sack. We had to run and get the warehouse owner to lift the sack off the boy, who fortunately was not hurt, but we took a blistering tongue lashing from the frightened warehouse manager.

We could visit an apple packing shed in the fall. Of all the wonderful smells, there is nothing to compare with the combined smell of fresh pine apple boxes and apples just picked from the tree. The rumble of hand trucks and the clatter of the sorting machinery all contributed to the sense of bustle and excitement that was a part of apple harvest.

Like all kids of that era, we wandered around town watching whatever activity was taking place, whether it was the building of a new home, the assembly of farm machinery in a vacant lot or putting a display window pane in a store. We learned to keep out of the way, not to bother anything, and to keep still and not distract the workmen. Without realizing it, we also learned a lot of practical handicraft.

Our only amusement was to go to the show in the old Kam Theater. They showed one reel at a time then stopped and showed advertising slides between halves. Tubby Harris ran the shows. Tubby had been hurt in an accident and he was stone deaf. He played the drums in an orchestra because he could feel the vibration and watch the piano player. When he was upstairs in the theater running the film and wanted to call somebody, he would pound on floor. He couldn't hear how loud he was pounding and he would sometimes practically knock the ceiling off the building. He charged 15 cents for the show and went around in a car with a megaphone beforehand and announced, 'W.S. Hart tonight in Sheriff of Slippery Gulch, at the Kam Theater.' The music at the theater was often played by Thelma Billingsley Nicks, Margaret Kerelake played a lot too. I remember 'Starlight' was one of the pieces played. There was a certain piece they played when the soldiers were marching, and another when the cowboys were chasing the Indians, and than a sad piece when they turned the girl out into the snowstorm. But we enjoyed it. Gordon Nicks ran the projector, which was turned by hand, but finally it was modernized and got a motor on it

If we had one carnival a year with a merry-go-round and two or three little slide shows, we thought we had had a big summer. We'd all go down there every night and stand around, we didn't have enough money to go but one night, but would always stick around there. It was like Eisenhower said, 'we were poor, but nobody ever told us, so we didn't know it.' We had a good time.

When I was a small boy the annual summer Chautauqua was an eagerly awaited event. Every little town had its week long tent show. The Chautauqua was literally a seven day show which gave an afternoon and evening performance every day to a crowded house.

Because the Chautauqua was nation wide and a performer could appear in up to a hundred shows in one season, the promoters could afford to hire top talent. William Jennings Bryan was just one of the nationally known speakers who appeared on the circuit for many years.

The programs were of high quality and were varied. For example, I remember that nearly every summer a group of Swiss bell ringers and accordionists would appear. Male quartets, violinists, orchestras and bands were on the program. Magicians and acrobats added variety to the offerings. Dramas were given in which virtue always triumphed and the villain got his just penalty.

Elocution lessons were given in high schools and colleges, so many extremely dramatic 'recitations' were given before breathless audiences. These were highly emotional and usually had as their subject a young girl making a perilous ride through a night storm to get to the next town to present evidence that would save her lover from being unjustly executed.

Those were the days before there were any home radios and little opportunity for home entertainment, so entire families attended every performance of a Chautauqua. Many farmers left their farms in care of a hired man and the entire family camped in town during the week of Chautauqua.

During the winter months a 'Lyceum' series of entertainments were offered indoors.

The coming of radio and the increasing use of cars eventually spelled the doom of Chautauquas and Lyceums and they all closed down. But for many years they were a colorful part of small town life.

Before cars became generally popular, the Fourth of July was celebrated in big style in every community, especially the smaller towns. The day usually began at dawn with an earsplitting blast caused by 'shooting an anvil'. This was done by pouring black powder in the small hole at the end of an anvil, setting some on top, and touching off the powder. The blast was guaranteed to wake up everyone within a radius of two miles. If this wasn't enough, all the kids took this as a signal to start shooting off their firecrackers which, in those days of little consumer protection, ranged in size from the conventional small pencil sized firecracker to those that were almost as large and almost as deadly as a stick of dynamite.

Early in the day, farmers started coming into town with their families in buggies or wagons, prepared to spend the day visiting and attending a picnic in the city park. Each farm wife had prepared baskets of food enough for dinner (nobody called it lunch) and supper. The Fourth was one of the few universally recognized holidays when everyone took time from work, and all were determined to spend the entire day and most of the evening enjoying themselves.

The official part of the day's festivities started with a parade at 10 o'clock. The town band led off. The colors were carried by veterans stepping proudly erect. (Incidentally, the national flag was greeted with respect by the spectators and any man who forgot to remove his hat probably would have it forcibly removed.)

The rest of the parade would be composed of the local fire department pulling a hand drawn hose cart and hand drawn chemical cart. Then would come the speaker of the day, the mayor of the town, county commissioners and other local celebrities either in snorting brass radiatored cars or in glistening buggies drawn by high stepping well groomed horses. The local beer distributor would have his brightly painted wagon drawn by eight perfectly matched massive Percheron horses. Also in the parade would be the Boy Scouts, the local baseball team in uniform, members of the various lodges in full regalia, members of local ladies' organizations in their long white dresses and plumed hats, and any other organization or individual who could find an excuse to be in the procession.

After the parade everyone went to the city park for the reading of the Declaration of Independence and the speech of the day. In those days when people came to hear a speech they wanted a speech of at least two hours. The speaker, chosen more for the power of his voice than his wisdom, would oblige with an oration wherein the American Eagle screamed, and platitudes soared into the heavens and fell again like hail on a tin roof.

The picnic lunch followed. Then came the baseball game with a team from a neighboring town or, more often, a game between the young men and the girls, in which the men batted left handed. It was remarkable how many young men who were excellent ball players were unable to stop a feeble grounder batted by a girl friend. This was followed by fat man and fat woman races, sack races for the kids, and various other events. The picnic supper was followed by a band concert and then the climax of the evening, the fireworks display.

We used to have a fireworks tower. One time all of the fireworks went off at once and everyone started to run. I asked one of the old timers later, 'were you scared?' Answer 'no I wasn't scared but I passed two guys who were.'

To keep the day from dragging, there usually were one or two small fires caused by fireworks, and at least a couple of runaways by teams scared by the commotion.

In 1911 the city council showed a lot of good sense, the city planted 1100 trees up and down the streets, even down the business streets. You have heard the song phrase, 'listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees', at night when there was a little wind there would be a murmur throughout town. The canyon west of town used to be full of trees. When the city dug the wells the little stream dried up and all of the trees died. Ephrata used to be known as a 'little oasis' and one of the things I was impressed with the first time I saw Ephrata was the trees. Years later when the state built the highway through town the trees were all torn out, we almost hung the mayor over that, though he had no choice in the matter.

Ephrata had quite a few characters. Some old Klondike miners settled here. 'Paddle Foot' Jack Edson, had frozen his feet in the Klondike. When we had the 1918 flu epidemic 'Paddle Foot' Jack took an ax and went up and down the alleys and whenever he saw that someone had no wood cut, he stopped and cut it for them and laid in a supply Half the people didn't know who was cutting the wood for them. They didn't ask for charity in those days, they looked after each other. Everyone tried to do his part.

There was a little reservoir with a very light board roof on it, you could walk right on it. Stritehoff's bull got out on there one time and fell into about four feet of water. It had been in there a couple of days before it was found. There was a character by the name of Fred Curtis, kind of a former cowboy and a man of all characters. Fred was going to help them get the bull out. They tied a rope around him and he crawled out on the girders and was going to lasso the bull. Of course, the characters holding on the other end of the rope claimed it was an accident, but they jerked the rope and Fred fell in. During the next year Fred had almost six fights a week because people said, 'Fred we didn't mind drinking after the bull, but when you fell in we decided we better clean the reservoir.' Fred used to carry a snoose (snuff) can in his pocket, one of the little round ones, and they'd be talking about shooting, he'd say 'well I'm pretty fair. I can hit the snoose can.' So he'd pull it out and toss it in the air and shoot. When he picked it up it would have a bullet hole through it. He didn't tell anyone that he had put a bullet hole through it before he put it in his pocket.

A lot of us didn't have electric lights in our homes so part of the kids' chores was to clean and fill the oil lamps. We didn't call it kerosene-that was kind of affected to call it kerosene. I remember we had an old aluminum lamp and you couldn't tell how full it was. I always ran it over and then had to wipe it off with newspapers. I had to split the kindling and carry in the coal and wood. Everybody had a wood shed where you stored and split the wood. That was quite a chore. Every night you had to clean the ashes out of the stoves, carry in the wood and coal and the next morning you had to fill them up again to last for the day.

In 1916 L.R. Nelsen, a Dane, installed a diesel generating plant to supply electric lights and power for his garage located on the corner of First N.W. and C street, across from the Methodist Church. Ephrata residents decided they wanted electricity, so Nelsen started serving them. The Town of Ephrata, as it was known then, had Nelsen install a few street lights, and almost before he realized it Nelsen was in the electric generating and distribution business. Nelsen and Charlie Reeder were the entire line crew, with Nelsen doing all the pole climbing. Art Healy, a high school student with a natural gift for electrical problems was the 'engineer' for the power plant and distribution system.

Soon Nelsen was serving 122 customers, which was a sizable percentage in a town of perhaps 750 residents. The charge for DC service was 15 cents a kilowatt-hour. All of the wiring was the knob and spool type, with on drop cord hanging from the center

of each room and one service outlet to a room, if requested. An old bill shows that the cost of bringing the service from the pole to the house and the cost of wiring a large two story house with four bedrooms was $40, and this included the bulbs.

Most light bulbs were about 25 candle power, not watts, and customarily were shielded by a heavy frosted glass shade so that the 'glare' would not affect the eyes. From one to three bulbs hanging from a single fixture in the center of the room usually provided the entire illumination for the room.

Every evening at sunset Nelsen would start up the diesel engine and its steady 'chucka-chucka-chucka' was a familiar sound until midnight. When the engine was shut down the lights went out all over town, there was no other source of supply. As a matter of course, all electric customers had oil lamps in their homes for use after midnight or in case of emergency.

The midnight deadline had some unusual and sometimes annoying sidelights. For example, for years a passenger train from Spokane arrived in Ephrata at 11:55 p.m. The arriving traveler, would usually get just about half way home when the street lights would go out. And until you have experienced it you have no idea how dark a town can be without a single street light or porch light burning.

When dances were held if everyone was having a good time, a collection would be taken up shortly before midnight and a delegation would call on Nelsen and pay him to run the diesel plant an extra hour or so.

Photo 3: Nelsen's Garage

Located at 1st N.W. and "C", across from the United Methodist Church

Photo: Grant County P.U.D. archives
Caption Information: Herb Jenkins

When I was a boy, Wenatchee was 54 miles from Ephrata. If everything went perfectly, it was possible to make a round trip of 108 miles in five hours, if you didn't have any tire blowouts on the way, your car didn't overheat on the hills, and the ferry at Columbia Siding was on your side of the river each time.

The pioneer motorist was a rugged individualist whose fluent vocabulary, daring and dogged persistence eventually persuaded the public that the horseless carriage was here to stay. Motoring in the old days was not a taken for granted means of travel. It was a combination of thrills, adventure, hard work and hard luck.

The first cars were open models with a door on the back, complete with high wheels, brass radiators, squeeze bulb horns, and straps running from the top of the windshield to the front of the car. All of the passengers wore long dusters and goggles, and the women added voluminous veils to their outfits.

Many of the old crates were right hand drive. You cranked up the motor, made a wild dash for the driver's seat to push down the gas lever before the motor stopped, and then after a lot of preliminary gear raking, clanking and banging you started off.

If you were lucky you drove five miles before you had your first puncture. Tires in those days were made of fabric and guaranteed for 3,000 miles. Occasionally some daring manufacturer hinted that his tires would hold up for 4,000 miles, but most people considered him a liar for saying it.

Daredevil drivers scorched around town at 20 miles an hour, so the town council immediately passed an ordinance prohibiting speeds of more than 12 miles an hour within city limits.

Driving in those days was beset with hazards unknown today. Horses were almost invariable scared out of their wits at the appearance of a car. Most of the time the owner of the horse would have to get out of his buggy and hold the animal, and as he struggled with the horse and glared at the motorist, the car would creep by very slowly.

We take so many things for granted today; comfortable closed cars, automatic windshield wipers, heaters, radios, good tires, efficient brakes and headlights. We forget that it was only a few years ago that cars lacked all this things.

No one would want to abandon our present mechanical marvels and go back to the clattering coffee mills of the old days. But at the same time, those of us who were fortunate enough to indulge in a little pioneer motoring are glad to have had the experience."

STARTING THE FORD
By Herb Jenkins

He jacked the hind wheel up real high, but it did no good
He cranked and cranked and cranked again, then lifted up the hood
He monkeyed with the spark plugs, the wires and carburetor
He tightened up the fan belt and fixed the generator.

Again he tried to start her and again she refused to go
'Twas then he lost his temper and the cuss words 'gan to flow
He kicked at all the tires, he slammed the right front door
He pulled down both the levers and then he cussed some more
He got dirt upon his trousers and grease into his hair
He cut his little finger and howled in deep despair.

He looked the car all over, but everything seemed all right
The connecting rods were present, and the bearings were all tight
The battery was working, and the spark plug points were clean
There was oil in great abundance and lots of gasoline.
So once more he tried to start her, but she would not sputter
He straightened up his aching back and then began to mutter.

He took his coat and collar off, and loosened up his tie
He grimly grasped the crank, with a resolve to do or die
His face was dark with anger and his teeth were tightly set
His fingers all were bruised and his brow was wet with sweat
He cranked for several minutes, then desisted with a groan
He staggered to the driver's seat and slumped down with a moan
Suddenly he yelled in anger, for (though doubtless you will scoff)
He had finally discovered that the switch key was turned off.

Photo 4: 1910 Model T Roadster

Illustration: realclassicads.com/ford1910