

RANDOM MEMORIES

G. C. LENO



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### Introduction

As one advances in years, it becomes a daily practice to reminisce about events of the past and about people you once knew. However, it is only those people and events that give a sense of well-being that are usually included in these reflections. The unpleasant memories remain untouched. The topics that I have selected fall into the pleasurable and sometimes amusing categories which also have a romantic appeal for me because they typify people, places, and things at a time that I was a youth. Because of the age period about which I am writing, these reflections are further enhanced since this was also the most impressionable period in my life. The stories will also add a human dimension to the history of the time because it was people who played a significant role in shaping it. I shall attempt to describe some of these people and events knowing that words alone often fall short of adequate description.

Also included in this manuscript is an article that I wrote for the North Dakota Centennial Committee about my rural teaching experience. The Committee is preparing a commemorative edition of numerous articles written by teachers as part of a documentary.

## Saturday Night In Town

At one time during a period in my life, "going to town" was a common expression used by everyone because its connotation was readily understood. What it meant was, "I am going to spend some time in town" or more specifically, "I am going to town on Saturday because by common consent, Saturday night became the night to "go to town".

What attracted people to a small town on a Saturday night, especially to a town with few retail outlets and even fewer recreational facilities? The answer may be found in what the existence was like in a rural community as well as the economy as it was during that period.

Weekdays on the farm meant getting up at sunrise and working until sunset. Chores became somewhat of a daily humdrum with very little excitement or change. On rare occasions did a neighbor take the time to stop by because he too was busy. Therefore any break in the weekly routine was welcomed. Sunday in church provided a brief respite but did not satisfy all of the suppressed social needs that accumulated throughout the week. It was Saturday night that became the big night of the week for extensive social activities. They were generally activities in which little money was involved because no one had much to spend at the time. The stories I am writing about took place in what is generally known as the "dirty thirties" or "The Great Depression" in American History textbooks.

Saturday night also became a big night because everyone expected it to be that and came in a mood prepared for it. Merchants cooperated in the same spirit and kept business places open until the last customer departed which was usually well past midnight.

Sometime during the evening of a Saturday night, as if by a prearranged

signal, cars and trucks began to converge on the little town and scores of people made their appearance on the streets and in the shops. Vehicles filled the parking areas up and down the one block business district and also around the ends of the block. Street lights cast a weak and shadowy glimmer of light on the dust-filled scene below. Lights from the business places helped dispel some of the gloom; however, no one expected it to be different and no one cared.

### The Grocery Stores

For some, "going to town" included shopping for groceries. There were two stores selling groceries that were located at opposite sides of the main business block. One was operated by the Kremenetsky brothers, Henry and Jake, and the second one by Max Miller. They were Russian-Jewish immigrants who spoke German fluently as did the majority of their customers. Both stores were well stocked with grocery items in common demand.

I best remember the Kremenetsky store because this was where we did most of our grocery shopping. Henry and Jake were good business men with a well-established reputation of honest and fair dealing. They had a unique way of pleasing their customers, especially children, by including a small bag of candy with each grocery purchase. It became such a common and accepted practice that absence of the candy was considered an oversight by some customers and the merchants were reminded of it on their next trip to the store.

The store was small by today's standards but every bit of space was used to display the merchandise, including the walls and ceiling. Grocery items that were beyond the reach by hand were retrieved with a long handled

device operated from floor level or else by means of a ladder that was set at an angle and ran on a track on the wall next to the ceiling. Space in front of the counter had glassed-in displays of groceries that were sold in bulk such as dried beans, peas, rice, coffee, and sugar. A large round of cheese was kept on the counter from which wedges were sold. Bananas were sold off from a stalk suspended from the ceiling. Coffee was ground in a hand operated dual-wheeled coffee grinder which was located on one end of the counter. There was always an appetizing aroma in the vicinity of the grinder.

One section of the store had a small stock of men's footwear basically workboots and overshoes. A middle section of the floor had racks of everyday wear and also a limited selection of men's dress suits. (My confirmation suit was purchased here). Drygoods were sold in another corner of the store and tubs, oil cans, and a wide variety of hardware occupied the rear part of the building. The store also took in eggs in exchange for groceries and sold gasoline from a pump located outside in the front of the store.

In later years, Henry was also the community Chevrolet dealer, an enterprise for which he became well known. I recall in 1930 he negotiated a sale with my father for a new car for my brother Jake. The sale included taking in exchange bushels of rye somewhat above the market value quoted for the day. During periods of low cash flow, farmers were permitted to "charge" groceries until grain was again sold in the fall. The grocery operation by the Kremenetsky brothers was an important element in the economic well being of the community.

## The Pool Hall

I can not think of another enterprise other than the grocery store that played a more important role in the life of the community. It held a strong attraction for many (notwithstanding) who considered it to be evil. Some came to observe, others to participate in a game of cards or pool. On a Saturday night all card tables were in full use and the pool tables were available only by waiting for your turn. No money was exchanged at the card tables; only tokens issued by the poolhall owner were acceptable for betting purposes. They were sold at a discounted rate and redeemed in like manner.

Women and children were never seen in the pool hall. If a lady had a message to convey or in search of someone, she would generally delegate a male friend to carry out her task. It was a disgrace for a woman to be seen in a pool hall!

Occasionally some of the men became rowdy and fist fights would break out. They were usually caused by misunderstandings, jealousy, rivalry, or excessive drinking. The latter affair usually became a shoving match and ended when both participants were on the floor with little physical damage to each other. Fights brought about by other factors erupted much more fiercely and at times caused physical harm. The number of combatants involved usually increased in direct proportion to the number of relatives on either side, because frequently in addition to the original cause of the fracas a threat to the honor of the name also became an issue. Law enforcement in the small community was left up to the least capable or so it seemed. Seldom were arrests made. It always appeared that when trouble broke out the "marshall" was nowhere to be found.



### The Barber Shop

A haircut was a necessity, but a Saturday night shave was a luxury. The song ending, "shave and a haircut, six bits" held true but seventy-five cents was hard to come by. Usually a long line of customers would be seated waiting patiently for their turn in the barber chair. No one seemed to mind the delay because it provided them with an opportunity to hob-nob with the neighbors about common problems on the farm. The barber also provided his own brand of philosophy and interpretation of local and world events. Each haircut or a shave concluded with a generous application of perfumed talcum powder, after shaving lotion, and Lucky Tiger hair oil. The fragrance along with a fresh haircut was thought to be of some benefit for anyone pursuing the fairer element that night. "And the barber kept on shaving" (The Owl Critic-J.T.Fields).

### The Butcher Shop

During warm-weather months little fresh meat, other than chicken, was available on the farm and elsewhere. Most homes lacked cooling facilities except the few who had an icehouse or cool well to keep foodstuffs fresh. It was in times like this that the local butchershop took on added importance. It always had a supply of fresh meat and had the means to keep it cool. Freshly butchered meat was kept in an ice cooled storage room in back of the shop. The ice came from an ice house adjacent to the butchershop. The ice had been cut from a local spring-fed lake during the winter months and stored for summer use. The inside of the butcher shop had the characteristic appearance and equipment that one would expect. A counter with a scale on it faced the entry. Saw dust was on the floor, and a variety of sausages

and smoked meats hung from the ceiling. What I best remember was the large round chopping block that was located next to the counter and meat cleaver hanging nearby. The top of the block, as I recall, had numerous deep scars, a remnant of the vigorous application of the meat cleaver. The physical appearance of the butcher completed the picture. He was a short stout man with a somewhat besmirched white apron around his waist. His cheery, "vat can I do for you" was to be expected.

#### The Movie Hall

A Saturday night in town also included going to a movie. Early movies were silent and in black and white. Captions were placed under the picture to explain the story and music was provided by a player piano or one played by someone capable of dubbing in music to fit the drama on the screen. Hoot Gibson and Charlie Chaplin films were well accepted. Since attendance was good, two shows were scheduled on a Saturday night. Prior to the start of each show, young people, usually in couples, would parade up and down the street to announce the beginning of each show. This was done repeatedly in a sing-song manner using the words "First show starts in fifteen minutes", etc. and would be repeated for the second show likewise.

Some parents considered shows to be evil and their children were forbidden to attend. The young people from these families could usually be detected by their nervous behavior when they were in line to purchase tickets and quick glances about them when they entered the "show hall" as it was called. "Rules were made to be broken".



### The Saturday Night Street Scene

For young people, Saturday night held a social attraction. It was a great opportunity for boy to meet girl and vice-versa. There were those girls who were somewhat discreet and made infrequent appearances on the street throughout the evening. They made a showing of remaining aloof and independent and subsequently considered by the boys to be a more worthy prize. Then there was another group, less reserved, much less discreet who made themselves well known. These were the street walkers. They would lock arms in groups of two or more and walk around the business block in an endless parade as if announcing to anyone interested, "here we are". In general, parading girls were considered to be too easy to obtain and avoided by boys with higher aspirations.

Saturday night also brought out the "people watchers" that included both town and country residents. They were adult shoppers and non-shoppers who drove their cars into town or downtown, whichever the case might be, in order to locate a prized parking position ahead of everyone else. Cars were parked at a diagonal, therefore giving the occupants an unobstructed view up and down the street. The best location according to the "experts" was a place somewhat off to one side of the pool hall. Not directly in front of it because the light from the pool hall window would reveal the occupants in the car. The "good ladies" who generally were in it did not wish to be seen. There were nights when the "people watchers" were well rewarded.

### Prohibition and Prohibition Days

Cary Nation, the axe wielding prohibitionist, and her friends at one time convinced the American people that the sale of alcoholic beverages

should be forbidden by law. The law created an alien situation for many people, especially for those whose ethnic background included beer or wine as a daily part of their diet. There were also those who equated having a "good time" with the consumption of alcohol. As a result of this, bootlegging and the manufacture of home brew became a big business.

Every community, large and small, had its providers. Neighbors shared stills to make whiskey since grain of one kind or another was in abundance. Ingredients for making beer could be purchased from the local grocery store and chokecherries and other wild fruit was readily converted into wine. Where local supply failed to meet the demand, bootlegging filled in the void. In time, large scale operators began to emerge and control segments of a territory. Where rivalry existed, ruthless means to dominate the market led to gang wars and frequent murders. The Dillinger Gang is but one example of the many gangs that came into existence at the time.

On the local level where I grew up, the scene was mild by comparison. Homebrew, usually beer, was sold directly out of the "home" where it was brewed. There were also those outlets in town that obtained their liquor from out of town sources. This was especially true for whiskey products. Beer was considered to be too bulky.

Usually the bootlegged beverages were sold in a business place that had a respectable reputation and better known for its major activity such as a restaurant or pool hall. These major activities became "fronts" as they were called. In order to avoid the uncertainty of arrest, further steps were usually taken by serving only customers known to the operator.

There was a second kind of bootlegger who sold out of the trunk of his car. He would usually appear at barn dances parked in a darkened area

next to the barn. It did not take long for the word to spread around that the "stuff" was available. Usually it was sold in bottles called a "mickey" that held about a half-pint. There was no label to indicate the nature of the contents or strength. Since the bootlegger had no way of screening his customers and perhaps cared less, because of the profit involved, his chances for detection and arrest were good. Law enforcement officials seldom came around to these small events or else placed the control of alcohol low on their enforcement list.

Without any control over the purity of the products sold in these clandestine activities, illness due to alcohol poisoning was not uncommon. The adulterated products were usually sold by fly-by-night operators such as the barn dance situation. Prosecution was seldom attempted since the consumer was a participant in an illegal transaction. "Let the buyer beware" was an accepted motto.

#### Reflections on Saturday Night

Saturday night as a special night in town no longer exists. Several factors helped in the demise of this important community event. Saturday night had become popular because people had little money to spend for activities and therefore found outlets for their emotional needs in simple and less costly things. To drive even a short distance to town or neighboring towns was a considered event because of the cost of operating the car. Furthermore, few people had cars that could be trusted over an extended distance. Rural population at the time included many young people so that the adventure of meeting someone new and exciting was always a strong possibility. In time many of these factors eroded. Farm income improved, better

roads were built, people became more sophisticated in their search for entertainment, young people left the farm and the farm age population became older, and so the entire social structure changed that had made Saturday night in town attractive. The small community lost its position as a center of community interest and Saturday night in town, as it was known, became a romantic period of the past.