

Immeasurable Wealth

by
Pauline Jensen

Circleville, Kansas, nine miles northwest of Holton, braced the footing of my early years. The Circleville of my youth, however, has changed as much as I in the last half century; but the wealth of my childhood remains immeasurable. I remember dirt or mud streets of Circleville and two elevators, a blacksmith shop, creamery, shoe repair shop, cafe, hotel, drugstore, band hall, post office, hardware, furniture store, lumber yard, two groceries including a butcher shop, a dry goods and millinery store, telephone office, two railroads--the Northwestern and the L. K. & W. (Leavenworth, Kansas, and Western--nicknamed Lord Knows When)--and two railroad depots with clattering Morse code telegraph senders.

The site for Circleville was laid out in 1863, but the originators of this city failed to record their reason for the choice of the name. By the time I was born, sixty years after the founding of Circleville, there were at least three conflicting "factual" stories claiming the coinage of the town name. *A History of the State of Kansas* compiled by A. T. Andreas and published in 1883, records: "that as the town had been circling round the prairie Circleville would be a fitting name." *A Business Directory and History of Jackson County* published by Elizabeth N. Barr in 1907 gives a less palatable account: "Early settlers in Jackson County tell some awful stories. It is said that during the latter fifties a small colony located somewhere in the vicinity of what is now Circleville and lived an entire winter on plug and potatoes. The potatoes were boiled and poured out on the table and everybody sat down. The plug, a small piece of fat meat suspended from the ceiling by a stout cord, was passed around. Each person in his turn swallowed the plug, drew it back up his throat by the cord and passed it to his neighbor. This greased their throats so that the potatoes were slipped down whole. After everyone had swallowed the plug, the first man was ready again, so that it just went round and round the table until the potatoes were all eaten. It was from this circling of the plug around the table that Circleville really took its name. Other accounts are given, but do not have any foundation on fact."

Still another version of the name is recorded in the *Holton Recorder* newspaper by Lillian Estee in March 14, 1935. (I remember when Mrs. Estee was the quill-tongued postmistress of Circleville. She endured children. I dreaded the post office encounter when I was the one sent to inquire, "Do we have any mail?" As she grudgingly pushed the mail under the iron grills protecting the delivery window, I felt as if I had severely inconvenienced her dynasty. I did get even, though. Sometimes, when I was safely outside the building, I stuck out my tongue.) Mrs. Estee's newspaper story reports that some of the first settlers came from Circleville, Ohio, and thus elected to name their new settlement after the old one.

Regardless of the origin of the name, Circleville has been the focal point for the accumulation of my wealth. Of course one must understand that there is the Rockefeller type¹ of wealth and the wealthy-beyond-all-measure type that I inherited--a home secured by loving parents who made God real to me through their actions, a brother and two sisters, a granny-image baby sitter, a best friend, a series of galloping (or balking) ponies, and a vault of memories with vast deposits of disastrous fires and adventures that improve like wine with age.

My growing-up years wealth was also material for I had no doubt but that all the money in the safe at the Farmers State Bank belonged to my father who is now president of this same bank. The bank was also the field for numerous field trips after school. I led my tour group right past the cashier to the back of the bank where I proudly displayed the new plaster patching the hole bank robbers had blasted. Thus it was reasonable that I was offended when I overheard an opinionated lady remark, "My, isn't Pauline poor?" It was not until years later that I forgave the lady for her misjudgment when I learned that her "poor" was measured in waist inches instead of silver dollars.

Not even silver dollars, however, could have purchased television for my early home--but neither was there a need for one, because we had Nannas. Nannas' children were grown and her husband was dead. She was healthy and needed employment. My parents had four children within ten years--my brother Ken, three years younger than I; my sister Nolah, two years older than I; and Ginny, two years older than Nolah--and we needed Nannas. Her name was Maggie Heathman but my brother dubbed her "Nannas," which was either a contraction of Mrs. Heathman or his best try at "Grandma."

Nannas was comfortably old. Her round face was a creased documentary of laughter, anxiety, and time. Her sparkling eyes were aided by round glasses held in place by gold frames. An accumulation of gray hair was pulled together and twisted into a bun which permitted unruly hair to escape and lessen the severity of the bun without subtracting from neatness. She must not have been much over five feet tall because her figure was also round, providing a cushion lap and pillow bosom. Her dress, surely she had more than one but whether from necessity or choice, was always the same pattern--a subtle gray-flowered print, belted in the middle and topped by a lace-trimmed collar encircling her short neck and bibbing her chin. Black-laced shoes met the hem of her dress. I suspect that Nannas had little formal education, but her head was brimming with a complete library of pioneer days micro-classics. She ended sentences with "uh" instead of a period. This kept her listeners in impatient suspense and also allowed time for private coloring of the strawberry leaves spread over the "Poor Babes in the Wood." I loved the poor babes in the wood and kept hoping that sometime a search party would be organized. My quivering chin and teary eyes were rescued from total distress by my personal security within the listening circle of Nannas' sewing machine.

Nannas treadled that Singer sewing machine thousands of miles as she made clothes for us. We spent hours at her feet by the sewing machine listening to her childhood tales. She came to Kansas from Ohio in a covered wagon. One night her family stopped at what appeared to be a friendly home. Her father, however, was awakened in the night by the sound of the homeowner sharpening his knives. Nannas' family was quickly alerted for a stealthy escape. They heard many times later of pioneers losing their lives and all their belongings in this apparently hospitable home.

There was also a collection of grasshopper stories. The grasshoppers arrived in a black cloud. The cloud obliterated all light and the grasshoppers grew to be air-borne football fullbacks. Before the roaring mass descended, Nannas' family grabbed their bedding to protect the garden planted to feed the family. But when the grasshoppers lighted, they ate right through the bedding. I wonder now why I didn't question Nannas when this same ventilated bedding was drafted to hang on the windows to block dust storms. Perhaps there was bedding assigned to grasshoppers and other bedding assigned to dust storms.

I don't remember Nannas ever losing her patience with us, but my brother recalls her tying his feet together until he learned not to

kick his sisters with his new hard-soled shoes. Ken also pried into Nannas' private life. After one narrative about early-day lawlessness, Ken asked, "Nannas, were you ever in jail?" Nannas lowered her voice and answered, "Law, no, Kenneth, and I hope I never will be, uh."

One fear that the range of custody of Nannas' sewing machine could not quarantine was the terror of uncontrolled fire. Stretching flames have claimed most of the businesses in Circleville and whatever fire claims in a small town, with a decreasing trading area, is not rebuilt. When the tall elevators burned, homeowners and firefighters threw water on the roofs of their homes, because flaming cinders were missiled by the wind all over the town and fires blazed in several locations at one time.

Another major fire swept one entire business block. When I was ten-years-old, I was awakened in the middle of the night by that terrifying alarm, "Fire! Fire!" That night fire erupted in the Frakes shoe repair shop and jumped to devour the band hall, butcher shop, drug store, hardware, furniture store, lumber yard, and part of the roof of the bank. The buildings were all wood frame with the exception of the stone bank. The Methodist church was just about twenty feet from the lumber yard and when it appeared that the church would burn, a hysterical woman started screaming, "Save the steeple, save the steeple!" As I stood in my pajamas--it was no disgrace to go to town in one's pajamas when there was a fire--I watched with fearful fascination at the display of rivalry as each flame contested to leap higher than the rest. I also eyed the shouter and puzzled why it was imperative to save the steeple, since churches are built from the ground up and I could see no means of suspending a churchless steeple. Dedicated effort of the brave firefighters and aid from the rudimentary fire-fighting equipment from neighboring towns saved the church, so the steeple did not have to be amputated.

This fire, however, did clear a natural theater for the free Saturday night movies. In the space gutted by fire, planks were placed across stumps to make long rows of seats. A large screen was hung between two upright posts. This starlight theater inspired farmers to come to Circleville to do their trading on Saturday. The merchants each contributed a dollar to buy a silent movie. I don't remember the movie stories, but the cartoons were hilarious. Bugs Bunny chewing a carrot and demanding "What's up, doc?" burst all laughter barriers. There was also a serial which caused dismay when the film was substituted and the serial was shown out of sequence. The mechanic for the movie machine was Willard Hill, owner of the

hardware. Willard could fix all the new-fangled electrical conveniences, and the movie machine always broke down at least once during the movie leaving the hero clinging to the handrail of a fast-moving train. Since there was much cheering, advising, and hissing as the audience lived the movie, perhaps the break down was a needed catharsis.

One fire-destroyed building which demand justified being rebuilt this time from brick, was the barber shop. My brother has become an authority on Circleville folklore and he heard it all loafing in the barber shop where every important political, personal, or community matter was settled. It was here that rumors started, enlarged, and with no guilt completely left the pattern of their first version as the "more 'n likelies" were added. My brother tells that one time he was playing cribbage in the back of the barber shop and Elmer Smith (name changed) was lounging with his long legs extended in front of the waiting bench. He had tilted his head against the wall and lowered his hat over his eyes to defend against light glare. At this time there was a Sandstrom family (name changed) with four gangling young men whose muscle coordination had not corresponded with their growth in height. When the Sandstrom's family wagou came to town, the boys entered the barber shop, one at a time, at about five-minute leisurely intervals. The first one stumbled over Elmer's feet. Elmer had just rearranged and resettled himself when the second Sandstrom repeated the ritual. Elmer held his composure and expressed no ill will until the fourth rerun of this performance. Slowly, Elmer pulled himself straight, rubbed his injured ankles, pushed his hat to the back of his head and declared, "I would like to correct a misinterpretation. The Bible says Christ was crucified on a cross. That is not so. He was trampled to death by the Sandstroms."

At other times tempers were displayed more forcibly in the barber shop. It was superior foresight of our founding fathers to set the date of the general election at a time of the year when the earth had cooled. Even so, the primary election in August caused enough friction in the barber shop to raise the mercury in the thermometer. In those days Republicans were Republicans and Democrats were Democrats and there was no one worthy of an opinion in between. One morning an irate Democrat had heard all the blasphemy against his party that he could dismiss. He shouted at his offenders, "Are you saying that there is no such thing as a good Democrat?" His antagonist pounded his fist on the barber chair and answered. "I

didn't say that. I said there surely was one, but I had just never had the pleasure of meeting him."

Barring politics, people are friendly in a small town and honest by necessity since everyone would know "who done it." There was a time, however, when all screens were latched and I peeked out the curtained windows with dilated eyes. When the gypsies came to town, they camped in a small clearing just at the west edge of Circleville, across Elk Creek. As soon as the first wagon unhitched, the word spread as fast as blowing fire cinders, "Lock your doors, gypsies are here." The gypsies scurried all over town selling pots and pans, jewelry, embroidery work, sharpening knives, and begging for food. My aunt remembers that one time an old gypsy "Rom" was selling embroidery to my grandmother and complaining all the time she was selling about her paining baek. Grandma showed much sympathy and her sympathy was rewarded by the loss of three rows of sweet corn--the work of other gypsies while Grandma's attention was diverted.

There are many other stories of gypsy theft, but the one which clutched me with fear was the never-disputed fact that gypsies kid-napped children. One story told of the kidnapping of a little girl in a neighboring town. When the people in the ueighboring town were questioned, they knew of the incident but said it had happened in the next town north. Actually I was not in too much danger because my hair was brown and I had freckles--a natural protection against anyone's choosing me if there were a choice--but my blonde-haired, blue-eyed sister Nolah was forced to stay safely within the perimeter of her home and out of reach of these dark-skinned, black-haired and black-eyed mysterious people whose white teeth and golden ear-rings flashed deceptively.

I related the gypsy pillaging to my best friend Doris Pool, who lived in the country. I wished she had been at my house to heighten my fright. When Doris and I were together, our imaginations were unbounded. It was because of this friendship that I enjoyed the best of living in town and the best of living in the country. Doris shared her timber, straw staek, hayloft, candle making, secret hideouts, creek, and threshing-maehinc wheat harvest. On the other hand, Doris found life in my home equally zestful, so we took turns staying overnight. She liked my inside bathroom and I liked her outhouse. When I was growing up, my home was one of the three houses in town that had bathrooms and toilets that flushed. Still, I thought the solitariness of my bathroom was inferior to outhouses with two holes cut in the wooden seat. Doris and I used our outhouse time by

salvaging paper doll pictures from the Montgomery Ward or Sears and Roebuck catalogs demoted to the outhouse as soon as the new issues were printed.

Doris and I have had a lasting friendship, so I know now that it wasn't just because I liked to carry in wood that I was invited to "go home" with her so many times. It was recreation to me to make trip after trip to the woodpile and stack wood in rows on the porch so it would be handy to burn in the stove to heat the house. This wood could also be stacked in log-cabin designs or used as forts for snowball fights. My own home was heated by a coal furnace hidden in the basement. Wagon loads of coal were shoveled through the basement window into the coal bin. I took no interest in these dirty black lumps and I do not remember being required to "fix the furnace." Probably by the time I was old enough to accept this responsibility, the need had been canceled when the coal furnace was replaced by gas.

An additional privilege of living in the country was that the country kids got to bring their lunches to school in lunch buckets with the owner's name clearly inscribed on the top. The lunches were held in safety in the lunch cupboard in the hall. It was permissible, though, to snatch a cookie or homemade-bread sandwich for a recess snack. To the town kids, this seemed like a continuous picnic. Doris lived only a mile and a half from town, but I remember one morning, in this era before the temperature and chill indexes were flashed from electronic signs to warn students that it was too cold to venture forth, the jars of home-canned grape juice we carried in our coat pockets froze and burst while we were walking to school.

As I recall these pre-schoolbus days, I wonder how my mother knew how much food to cook. If there were a ball game that night, country kids and most importantly members of the team, were invited to stay in town after school and eat with us. Sometimes they also stayed overnight if they did not have to be home to do chores the next morning.

"Chores" was always pronounced with a persimmon accent, but through our enterprise, Doris and I turned one farm chore into a primary step for Women's Lib. During wheat harvest time we hired out as "water monkeys." Water monkeys carried water to revitalize the strength of the harvesters. Gallon size crockery jugs were wrapped with burlap and filled with cold water from the pump at the windmill. Then we dipped the jugs into the stock tank so that the wet burlap would become insulation to keep the jugs cool. A leather

strap was attached to the handle of the jug and then we mounted our ponies, looping the strap onto the saddle horn. With water jugs bumping against the saddle and our thighs, we raced off to the field where the harvesters--the landowners and his neighbors--were throwing bundles of wheat onto long hay racks made from heavy wooden planks. The racks had board guards four or five feet high on the front and back and angled brace boards on the four corners to secure the load onto the iron-wheeled, horse-drawn conveyances.

We were eagerly greeted by the thirsty men filling the hay racks. Working without shelter from the compassionless Kansas sun, these men transferred the water from inside their bodies to their clothes and onto the ground. As the water jugs were passed from mouth to mouth, they were soon drained and we galloped back to the barn for refills.

The activity in the barn lot was ruled by the operator of the threshing machine. He was a man to be respected. The filled hay racks lumbered into the barn lot and lined up to feed the wheat shocks to the awesome threshing machine. This monster machine roared, shook, and belched straw to mushroom a gigantic straw stack blown out of one pipe, and to pour the threshed grain separated from its stock out of another pipe into a waiting wagon. When a bundle of wheat twisted or jumped from the conveyor belt carrying the shocks to the separator, the operator knew how to grab a pitch fork and straighten the bundle. When the machine coughed and died because of a mechanical ailment, the operator grumbled that bundles had been thrown in too fast. Then he scaled the machine, opened the big metal lid on the top and pulled out the excessive straw.

On our second harvest job, Doris and I conceived a scheme to save bushels of grain. As soon as a hay rack was emptied, we jumped up on the rack with brooms and swept the loose grain from the board floor before the driver rattled back to the field. Thus the wheat that had shaken off the stalk on the trip to the barn lot was not lost on the return trip to the field, but saved in the barn lot to become feed for the chickens. As soon as this conservation idea was implemented, the appreciative farmer raised our pay from 50¢ per day (the going rate for water monkeys) to \$1.00. This is the only time I have ever had my wages doubled in one day.

When the clatter of the threshing machine was shut down for noontime, the farmers took turus washing in big pans set under a shade tree. The towel on which they dried their hands and faces soon color coordinated with the browned skin of harvest laborers. As

the hungry men filed into the farm house, it was a signal for the water monkeys to dismount and report for dining-room duty. In the dining room, the table had been extended to its full length by adding boards in the middle. Now it was our job to keep the white bowls of mounded mashed potatoes and stoneware platters of fried chicken passed around and around the table. There was also a constant refilling of glasses with pitchers of iced tea and lemonade. It is now clear to me that the water monkeys were the ones who moved the harvest.

The days of the threshing machine have been absorbed by the lonely monotony of air-conditioned combines, and the thriving business once transacted in Circleville has advanced to Holton, the county seat. The population of Circleville has shrunk to less than two hundred people; and the business section is the garage, the Farmers State Bank, one grocery, a feed store, the post office, and a temporarily closed hardware whose proprietor is ill. The railroad depot has been converted into a house, and the railroad tracks have been uprooted.

The Farmers State Bank, however, is not only still alive but also has expanded into the vacant building adjoining it on the south. My eighty-six-year-old father still sits at his desk and counsels loan customers. He still lives in the two-story frame house with the long front porch partially enclosed by two-feet high banisters and covered by a roof supported with southern-style pillars. The color of the house has been changed from white to green, but it still sits on the corner just one block east of the bank. The principle of neighbor-help-neighbor continues to bond common concerns; and when I go home to Circleville, my wealth is still intact and compounding interest.