

MEMORIES OF RUSSELLVILLE (1922/26)

by

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Sixty nine years ago, at age 10, Russellville, Alabama became my home for a 4-year period. My memories of that period have become fragmented and dim. This record of what remains provides only a glimpse of the town and its people of that period.

In 1922, my father's business in Sheffield failed. Jobs were scarce but he succeeded in getting one at unskilled labor with the Northern Alabama Railroad in Russellville. His pay was \$2.08/day (\$0.26/hr.) less \$7.50/month rent for a railroad-owned house. So our life there was not one of affluence.

I remember Russellville as a town of beauty with hills and trees, a meandering stream, a courthouse, a railroad, two school buildings, and several churches. Most of its 2,000 inhabitants lived in well-kept houses - many on large lots. Its gravelled streets were well maintained. Traffic was light and consisted of both animal-drawn and mechanically propelled vehicles. A statue of a Confederate soldier, facing north, stood at the intersection of 2 main streets downtown.

During our 4-year residence we rented 5 different houses, none with electricity, central heat, or indoor plumbing. One of them was on a street that ran uphill from the stream. Vehicles drove through it but pedestrians crossed it on a picturesque swinging bridge. I rarely crossed without stopping near midpoint for a swing.

Commercial activity was oriented toward serving an agricultural area. Only two stores come to mind: Deering & Ormond which sold hardware, farm equipment and feed, and Wilson Mercantile Co. which sold clothing and drygoods. I recall its numerous shelves reaching up to the ceiling filled with "bolts" of cloth that was sold by the yard.

A fascinating feature of this store was its labyrinth of overhead wires that connected the various sales positions to the cashier located in back of the store at an elevated level. Transporters with flanged wheels sped along these lines carrying sales tickets and money between clerks and cashier all done by gravity or by imparting momentum.

Northward from this store along Main street stood the Wilson Motor Co. that sold and serviced Ford cars and trucks (some of the trucks had solid rubber tires). It was here in 1926 that we bought a Ford touring car with removable side curtains - its cost was \$515 delivered. Shortly after its purchase, I started driving at age 14. Neither a driver's license nor insurance was required, but a license plate was - ours was numbered "110842" (why has my memory retained such trivia for 69 years?).

I don't remember ever entering the courthouse. But I do remember that it was a very busy place when court was in session. The Franklin County Times published the list of cases being tried. One charge that was quite common was "using abusive language" - fine \$5.00 and costs. Cursing your enemy and swearing in public were not considered as being protected by the first amendment of the U. S. Constitution.

We attended the Church of Christ which decrees that every statement in the Bible is true and must be interpreted literally, that no instrumental music be used in its services and that baptism by immersion is a requirement for membership. Its preacher was very effective in describing the horrors of hell and pleasures of heaven. I applied for membership. So on a summer morning in 1924, the preacher transported me and my mother to Burgess Lake nearby where I was "ge-dunked". Presumably that erased all my prior sins but didn't help much on future ones. Later the church installed a baptismal font back of the pulpit so immersions could be performed inside.

At two different times we lived close to the railroad tracks and I spent numerous hours watching its activity. There was the water tower where ^{the} steam engines quenched their thirst, the trestle where they dumped their ashes later to be hauled away, and the coal dump which fed their ravenous appetites. Freight trains came and left - some just passing through, others stopping to drop off and pick up cars. Daily, passenger trains stopped at the railroad station to load and unload people, mail, and express. Its telegraph ticker ran continuously. It had separate waiting rooms for "COLORED ONLY" and "WHITES ONLY". Both had spittoons (or cuspidors) to catch expectorant from tobacco chewers (when their aim was good), ashes and unburned portions of cigars, cigarettes and pipes.

Only a few blacks lived in town or even in the nearby countryside - probably because Franklin Co. never had large plantations that used slave labor. Blacks had their own schools and churches, so I never became acquainted with any. Segregation was never discussed at home, in church, or at school and it never occurred to me that the blacks might be unhappy with it. I do remember being told that there was a local KKK unit but I have always preferred to believe that it wasn't true.

Jobs for kids were almost non-existent but I did succeed in getting one in 1923 at age 11. I was hired as water-boy for a crew that repaired railroad bridges (trestles) on spur lines that ran out to iron ore mines that had been abandoned several years earlier. My pay was \$0.50/day and I collected \$12.50 for 25 days work. I quickly learned that men working under the hot Alabama sun need a lot of water. The source of water was from a spring that could usually be found within a hundred yards or so of the work site. Fortunately for me either Child Labor Laws had not been passed, or my employer chose to ignore them.

There was a blacksmith shop somewhere down town which had as its main business the shoe-ing of horses (maybe mules too). In the summer of 1923 my mother set up a hamburger stand next to it. I enjoyed many hours watching blacksmith activity and eating a significant portion of my mother's profits.

Prohibition was in effect during this time which made it a federal offense to manufacture and sell alcoholic beverages. So there were no bars, saloons, or pubs. I don't recall that we had a restaurant but if we did it couldn't serve beer or cocktails. There were many stories about Federal agents destroying stills and stores of liquor and arresting bootleggers. Occasionally it was reported that a "Revenue-er" had been shot. These happenings didn't bother us because my parents were teetotalers.

The snappiest car in town was owned by Mr. Wright, our town barber. It was a NASH touring car with disc wheels. He let his son (and my classmate) Walton drive it. He was probably the most popular student in our class. Walton had superior athletic skills and years later made headlines as a member of the Auburn football team.

Shortly after arriving in Russellville in 1922, I enrolled in the 6th grade at the City Public School. Its principal, and one of its teachers, was Charles C. Kerby. I remember very little about this class but my report card and a picture of the class have survived.

The next 3 years were spent in the Franklin County Junior High School which shared a single building with the Senior H.S. The building was 2-story and sat on a beautiful hill in the S. W. portion of town. Two clay tennis courts were placed half way down the hill.

The building had no central heat - each room had its own coal-fired heater that was surrounded by a cylindrical jacket. The boys in each class took turns starting the fire in the morning and keeping it going throughout the day. I don't remember bringing the coal in from the outside, so maybe we had a janitor that did that. We had no cafeteria nor separate eating place. I don't remember if we had indoor plumbing.

Once a week, we had "assembly" when all the Junior High pupils gathered in the study hall, listened to announcements and sang songs of Civil War and World War I origins - "Tenting Tonight On The Old Camp Ground", "When Johnny Comes Marching Home", "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag and Smile... Smile...Smile", etc. Once a month a local clergyman was brought in who led us in prayer, and spoke on some "morals" or similar subject. Remember this was 50 years or so before the Supreme Court banned school prayer.

My memory of classmates is largely restricted to three: Crawford Allen, George Braly, and Johnny Cook. We enjoyed each other's company, spent many hours together and (at least in the 9th grade) frequently skipped study periods, ate our lunches outside the building and engaged in such physical activity as horsing around the creek, jumping off hills and bridges, etc. In later years, Crawford became a preacher and teacher, George majored in English and taught it in the Russellville schools during a long career. Johnny went out to Texas where he worked in oil fields and died rather young from an accident.

Helen Albert was Valedictorian of our 9th grade graduating class. I was its Salutatorian. Helen was the only Jewish member of our class and was a delightful person. She instilled in me a strong positive attitude toward the Jewish race which still persists.

I remember the name of only one teacher: Miss Tulli Mae Birdsong. I don't remember my Latin teacher's name but I do remember that she gave me a fountain pen (my first) for attaining the highest grade in class. Latin was a high school subject but could be elected by 9th grade students as an "extra". If passed, high school credit was given which established the opportunity of completing high school in 2 years, which I later did.

Public water came to Russellville in 1924 or 1925. A public park was built at the "water works" a short distance from town. In 1926, we were neighbors of the Water Work's Manager, whose name was "CROWE" I think. Early that year he bought an Atwater Kent radio. On many Saturday evenings he moved it to his front porch and invited all neighbors to listen. What a thrill that was - listening to voices and music from distant Nashville, Cincinnati and Chicago. A true miracle had arrived.

Our economic status did not improve significantly during this 4-year period. During several months of 1925 and first part of 1926, my father worked in North Carolina on dam construction. No job became available in Russellville. So, in mid-summer 1926 he went to Detroit where he got a job. In August, my mother disposed of most of our possessions and we headed northward in our Model T. On the afternoon of the first day out, I saw my first traffic light as we entered Nashville. It had no amber - just red and green. Just before it changed color, a bell rang from one corner of the intersection to alert the drivers.

My mother offered free transportation to a local young man to drive us. We had no map, roads were not numbered, signs were few and sometimes confusing. We depended largely on directions from gas station owners. At one point in Kentucky we zigged when we should have zagged and were surprised when we entered the city of Indianapolis. Next day we reached Detroit after having travelled 4 days and repaired 17 flat times along the way. Travelling in those days was an adventure.

We were saddened by having left Russellville and our many friends. Fortunate are those who stayed and enjoyed living there over the years.