

Memories of Winifred

by Ray C. Stedman

I first saw it in the summer of 1931, riding over the hill on a blistering hot day in my uncle's 1929 Chevrolet. Along with my aunt and their two small boys, Lowell and Wendell, we were coming to live there where my Uncle Fred would be superintendent of schools for the coming years.

We had driven the 42 miles north from Lewistown on a gravel road, skirting the edge of the Moccasin mountains where the old mining camp of Maiden lay, and heading steadily north through the Dog Creek valley. Far on the northern horizon and across the Missouri the Bearpaws marked the site of Chief Joseph's last stand, and east of them the sharp edges of the Little Rockies broke the skyline.

I was just about to turn 14 and already Montana and the west was an exciting place to me. Though I missed my grade school friends back in the Red River valley of North Dakota, I now looked forward eagerly to my first year of high school, and what life in Winifred would be like.

In those days the frontier seemed close at hand. The town was the center of a large, still sparsely settled area, stretching from the Missouri River, 25 miles to the north, to the lilting waters of the Judith River, 20 miles west, and to the east the small ranches and open range that reached to the mouth of the Musselshell, some 70 miles away, with the nearest city of any size, Lewistown, just beyond the Moccasins.

At that time Winifred served as a center for the whole vast area. It was still primitive in many ways, having no electricity, no phones except one line from Turner's haberdashery to Lewistown. There was no modern plumbing and every house had its outside privy, even the high school which sat at the top of the hill at the west end of main street. The nearest doctor was in Lewistown and though there once had been a drugstore, it had closed its doors during the Depression.

Nevertheless it was an exciting place in which to live. Ranchers, cowboys, dryland farmers, all came to town to buy groceries, ship cattle or grain on the little Milwaukee train that came up on a spur line twice a week, or oftener when needed. Though Prohibition was the law, everyone knew where liquid refreshment was available. As Will Rogers remarked, "Prohibition was certainly a lot better than not having any liquor at all!"

Winters were often bitterly cold with great blizzards shutting down the little town's social life for days on end. Yet when the chinooks would blow the snow could all disappear over night. School was the center of the town's activity for all the surrounding ranch and farm families would send their children into town to rent a house and live, often by themselves without adult supervision, for weeks on end. But these ranch children were for the most part well disciplined, eager students, who stayed away from immoral activities, and did well in their studies. There were some exceptions, of course, but they were all my acquaintances and friends and it was not difficult to sort out the few bad ones and avoid them.

There were two families, however, that usually provided some excitement. They had adjoining ranches north of town, and owned adjoining houses in town which they occupied for the school season. For some reason which I never discovered, there was bad blood between them, and this would erupt from time to time in clashes between the family members. I recall walking home from school one spring day and passing the two houses in time to see one boy from one family lying prone on the ground, with one of the older girls of the other family standing over him with a raised axe, about to split his skull in two. Perhaps she was only threatening, but my arrival led her to lower the axe and let the boy up. Unfortunately that wasn't the end, for occasionally they would take pot shots at one another with rifles at their ranches, though I never knew anyone

to be hit.

Though lawmen were few and far between (there being a sheriff in Lewiston, but only an Irish constable named Nels in Winifred) there were surprisingly few major crimes. One notorious murder was that of a part-Mexican farmer named Turkey Joe, who lived by himself a few miles out of town. One day his body was found in his one-room cabin, and an attempt had been made to burn the cabin but the fire had gone out. Two brothers from a Hungarian immigrant family nearby were suspected of trying to rob Turkey Joe of the store of gold he had reputed to have hidden in the cabin, but to my knowledge no one was ever arrested for the crime.

Summers were the most fun for me. Two families who had children my own age had ranches, one on the edge of a deep canyon in the Breaks, and the other a wheat ranch northwest of town. One family had horses and cattle and ran a typical western cattle ranch where we would often ride in parties of ten or more, down the deep canyons to the Creek and practice calf-roping, etc. The other family grew wheat and hay but had a large house where families would often gather for a full night of dancing, to the tunes of a fiddler, a piano, and whatever other instruments anyone cared to bring and play. Memories of those colorful evenings still rise fresh in my mind. The dancing would not stop till the sky began to lighten in the east.

Another ranch couple, just a mile out of town, had no children of their own, and virtually adopted me as a son. I got my first job with them, making hay during the summer, at 50 cents a day! They too had horses and cattle, and I learned much of the cowboy life with them, sometimes riding east to the open range, to brand calves that had been born during the spring months.

The main sport played at high school was basketball and the whole town would turn out in support of the local team. We played teams from Denton and Roy and sometimes as far away as Grassrange and Winnett. Though I played on the varsity my last two years I have not followed basketball much since then. My attraction was not to the game itself but to the excitement that accompanied it and to the intense rivalry that would build up between towns.

My second job was driving a truck up from the isolated Stafford ranch on the Missouri, up through the steep Breaks to bring produce grown on the ranch to the Stafford grocery store in town. My days at the ranch were often lonely ones, as the only other person around was a part-French ex-sheepherder who served as manager of the ranch. I spent my hours after work resurrecting a leaky rowboat which I found and rowing across the rapid-flowing Missouri to fish. I caught several catfish around two to three feet long and they were a welcome change to our diet. I also had to be on constant watch for rattlesnakes, as I killed several large ones that summer.

Many years later (in 1989) I drove back to that ranch and found it abandoned. But my cousin and I took the free ferry across the river and, parking the car on the dirt road out of sight, we climbed a nearby hill and looked out over the river and surrounding hills. For 360 degrees we could not see anything that was manmade or changed since Lewis and Clark had camped at that spot in 1805. There are few places left in the United States of which a claim like that could be made.

Though the school I attended was in an isolated town far from the fine amenities of civilization, yet the education I received was first class. The knowledge I was given of classical literature was far beyond anything now taught in the high schools of California. Though we only had a primitive chemistry laboratory I went on from there to become so proficient in chemistry that my professor in college asked me to take over the class if he could not show up some day. The typing and shorthand which I learned at Winifred High School kept me employed through most of the Depression, and led to my serving as a Court Reporter in the Navy, taking shorthand records of the Navy court martials at Pearl Harbor during World War II.

When I graduated in the spring of 1935 I was only 17, but though I soon left Winifred for college and then on into various parts of the world, I have never ceased to value the things I learned and the people I knew in that strategic little central Montana town. In 1989 I was honored to be invited to launch the Montana Centennial celebration as speaker at the Billings Civic Arena in November. It was a great delight to me to do so as it brought flooding back the happy memories I had of those days on the Great Plains when Montana was still young and its skies were always blue!

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From the archives of Elaine Stedman, July 30, 1996.