

“Abilene in the First Two Decades of the Twentieth Century”

by Deane W. Malott

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“Before I ever started school my Mother tutored me, so I skipped first grade. In those days the Public Library was located above a couple of the stores on the west side of Cedar Street between Second and Third. I remember going down to that Library as a small boy to take out a book, "The Magical Monarch of Mo." The Library was presided over for many years by Miss Lida Romig, who always went on tip-toe and talked in whispers. She kept track of attendance by moving a bee-bee bullet from one box to another, anytime anyone came thru the door. Her bearded Father was City Surveyor who measured everything by stepping it off with even strides. No instruments or tapes.

She presided for many years even after the Abilene Free Public Library was constructed with the aid of Andrew Carnegie on a plot of land between Broadway and Spruce Street at Fourth Street.”

Courtesy of Robert H. Malott

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“In my day the high school was at the head of Spruce Street at Seventh. No such thing as Junior High existed. (The educational program in Abilene was normally eight years of grade school and four years of high school.)

Teachers in the Abilene High School did not have a great turnover. Minnie Stewart in Math (who said she nearly gave me a red A+ for a monthly grade); Miss Ault, our Latin teacher and class advisor; Miss Hopkins, a more elderly uncertain creature, who taught us the Constitution, paragraph by paragraph, and who was irreverently dubbed Miss Hoptoad; Miss Ruth Hunt who corrected everyone who started to recite beginning with "Well"; "Without the Well, please" she would insist. Miss McLatchey also in English—her sister in Music. The principal was Will French, a KU graduate who inspired us all to go on to the University. There was also a chemistry teacher and a physics teacher, both mild-mannered gentlemen, who taught us a bit about being scholarly.

The Superintendent of Schools, W. A. Stacey, had his office in the High School, and often gave us excellent talks at convocations held perhaps once or twice a week. I can still recall the subject matter of at least one of his talks. He later became Assistant Superintendent of Public Education at the seat of the State Government in Topeka.

I was not a participant in sports, but did belong to the Debate Team and the Chorus. Dr. Blaney presided at one of our inter high-school debates, probably with a team from the Dickinson County High School in Chapman, which we lost. Myrl Rodney, daughter of a flour miller, was on the team with me.”

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“When I was about ten years old, the Boy Scouts were organized with a wholesale grocer salesman by the name of Zeke Schilling as Scout Master. I do not remember the names of many of the scouts. Among them were Dudley Wyandt, Walter Alexander, Norman Gross, Bud Jeffcoat, whom I remember was with our scout gang when Zeke took us swimming one Saturday or Sunday afternoon in the (undoubtedly polluted) Smoky Hill River.”

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“My boyhood friends in Abilene were John Haskell, member of a large family whose Mother died but whose Father kept a home for his children next to my Grandfather's home on Buckeye. John was imaginative, loyal, and talented in writing, in cartoons, and drama. Neither he nor I were athletes. Another friend, not as close, was Roy (Curley) Elwick who lived next door to the Humphreys. He was not as talented or as interesting as John Haskell. I had a less intimate friendship with Norman Gross, Herbert Gish, Bruce Engle (from a farm down on the Smoky Hill River), Chester Cassel, Muriel Close, Harriett Toliver, Madelaine Nichaly [Nicolay?], Verla Dahnke and Harriett Patterson.”

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“There were one or two motion picture theatres, as well as the converted Seeyle Theatre where traveling plays and musicals used to play one-night stands, and there was a Lyceum program of miscellaneous attractions each winter. The movie theatres were converted stores. The pictures were of course silent films, and they were usually accompanied by someone banging out tunes on an upright piano below the screen.

The Redpath-Horner Lyceum program came in early fall each year with a variety of programs, playing in a tent. I heard Conwell's famous lecture "Acres of Diamonds," various troops of bell-ringers, musicians, and magicians.

Abilene was the home of Parker's Carnival, a miscellaneous collection of tent shows, each entered thru an elaborate wooden, highly decorated, and lighted front. My Father was a friend of Mr. Parker and always had a season pass, good for "bearer and party." I was allowed to use it on occasion. I remember one show, "The Girl from Abilene," a dazzling dancer; a musical show called "Sunflower Bells"; animal shows a miniature scenic play laid in the Swiss Alps. In the center of the horseshoe of shows, was the Merry-go-round and Ferris Wheel. All Abilene turned out when Parker's Carnival opened in Abilene, before taking off on its several-months-long tour. It was at Parker's Carnival that I saw my first movies, a crudely presented "Trip to the Moon" and "The Great Train Robbery," in about 1903 or 1904.

Occasional circuses came to town for one night stands, arriving by long one or two circus trains in the early morning—a great sight for excited small boys. I remember Wallace and Hagenbeck; Sells-Floto; Ringling Brothers; Barnum & Bailey (before the last two merged).”

Courtesy of Robert H. Malott