

Looking Back At Historic Kern County

Jerry Kirkland
jerryk@bak.rr.com

Black Gold Gypsies

by Jerry Kirkland

I suppose this tale, or one very much like it, could be told by a host of others from my generation who grew up in oilfield families in the late 1930s and early 1940s. During those years, my family - my dad and mom, my two older brothers and I - were migrants, not much different from today's migrant workers except that they follow the crops and we went wherever there were oil wells to be drilled.

My dad worked for a drilling contractor, a company that used its own employees and equipment to drill wells for major oil companies on a contract basis. We generally stayed in one spot only as long as it took to complete the well, maybe a month, maybe six months, and then we moved on to wherever the next job took us, usually to another city or town.

We often had to pack up and leave on very short notice and by the time we had moved three or four times, a smooth and efficient routine was in place. Our mom checked us out of school while my dad settled up with the landlord. He then hooked on to the small utility trailer that we pulled behind our old Chevy sedan and everyone pitched in with the loading. It didn't take long. We had our clothes, a few dishes and personal effects, an iron and an ironing board, an old Easy brand wringer washer and little else. No furniture. We traveled light and looked for a place to stay after we arrived at our next destination. We spent time in Santa Maria, Coalinga, Taft, Fillmore, Ventura, Long Beach, Fellows, Santa Paula, and maybe a couple of more towns I can't remember. In between, we made two or three trips back to Bakersfield, staying always in Oildale where the rent was cheaper. Usually we were able to rent a furnished house but more than once we had extended stays in auto courts, the

early version of today's motel.

During that three year period, my brothers and I went to more schools than we can recall and I suspect our school records spent more time in transit than at any one school site. But if there were lost learning opportunities, those losses were more than offset by the life experiences gained by living life on the road. We seldom had store-bought toys and television was yet a generation away but we were rarely bored or idle. Unwittingly, my brothers and I had discovered the recipe for a happy, maybe even meaningful boyhood: Just combine a cupful of imagination with a tablespoon or two of derring-do.

In the summer of 1940, we moved to the little town of Fellows, a few miles north of Taft. At that time Fellows was still an active community, not anything like what it had been during the oil boom early in the century, but certainly nothing like the near ghost town that it is today.

A few days after arriving there, the three of us took a walk on the railroad tracks that ran along the eastern edge of town. It appeared that the tracks, rusty and in disrepair, had not been used for some time so we were surprised to find an old freight car standing lone sentry over a siding just north of town. Its sliding door was open about half way, inviting further investigation. My oldest brother, the only one tall enough to see inside, took a peek. He turned with a look of astonishment on his face and, no doubt hoping to impress us with some swear words he had learned at our last school, said in a loud whisper, "Holy Christ, there's a goddamn old tramp living in there!"

We were not unfamiliar with hobos. They were a common sight during the Depression years but we had never been close enough to talk to one. That was about to change. Giving no indication that he had been offended by my brother's unflattering outburst, the old bum said, "You boys wanna come in, come ahead, although your mama might not approve of you visitin' with the likes of me." We knew, of course, that his was an entirely accurate observation but we accepted his hospitality anyway. He told us right away that his name was Tim.

Tim had not seen a bathtub in a while and his gray beard was a bit shaggy and matted but he was a friendly sort and had a laugh that reminded me of my grandfather. We were ignorant of pedophiles or child molesters, of course, so I guess we were lucky that Tim was neither. We spent about an hour in his makeshift living quarters, mostly just listening. He had lots of tales to tell – of growing up on a farm in Nebraska, of a stint in the Merchant Marine, of life on the road and the rails. We were in awe. They were great stories and some of them may even have been true.

We went back to see Tim the next day but the old railcar was empty, its former occupant no doubt caught up in the wanderlust that had brought him here a week or two ago. We were disappointed, of course, but we felt fortunate to have made the acquaintance of someone so worldly ... and we felt doubly fortunate that our mother never found out about our hobo friend.

Two moves later, if memory serves, we landed back on the west side, this time in Taft, where we rented a little house in Taft Heights. The landscape to our north was dotted with scores of old wooden derricks, relics from the days when wells were dug by the pounding, chisel action of cable tools. Since most were within easy walking distance of where we lived, we began an inspection tour almost immediately.

Still attached to most of the derricks were the huge wooden walking beams, overgrown teeter-totters that looked every bit like ungainly brown birds pecking relentlessly at unseen morsels. Their gentle bobbing motion kept perfect harmony with the squeak and squeal of ancient cables and pulleys - music and motion that beckoned, then invited our participation. We stopped at the first one we came to.

We knew that the prudent thing to do was to avoid this collection of wheels and gears and belts, all of them in motion, and move on - but we were not so inclined! We clattered quickly up a ladder that led to the top surface of the beam and suddenly found ourselves first atop, then astraddle the world's largest bucking bronco! We screamed and hollered like, well, like schoolboys!

We rode broncs, a different one every day, until the thrill had run its course, managing to escape almost unscathed, just a few splinters in the butt. There surely is a god who looks after drunks and foolish young boys!

In the fall of 1941, our dad's rig was moved to Elk Hills, twenty miles or so west of Bakersfield, for what he said would be an extended stay. When our parents purchased a small house in Bakersfield, we knew that our days on the road were over and that we would have to be content with a more sedentary lifestyle. All I could think about was how odd it was going to feel spending an entire year in one school!

There are no photographs of our years on the road and no one kept a diary but perhaps that's not so tragic. There will always be the memories, scrubbed clean now of any hardship or unpleasantness. What remains are powerful word pictures capable of soothing the souls

of vagabonds who had thought everyone lived without roots: day to day, hand to mouth, nourished by the poetry of the open road. These are coming-of-age memories - impossible to capture on film and only poorly defined by any combination of words or phrases.

< O >