

Sailor Springs History

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(Printed by The County Commoner, Tuesday, June 13, 2000, page 8)

I was born in 1923 and Sailor Springs was just 2 miles from where I grew up. I walked to church where I now preach, with my brother Lubert, and two sisters Emmadine and Myone. I often walked home alone because an elderly lady by the name of Cora Levitt, felt I needed some extra help in understanding the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. I am eternally grateful for her leadership. It was always a treat to visit with Bill and Amanda Smith, our great uncle and aunt from Kentucky, who lived in the middle of town. Uncle Bill was a prisoner at Andersonville during the Civil War, and when released weighed only 68 pounds. Back when I was a small boy, Sailor Springs was still a thriving town with two doctors, a blacksmith, a garage, a filling station, and at least four main stores. The Christian, Baptist, and Methodist churches did much to help mold the character of the community. There were houses of various descriptions and sizes all over town and surrounding area filled with sizable families. All were hit hard with the economic crash, called the depression in 1929. Four pennies had the purchasing power of \$1 today.

There were large crowds that would gather for the Sailor Springs picnics. A real for sure 'merry-go-round' powered by an upright boiler and steam engine, produced the energy to operate this beautiful piece of carnival equipment and also operated the steam calliope that played over and over again "It's A Long Way to Tiperrarie." On one of these occasions at the age of 5 I received my first aero-plane ride in a WWI Jennie bi-plane. What an experience!

The tragic burning of the huge hotel that was such an integral part of the Spring Grounds, had been a terrible blow to the main thrust of these unique grounds. That was a sad day in 1917 because it basically called a halt to the many visitors that were used to coming from every direction for the hot bath treatments and spring water that seemed to have, some medicinal values for some, was now coming to be dead in its tracks. However the most pleasant and well kept grounds with its great trees, flowing springs, covered by attractive gabasos, along with the Sunflower lake a few hundred yards to the south with its very practical boathouse, made it a real treat just to go down to the Spring Grounds. Lots of folk were present and especially on the weekends. What a delight to set around the main gas spring under the large and attractive gebaso, and watch fold put a large wet handkerchief with a small hole in it and lay it on top of the water and light the gas coming up with the large volume of water, and just watch it burn.

Close by was another splendid spring we called the vitamin spring because of the little flakes of 'who knows what' that came flowing up in the water.

There were carefully laid brick sidewalks, and large wooden stairs up the steeper banks, that led to the large billiard hall building. Even though years had passed since its use of the hall, there was still quite a bit of equipment such as pins and balls still around. A branch with several bridges and a continuous flow of water ran down in the center of the grounds and emptied in the Lake. At the west and north of Sunflower Lake was a baseball diamond that was a center of attraction every Sunday afternoon throughout the summer.

I well remember an Easter Sunrise Service held down in the middle of things on the grounds. Preachers said some good things about the resurrection of Jesus and we sang some appropriate songs for the occasion. Quite a crowd had gathered and enjoyed bacon,

sausage, eggs, and homemade bread served with real butter and honey.

The bank building was a center of activity. It had an 'opera house' as we called it up on the upper floor, and it was open to all sorts of meetings. It had a stage and all kinds of seats, some bleacher type in the back. The south side wall of the building was ideal for those silent movies that would be shown up on a sheet. Most of these movies were of the 'Western' type and much of the scenes were shot from a camera held by a man riding a horse or bumpy wagon --- but we laughed anyway.

The nice grassy slope was ideal for folk to sit and watch and hundreds came to see the free shows. Merchants were glad to advertise on the screen.

There was no electricity in those days. However the town did have an old Delco generator that furnished enough juice for about six lights strung up in the main street in town. It was used however just on special occasions. The streets would be lined with all kinds of different cars and not a few horses and wagons.

In those days the roads were atrocious. Graveled roads just didn't exist. It is hard for any of us to imagine just how dusty they became in the summer and how muddy they were in the winter and spring. Some of the worst spots would be paved with corduroy and you'll just have to ask some- of us oldtimers about that. What a wonderful blessing it was when I was nine years old to have a concrete slab 9' wide that extended from Clay City, right up through the center of Sailor Springs. It was like a new world had been opened up.

Something that really amazed me while doing research for our 1993 Church Centennial seven years ago. In the 1890 census, there were approximately 24,000 people in Clay County. In the 1990 census, 100 years later, that number dropped by approximately 10,000 folk. The 1990 census came up with 14,600 and we can well suppose the 2000 census will bring us closer to 14,000. As near as we can determine, the population of Sailor Springs was approximately 1,250 in 1900.

I have been asked to tell something of the Sailor Springs Swing. Some years before the Wright Brothers flew the first airplane, or Henry Ford produced his first Model T, Philip Weidner, of Sailor Springs, was manufacturing this rather famous Weidner Buggy and Swings. If you owned a Weidner buggy, it was something to talk about up town. Very rugged, beautiful, and practical with a patented hum assembly that only needed grease every 1000 miles.

I asked the late Lawrence Gumble, if he remembered the swing and buggy shop located immediately east of the Christian Church and just west of where Neva Schnautz lives. His response was: "I certainly do, I worked for the ole feller." I said, "You did, what did you do?" He said, " I painted and boy he was really particular. The building was quite large with ample anvils and steel bending equipment. Lawrence said that he built four or more buggies during the winter and eight to 12 swings throughout the summer. Then I asked him, "how in the world did you drill all those 200 holes in the steel of each swing?" His response was with his left hand holding an imaginary drill and his right hand turning a crank.

In answer to my "Oh no," he said, "Well we didn't have no electricity."

The old swing that I grew up on, according to my dad was made about 1901. It seemed that none of the swings were alike and Weidner just used the material he happened to have on hand. On investigation, one has to come to the conclusion that he was a real craftsman. Nearly all of the Weidner heirs own one the originals and are not about to part with it. These along with several dozen other folk feel that life is just too short to be without such.

Philip Weidner was a Roman Catholic that fell out with his church because of the Pew

Tax situation. He died in 1920. Since then a few folk have made a swing or two based on his pattern, with the steel framing and wooden slats and footboards. I moved back into the community 20 years ago and in 1982 sort of started where great-grandfather left off. Today they are in Oregon, Montana, Texas, Mexico, Florida, Tennessee, Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, and one is headed for Delaware in June. At the start I worked hard on perfecting the most comfortable contour seats, and added a canopy made of fiberglass on wood, that makes an attractive and practical addition. The wood for the seats and floors are made of clear white oak, finished in clear covering, unless otherwise specified. Almond color has been a favorite for the steel framing.

These swings have for over a century been a pleasant way for people to sit and enjoy good conversation. It has been described as effortless swinging and the main frame should last 300 years or more.

One of the many items that came from the Weidner shop was snow sled to be pulled by horses. It is of the Santa Claus type and has been in my possession for many years and stored in an old house. It has been suggested that such a piece of history would be most suitable

for the Sailor Springs Historical Society collection. I am certainly in agreement and have given same for that purpose. The only stipulation being, that in the case some of our family would like to use it, that permission be granted by the Society .

So the question comes? Were those Sailor Springs historical years the good ole days? In some ways they surely were--but oh how I would hate to go back to them!