



June 1, 1999

This is a day for catching up on some miscellaneous material provided by readers. First off, a while back someone brought me an interesting little paperback book entitled "One Thousand and One Things Worth Knowing; A Book Disclosing Invaluable Information, Receipts and Instruction in the Useful and Domestic Arts; Everything of Which Is of Practical Use to Everybody." Obviously, the title alone takes up nearly a page, but that is not what sets this little book apart. It was published in 1855 in New York by Henry Stephens, and that was a long time ago. Hand-written marginal notes in pencil are still visible but hardly legible. Although the pages are worn and fragile, they are still in remarkably good condition for something nearly 150 years old.

Some of the compiler's observations in that book are still valid. All of them are interesting because of what they have to say about the early years of this country. These are some of the topics listed in the contents: How to Get Rich; Warts and Corns, and How to Cure Them; To Make Cheap and Wholesome Drinks for Warm Weather; How to Win a Sweet Heart -- True and Only Method; and finally, Employment for Everybody, Or How to Make Money. I guess that last one is what you'd call a catch-all. It's not just about job-hunting. It includes a section on Hair Restorative and another on Cheap Hair Oil. Here's a recipe for that last one: Take 1 gallon lard oil in a vessel; tie up 1 oz. Alkanet in a straining cloth and suspend it in the oil for a few days until it comes to the right shade of color, then flavor it with 1 oz. essential oil to suit. (According to my dictionary, Alkanet is a European plant of the borage family). The book appeared back in the heyday of the antimacassar, which was a cover used to protect the arms or backs of chairs. You can see why furniture would need protection if lard oil was slathered on the heads of ladies or gentlemen sitting on them. The book contains only 144 pages but each one has its own charm and fascination.

Now on to other subjects. My friend Bess Kime was reminiscing recently about days of yore and she believes that qualifies her for "old-timer" status. She asks: "Do you remember the old Elementary school that stood in the middle of the block with the sidewalk diagonally to the street corner? That's where we played jacks and the boys (and some of the girls) played marbles in the dust. The game of horseshoes also was popular. I also remember playing shinny. Some of those times were 'good old days'." Yes, indeed, I remember that old school and the old playground of dust, gravel and sticks. One of my personal favorite recollections is watching a favorite teacher, Thelma Brown, playing tag with the kids at recess. She was pretty good at the game.

Thanks to these folks and all the others who supply me with interesting material from time to time.



June 4, 1999

Our town paid its last respects the other day to Biber, the quintessential court jester who through the years probably entertained (at least once) for every club, class reunion, wedding and/or baby shower and just about anything else locally where two or more were gathered together. She will be missed because, frankly, she was one of a kind.

Although she has been out of circulation and residing at Green Valley Nursing Home the past few years, Belva Vanbiber never, ever lost interest in her adopted town of Perry. She was an instantaneous friend of every youngster, teen-ager or adult whose path crossed hers and while her eyesight was still good she could call most of them by name. She loved everybody; children were her special joy.

To several generations of Perry kiddos, she was "the Halloween Witch" in October and "Mrs. Santa Claus" in December. Until his death a few years ago, her husband Russell was an accomplice in those holiday affairs. Both of them dressed in garish costumes suitable for the occasion and Russell enjoyed his role as straight man while Biber, as she was affectionately known by one and all, kept up a steady stream of chatter with the big and little folks who came to see her.

But even before she took on those responsibilities, Biber made herself available to entertain meetings of all sizes and description. Her "readings" were both serious and humorous and they could be adapted to any length as time allowed. For the most part they were original, but she borrowed frequently from the works of poets and essayists to get her point across. She loved poetry and some of her originals were published in book form.

Even when age and debilitating illness slowed her down, Biber was a cheerleader. She did her best to raise the morale of everyone around her at the nursing home. She smiled broadly each time a visitor spoke to her at Green Valley and responded warmly when called by her nickname. In her arms she usually cradled a baby doll, which I think was a symbol of her all-encompassing maternal instinct.

Biber was truly touched each time someone paused to reminisce about the years when she did so much to bring a smile or a sober, thought to some gathering. She enjoyed her life and was pleased to share it with so many friends and youngsters in this area. I have never known anyone quite like her and it is possible that there will never be another. The mold must have been broken after the Creator presented Biber to the world. We'll miss her, but we'll remember the character she exemplified with her lifetime of serving others with the gifts she had.



June 8, 1999

Driving around Perry and environs on a recent spring afternoon, our car turned south and soon led us to the CCC Park, that lush green oasis which once served ambiguously as "the city farm." It is a hilly, wooded area with a decent lake that many local anglers prefer to all others. Far as I know, it was never a farm in the traditional sense. When the Great Depression came along in the 1930s, the young men of President Roosevelt's newly created Civilian Conservation Corps set up a military-style camp on the location and soon converted it into a beautiful park. It was turned over to the City of Perry for all to enjoy.

During these lazy June days, many folks enjoy its offerings. Fishing is a major form of recreation, but there also are family picnics and many other group activities. Some find its vehicle paths suitable for a brisk early morning walk, and nature lovers just appreciate the closeness of the great outdoors made possible by this fine asset owned and maintained by Perry. Many kinds of wildlife enjoy the shelter, food and water they find there.

Several things about the park disturb me, however. An abundance of rainfall this spring has resulted in a great crop of weeds throughout the area, just like in our yards at home. We can handle the latter, but something needs to be done

about the park. All the roads are in extremely sad shape with great potholes that threaten to damage the undercarriage of the many cars, pickups and recreational vehicles that bring people to the area. Just driving through the park is a daunting task. A "one-way" traffic sign has been all but lost in the growth of a tree. The sandy volleyball court has been virtually obliterated by weeds and a teeter totter nearby is being swallowed by shrubbery. Filthy obscenities and other graffiti have been spray-painted on picnic shelter walls where parents used to bring children for birthday parties and other celebrations. Sadly, many people believe drug deals are carried out in various shaded areas.

Another major problem at CCC Park is the crumbling condition of the historic Episcopal church building -- the "church on a perch" -- which was moved there last year in an effort to preserve it and restore it to a usable condition. Although it is now mounted on a firm stone foundation, every window has been smashed, clapboard siding is loose and pulling off the frame, it's badly in need of painting, and there is a high probability that birds or worse are now making their home in the old building.

At the time the structure was acquired, it was hoped that it could be renovated and made usable for weddings, family gatherings, worship services and any number of things. However, one look at it now tells you the condition of the building is worse than it was when moved to the park.

Most of Perry's parks appear to be neatly trimmed and inviting, but our biggest and best, the CCC Park, is badly in need of attention. Let's hope help can be arranged before the situation gets completely out of hand.



June 11, 1999

I have always envied families that are big enough to have a reunion. Ours was so small we could have accommodated every one of them in a large closet, so we never seriously thought about getting our handful of folk together. I was delighted the other day when the Durkee family invited me to share in theirs. They were expecting about 125 adults and children from various parts of the country and it looked like at least that many were on hand for a picnic dinner in the women's building at the fairgrounds.

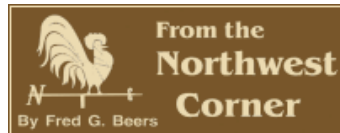
I am sort of an honorary Durkee. A pretty, dark-haired young lady named Mildred Durkee, from the Billings area, lived at our house in the early 1930s while she completed her high school education here. In exchange for room and board, Mildred helped with the housekeeping and cooking, a common practice in those days before school buses were available for rural students. She was about the same age as my older sister Jeanice and in no time she also became my big sister. When she left to attend business college in Tulsa, we all had a tearful farewell but through the years we stayed in touch.

Eventually she met a young man named Jerry Osborne. They married and started a family in New Orleans. In the process of rearing four sons, she became active in the Parent-Teacher Association and that led to a very serious interest in better schools. In 1969 the New Orleans school district named a new elementary school the Mildred Osborne School in her honor, and around 1,000 students now attend there. Mildred passed away several years ago and her husband died last year. The four boys remain in New Orleans and all of them were here for the reunion. They are genuine Southern Gentlemen, very much interested in the Durkee family heritage.

The original family of Mr. and Mrs. George Durkee of Billings had nine children. Only Charlie Durkee (one of Mildred's brothers) now survives, but he is an active octogenarian still living in the Billings area. A sister was the late Welthy Pursifull,

a former Perryan, and another was Margaret, who married Clarence Kukuk. One of the Kukuk sons, Col. Steve Kukuk, a very youthful looking Air Force retiree who now lives in Edmond, also was here. All of them are good people. Other Durkees, including my friends Duane and Cecilia Durkee, are still citizens of Perry and Noble county. We can use many like them.

Helen Neal of Seminole, one of Welthy's daughters, has compiled a fascinating history of the Durkee family dating back to the 17th century. It was on exhibit at the reunion and she will soon provide a copy to be placed on file here, probably at the Cherokee Strip Museum. It is wonderful to see such a close feeling binding a large family like the Durkees together. It was a joy to be included in their celebration.



June 15, 1999

Like many others, I do most of my morning fitness walking around the courthouse park in downtown Perry. The broad new sidewalks on the perimeter of the park are wonderful additions, especially for strolling on these pleasant spring days. Just recently I noted something new in the garden beds at each corner of the park. Nestled among the flowers and shrubs are flat sandstone pieces bearing simple messages of pride in Perry and references to our history carved into the face of each slab. Work is not yet finished on the stones. They will be mounted in some way to elevate them for easy reading, according to Jamie Layne, executive director of the Perry Chamber of Commerce/Perry Development Coalition. Placing the stones is a joint project of the C-C/PDC, Perry Main Street, the City of Perry and the U.S. Postal Service.

Other changes are visible in the local business district. At Sixth and Fir, work is speeding toward completion on the large new convenience store being constructed by Buy 'N Bye. I understand the present, much smaller store will be demolished to make more space to park customers' cars.

This is not exactly a "change," but those stop sign barrels are still thereon the east side of the square, along with the blinking traffic lights at both corners. When the city found it necessary to bring back the barrels and blinking red lights, I thought momentarily about keeping a log to see how long it would take to have the regular traffic lights in working order again, but eventually decided against it. They've been there several weeks so far. I understand the control box was struck by lightning in one of those recent spring storms, necessitating the present arrangement.

We are not the only ones dealing with urban traffic disruptions. Over at Stillwater, major work is underway on improvements to the east side artery, Perkins Road. Traffic has been reduced there from four to two lanes in the work areas and the numerous strip malls along the way are seriously affected. Stop signs have temporarily replaced some of the traffic lights, but they are not mounted on barrels as ours are.

Two deaths last week brought back memories of other years in Perry. Ralph Foster Jr. died in Stillwater after a long, debilitating illness. His late father, Ralph Sr., established the Foster Corner Drug Store years ago on the east side of our Perry square after working a while for my Dad at the City Drug Store. Ralph Jr. grew up in Perry, was an outstanding member of the PHS football squad, then starred for the Oklahoma Aggies at Stillwater, entered the Navy in World War II, rejoined the Aggies after the war and later played for the NFL Chicago Cardinals before taking a position in the Oklahoma State University athletic department. Members of the Foster family were significant parts of Perry's early history. One of Ralph Jr.'s sons, Doug, is a teacher in the Perry school system. Ralph Jr.'s brother, Woody, died a few years ago.

Katherine (Cappy) Singletary was a bright young lady while she lived in Perry with her husband, the late Al T. Singletary. In the 1930s, she gave birth to a son, Tom, on the same day the Dionne quintuplets were born in Canada. Cappy was a very capable administrative legal secretary for major oil corporations, and her husband was one of the most highly regarded attorneys in Oklahoma. Cappy, who died Friday in a Dallas hospital, left Perry some 40 years ago, but she is well remembered by many of us.



June 18, 1999

Travis Roberts of Bellaire, TX, collects samples of old tokens that were used years ago by barber shops, pool halls, bakeries, saloons and other businesses. He says the kind he's looking for are stamped or imprinted with "Good for a Nickel," or a dime, or some other amount. They were used for services or merchandise, like our present day "Perry Bucks." In some cases, they could be traded directly for a loaf of bread, a drink, a shave, a ride, or any number of things. They were an advertising medium, usually stamped in metal and looking like real coins, but they came in many shapes and sizes. Mr. Roberts hopes to add items like these from Perry to his collection. If you're interested in more information, his address is Box 1168, Bellaire, TX 77402.

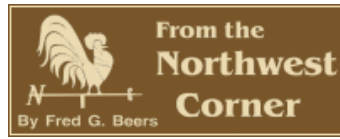
Some of our friends have had interesting experiences while tapping into the internet for the Mormon family data base that recently became available electronically. The demand for that kind of information is so great, web users have been limited to 15 minutes per request. Millions of families have joined the search for their roots, and the Mormon files are the most reliable and the biggest source of that kind of data.

The Noble County Genealogy Society is attempting to expand its own file of family histories. For one thing, these will be used to assist those who come here in pursuit of information about homesteaders and other early day residents. The second volume of their family history book is being compiled. If your family is not included, contact Darlene Roads, president of the society, to see what you need to do to be part of this documentation. Also, the Cherokee Strip Museum on West Fir Avenue has an ongoing program of gathering family histories for its collection. Perhaps yours should be there, too. Check with curator Kaye Bond or site attendant Clyde Speer at the museum for more on this subject.

Faye O'Dell and his family spent a few short years here while he served as athletic director of Perry schools and a counselor to troubled young people of all ages. He also put in one year as coach of the Perry Maroon football team during a transition period in that athletic endeavor. Those who knew him were aware of the impact he has had on so many young lives and he continues that work through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Recently the city of Cushing honored him by naming their football facility O'Dell Field. Before coming to Perry, Mr. O'Dell was junior high and senior high coach at Cushing, and he also served stints at Cleveland and Drumright, but we will always think of him as one of our own. Mr. and Mrs. O'Dell now live in retirement in Edmond and their health is not the best, but they continue to serve young people and others in more ways than we'll ever know. Cushing's tribute to him was well deserved.

Many Perryans have been watching with interest as another of the town's historic homes undergoes renovation. The old W.E. Merry home at Seventh and Jackson appeared to be in danger of collapsing until recent years when it was purchased by Bob Avery of Covington, who specializes in restoring old houses. The so-called Merry home, a two-story frame structure, was last occupied by the late Mr. and Mrs. B.M. Coombs. Mr. Merry, their predecessor, was a Perry pioneer and a former postmaster. A photo of the Merry home appears on page 59 of the March 29, 1917 "Industrial Edition" of *The Perry*

Republican. Recently, Mrs. Jo Wollard Garten of Ponca City, daughter of Perry pioneers Mr. and Mrs. G.C. Wollard, visited the Merry home reconstruction site together with a granddaughter of the late Ella Merry Hayman, daughter of the Merrys. The granddaughter lives in Little Rock, Arkansas.



June 22, 1999

Hope you're in the mood for something on the lighter side. Just so you'll know, the following yarn was passed along to me via e-mail by Vince Flynn, husband of my niece Sydney. For the last couple of years, they have been teaching at an American school in China. They'll be visiting here again this summer, and we look forward to hearing more such stories then.

An old man lived with his hound dog, Mace, in a run-down shack on the outskirts of town. He had no family and only a few meager possessions: A table and chair, a bed, a bag of hand tools, and his dog. He used the tools to do odd jobs in town, for which he usually would be paid enough to get food for the next day. Mace and his master lived from one day to the next, on what little these jobs would bring in. The dog was just a normal hound, with one exception: While most dogs like to chew on grass occasionally, Mace loved it. When the old man was in town, Mace would spend the day in the yard in front of the house, chewing away on the lawn.

One bright, sunny day the old man said goodbye to his dog and headed into town to work. He had a plumbing repair job in one of the homes there that would take him most of the day and would probably pay enough for food for the remainder of the week, if he managed the money carefully. He headed for town with a spring in his step and a whistle on his lips. Inside the house and ready to start, the old man reached in the bag for his wrench. To his surprise, he didn't feel it. He dug around again, but there did not seem to be any wrench. He looked in the bag, then dumped its contents on the floor, but still no wrench. Reality set in. Without a wrench he could not finish the job, and without the pay he could not even buy food for that night's supper, let alone for tomorrow.

When he finally came to grips with reality, he told the lady who hired him what the situation was. While she sympathized with him, the job needed to be done. If the old man could not do it, she would have to hire someone else. The old man picked up his tools and started for home, head bowed and shoulders stooped. The whistle was gone and no longer was there a spring in his step. A walk that normally took 15 minutes seemed to last forever.

But finally the old shack came into view, and there was Mace in the distance, munching away as usual on the lawn. When the dog saw his master, he came running, tail wagging, telling the old man how glad he was to see him. Kneeling beside the hound the man began to pet him, and through tear-filled eyes told the dog there would be no supper tonight and no food for tomorrow. What's more, without money to buy a new wrench, he had no idea what the future held. It was the loneliest, most helpless feeling he ever had.

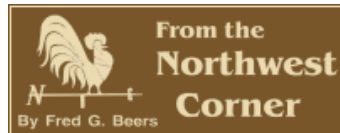
Then he caught a glimpse of something shining in the grass. As the old man went over to see what this piece of shining material was, his despair turned in an instant to joy! It was the wrench! The old man had dropped it on his way out that morning, and it would have been lost forever had Mace not been eating further away from the house than he usually did. The old man grabbed the dog, gave him a hug that almost suffocated him, and ran into the house. Reaching for a stub of

pencil and the only piece of paper he had, he wrote a moving tribute to his canine companion. Few people have heard these words, until now, that is.

One man who did happen to read them changed them a bit and has his name recorded in music history. The old man never did get the credit he deserved. But now you are privileged to read the beginning line of his original poem, which went:

"A grazing Mace, how sweet the hound that saved a wrench for me."

And now you know the rest of the story.



June 25, 1999

Aimless wandering around our town usually produces a few observations, even one or two worth repeating, as some of these may be...

Sonic Drive-Ins have adopted a new look for the numerous new locations being opened in various parts of their market area. Ours, out on Perry Plaza, is new enough that it still looks great, but the signage is being updated to show the company's new logo. "Service at the speed of sound" is still the Sonic slogan.

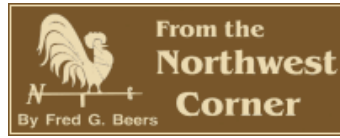
We rightfully claim Buster Keaton as a former Perry resident who had an enormous impact on the early days of the movie industry in this country. His stonefaced humor, a staple of motion pictures before talkies were born, made him a major attraction throughout the U.S. Some of his gymnastics were learned as a tot in a vaudeville act with his father, Joe Keaton, when they performed on the stage at the Grand Opera House on the east side of the square in Perry some 90 years ago. He became bigger than some of us might imagine. According to a list in the Daily Oklahoman's entertainment section recently, he ranks 21st on a list of the 100 most important male movie actors of the 20th century. Someday, Perry just has to figure out a way to make the public aware that Buster Keaton did some of his growing up right here.

You may have noticed a recent story in this newspaper telling about the annual meeting of the Perry Main Street organization. Among other points covered, the story announced that Betty Warner, the group's program manager since its inception more than three years ago, has decided to leave that position. She will, however, continue to be actively involved as a member of the board of directors. Her successor as program manager has not been announced. Betty has been responsible for many of the good things that have happened here during her time at the helm. She deserves our thanks.

It's that time of year for many hay fever sufferers in the Perry area. Cottonwood trees are filling the air with their tufted, hairy offerings, and the start of wheat harvest always produces a number of other airborne nose ticklers. So, many of us are sneezing, coughing and snorting as we await relief in the near future.

The frontier days facade has been removed from the front of the venerable Kumback Cafe on the north side of the square. Scaffolding is still in place, but the maroon and cream marble tiles that have been hidden by the facade for several years plainly show the damage they have suffered in the decades since Kate and Eddie Parker modernized the building in 1941. Tony and Marilee Macias, now the owner-operators of the Kumback, will no doubt come up with something very attractive

to replace the old wooden facade. The Kumback is one of our town's authentic institutions and that means all of us have a vested interest in the place.



June 29, 1999

The Roxy and the Annex were the two principal movie theatres in Perry for most of the 1930s and 1940s. Others came from time to time but soon left. Some were, so temporary they were in canvas tents with rude and uncomfortable seats, like the "Perry Airdome" which opened for business on a Saturday night in May 1939. The operators were transients who lived like Gypsies, traveling from town to town with their projectors and other equipment. The Airdome was heralded enthusiastically in a *Perry Daily Journal* news story as "a new open-air theater that will show the latest Paramount, Fox and Metro sound moving pictures in an arena being constructed just one-half block north of the post office building. Admission will be five cents."

To assist you in fixing that location, it was the space now occupied by the Dollar General Store's parking lot. Calling it an "arena" surely was a euphemism. Obviously, the Airdome was never intended to become a permanent fixture. It was simply a canvas cover with roll-down side curtains sheltering wooden folding chairs and a few planks on cement blocks, with no back rests. It sat upon a weedy lot laced with gravel, bits of glass and an uneven terrain that was perilous for movie-goers stumbling in the dark as they groped for a seat. The principal virtue was the open-air ambience that provided a modicum of relief from the Oklahoma summer heat.

Far from showing "latest offerings" from major studios, the Airdome featured ancient movies of doubtful lineage from obscure studios with actors most of us had never heard of. Once in a while Bebe Daniels or Ben Lyon, two major stars from the late 1920s, would turn up in the twilight of their careers, or perhaps you'd catch a glimpse of a young Chester Morris or Victor Jory just getting started in the business, but for the most part the performers were actors who ultimately failed to make the grade. The Airdome had a seating capacity of perhaps 200, and to the best of my recollection that was more than sufficient for each of the nightly performances.

I remember the outdoor theatre well because our family's City Drug Store had a back entrance only a few feet from the Airdome ticket booth. The people who ran the theatre came to our store for Cokes and ice cream through that door. They let us see the movies without charge as a courtesy, so, as a young movie addict, I was in and out of there many times that summer. The Airdome barely lasted one season. Safeway eventually built a store there and the theatre's lot was part of the real estate transaction. Just down the street, a half block south, was a two-story building which once housed the Bank of Commerce, then later a series of offices, and finally Gordon Clark's Oklahoma Tire & Supply (OTASCO) store until fire gutted it in the 1970s. The Albright Title & Trust building now has that corner.

The Airdome's offerings were of ancient distillation, but it came along years before the drive-ins and it was popular that one summer for the same reason drive-ins later succeeded -- open air movies in the summertime. The five-cent admission price also was attractive, but when the season was over the owners folded their arena and left town. Other remembrances of old Perry movie theatres will follow shortly.

