

May 3, 2002

Were you a kid in the 1950s or earlier? If so you've probably noticed that people sometimes make fun of our childhood. Comedians joke about it. Grandkids snicker. Twenty-somethings shudder and say "Eeeew?" But was our childhood really all that bad? Judge for yourself: In 1953 the U.S. population was less than 150 million yet you knew more people then, and knew them better. And that was good. The following thoughts, passed along to me by a friend, should be of interest to you.

The average annual salary was under $3,000, yet our parents could put some of it away for a rainy day and still live a decent life. And that was good.

A loaf of bread cost about 15 cents, but it was safe for a five-year-old to skate to the store and buy one. And that was good.

Prime time meant I Love Lucy, Ozzie and Harriett, and Lassie, so nobody had heard of ratings or filters. And that was good.

We didn't have air-conditioning, so the windows stayed up and half a dozen mothers ran outside when you fell off your bike. And that was good.

Your teacher was either Miss Matthews or Mrs. Logan or Mr. Adkins, but not Ms. Becky or Mr. Dan. And that was good.

The only hazardous material you knew about was a patch of sandburs around the light pole at the corner. And that was good.

Most families needed only one job, meaning Mom was home when school let out. And that was good.

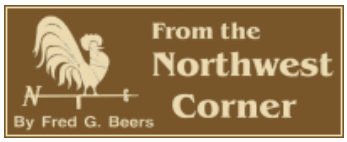
You loved to climb into a fresh bed because sheets were dried on the clothes line. And that was good.

People generally lived in the same hometown with their relatives, so "child care" meant grandparents or aunts and uncles. And that was good.

TV was in black and white.. But all outdoors was in glorious color. And that was certainly good.

Your Grandma grew snap beans in the back yard and chickens behind the garage. And that was definitely good.

And just when you were about to do something really bad, chances were you'd run into your high school coach, the nosy old lady up the street, your little sister's piano teacher, or somebody from church. All of them knew your parents' phone number and YOUR first name. And that was good.
Things have definitely changed. Have they changed for the better? Not by a long shot.



May 7, 2002

The Memorial Day holiday is just around the corner, which means now is a good time to discuss why we even have such an observance. Readers of this column will remember that for the past several years I have pointed out that, technically, there is no such thing as a "national holiday" in the U.S. because each state has jurisdiction over its holidays. The President and the U.S. Congress can legally designate holidays only for the District of Columbia and federal employees. In practice, however, most states observe the federal legal public holidays. Memorial Day is one of those. It now falls on the last Monday of May, but it formerly was on May 30. The holiday is also known as Decoration Day. It is a time especially to decorate the graves of those who served in the military, although many families believe it is a time to honor all those who have been called home.

The primary focus in Perry and elsewhere is traditionally on the men and women who served this country in the military. Those are the ones we normally think of at the mention of Memorial Day. Other friends and family members also are honored, but for the most part we are saluting those who were called to the colors in times of national stress. What brings all this to mind is a small booklet published in August 1943 and bearing the title of a "Directory of Noble Countians Serving the Colors." Ed Feken still has his copy of that directory, and he brought it to light the other day as he noticed the calendar page showed that Memorial Day is upon us.

The 7 ½" x 11" booklet was published by this newspaper while World War II was raging in the Pacific Ocean Area, in Europe and North Africa. At the time, neither the Allies (primarily the U.S. and Great Britain) nor the Axis (Germany and Italy) were assured of victory in the bloody global engagement. The Soviet Union, as usual, was an enigma and no one was sure where that country stood. Hundreds of young men from Noble county were among those who answered this country's call and traded their civilian garb for uniforms of the Army, Navy, Marines and other military branches. The Journal made an effort to include all of them in the directory. The flyleaf of the booklet also noted that those who had died in service were included. Extra copies of the directory were available only from the advertisers who made it possible to compile and publish the book.

Ed Feken was one of those named. At the time he was Technical Sergeant Edward J. Feken, 394th Infantry regiment, 89th division, based at Colorado Springs, Colorado. Ed now lives at 1704 Meadow Lane and most of us knew him well as manager of the Safeway Store before he retired.

The Journal was careful not to unduly commercialize the directory. The newspaper also recognized that omission of names was a possibility and invited readers to let the paper know of any errors. Additional copies of the directory were available only from the advertisers who supported the publication. It's interesting, from the perspective of 2002, to look back and see the names of merchants who joined in the undertaking. Like many of the servicemen named, quite a few of those businesses no longer exist. Here are some who fit in that category: Ben Beckham Refrigerator, Appliance, Repair Service; Ringler's Leather Goods, Donahue and Mugler Insurance; Eby's Cleaners, Brownie Drug Co., Donaldson & Yahn Lumber Dealers, M & W Food Store, Jim Wilson Grocery and Market, Perry Greenhouse, Art Cleaners, Galaway's Grocery and Market, Long-Bell Lumber Co., Gordon and Treadway Sinclair Service, Davis Funeral Home, Johnson's Food Market, A.C. Lamb Optometrist and Jeweler, Pearl Schiewe's Chic Shoppe, Kraemer's Shoe Store, O.K. Filling Station, and the Perry Whole Milk Plant (Home of Dairy Gold Products). Some of those who are still with us: Kumback Lunch, Charlie's Machine Works (now the Ditch Witch company), and the Exchange Bank. Sad to note, many service personnel listed in the directory also have passed away since this directory was printed in August 1943. Thanks to Ed Feken for sharing this memory with us.

From the Northwest Corner

By Fred G. Beers

May 10, 2002

I may have mentioned this before, so I apologize if it sounds familiar. The commencement speaker for our Perry High School graduating class in 1941 was Mr. H. Roe Bartle. Not to brag, but he was a high-powered speaker and much in demand for various large audiences throughout the United States. I do not remember one thing he said, but I know we were all impressed with his dignity and the aura of majesty that he projected. Mr. Bartle was a former mayor of Kansas City, Mo., and he was a major figure as an adult leader in the U.S. Boy Scout movement. You may have heard of the Bartle Hall in Kansas City. It is named in his honor.

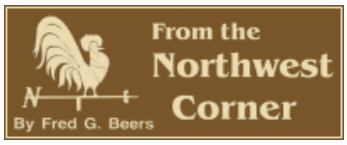
What brings all this to mind, of course, is the impending commencement program for the class of 2002 at our alma mater. Perhaps this year's seniors are much more serious-minded than we were in 1941, but then in the spring of that year we did not know the Japanese were soon going to bomb Pearl Harbor and drag the U.S. into World War II. Most of the young men of the class of 1941 saw duty in that conflict. Many were wounded, others died on the battlefields. As the decade unfolded, we realized that it was not exactly a happy time, but that's not the point of this column.

I know I have also mentioned that at that time we were just beginning to emerge from the Great Depression but there was not much money in the family cookie jars for such frivolities as a new dress or a new suit for the high school graduates of that spring. Most of my friends could not have cared less. We grew up in hard times and from years of deprivation we knew our parents were not able to fork over spare dollars for new attire. Scraping enough together for college, or whatever, was a major difficulty.

At the time my Mother was a member of the Perry Progress Club. It was composed of several ladies who had children about my age. The club's tradition was to honor graduating seniors with a gift of practical value, and that was almost always clothing. In 1941, two Progress Club members had graduating senior boys (I was one of them and Charlie Lamb was the other) and that posed a problem. Normally the club bought a new dress for girl graduates or a suit for boy graduates. Most of our predecessors as PHS graduates who were children of Progress Club members had been girls. Those young ladies had received gifts of clothing. For boys, there was not much choice as a gift except a new suit. The average cost of a new two-piece wool suit was about $35. The ladies were not sure they could afford to buy two suits. It was a dilemma of monumental, if not prohibitive, proportions. Members of the club worried about it for a while but finally concluded that to do less would have been unacceptable to them.

I was gainfully employed at the time as a soda jerk at the Brownie Drug Co., earning about 35 cents an hour. Some of that stipend I was actually able to lay aside. Before the Progress Club ladies faced their quandary, I had saved enough to make a down payment on a dark brown single-breasted gabardine suit at the Famous Department Store. My intention was to wear it beneath my academic gown for the procession across the stage in the PHS auditorium when my diploma would be awarded. Then the Progress Club offered their gift, and suddenly I was the surprised possessor of TWO suits.

That was the first time I had a brown suit and a gray suit hanging side by side in the closet. Then came my personal decision - which one to wear at graduation? More pressing problems must have been on my mind because I do not remember the final selection. Family snapshots of that period do not clear up the question because in all of them I was wearing the traditional graduation robe, which reached to the floor. But, like the appearance of Mr. H. Roe Bartle as our commencement speaker, I probably will always remember when I owned two new suits at the same time, thanks to the Progress Club. I still remember their generosity, and I thank them once again for it. Charlie Lamb would second the motion, I'm sure.



May 14, 2002

If the proposed new county jail becomes a reality, let's hope it won't be built in the courthouse park. For more than a century, local folks have worked hard to preserve the beauty of that green space in the downtown area and all of us can be rightfully proud of it. Placing a jail building anywhere in the park would seem to be almost a sacrilege. Please, let's find another location for the jail.

Laura and I tagged along with a group from the Noble County Family YMCA the other day for a trip to Norman. Our primary sites were the fantastic Oklahoma Museum of Natural History on the University of Oklahoma campus and the Crucible Gallery and Foundry, a privately operated business in downtown Norman. The museum was endowed principally by the Samuel Noble family and it is truly something to see. Dinosaurs and other critters from the pre-Ice Age era are shown in skeletal stages, and their relationship to modern times was carefully explained by our guide, with the help of information posted at each location. The museum also has a pleasant deli for lunch and a gift shop with items relating to the history of this state, dating back millions of years.

The Crucible Foundry also includes a sculpture garden with notable examples from the hands of artists and the firm's workshop. Incidentally, the foundry is in the historic Carey Lumber building which also served as a cotton gin at one time. While we were there, secrecy shrouded the heroic bronze statue created by State Sen. Kelly Haney to top the dome now being added to the state Capitol in Oklahoma City. Because of that, we were not able to tour the foundry itself, but peeking through some small windows we managed to get an idea of that part of the business. All in all, it was a day well spent with a group of friends from our local Y.

It was good to see Travis Brorsen here for a few days last week while he was in town for a short visit. Since he earned his degree at mid-term last year from Oklahoma State University, Travis has been trying his luck as an actor in the Los Angeles area and he has made some key contacts. If training, talent and a winning personality have anything to do with it, he should make the grade. You also can catch him locally as the TV pitchman for one of Jack Griffith's stations on west Fir. Travis is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Verl Brorsen. Good luck to him.

Congratulations to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows for starting the exterior improvement on the east side of their two-story building on the north side of the square. It is one of the old Triton Insurance Co. buildings. The IOOF now has its state headquarters in that historic building. The huge Oklahoma map painted on the east exterior wall has been fading badly for some time, and chunks of the stucco-like plaster covering the wall have been breaking off. New covering has been applied to the wall where needed and the map will be renovated to show the various land run areas in Oklahoma. Naturally, our own Cherokee Outlet graces the top of the map. Many visitors have commented favorably on this king-size state map.

The street on Fir avenue between 7th and 8th streets has a new surface. That's nice, but does anyone else think it now feels like driving over a block-long chatter bar?

From the Northwest Corner

By Fred G. Beers

May 17, 2002

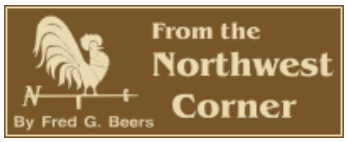
Our friends at the metropolitan press down south have covered some Perry area stories lately and I wanted to be sure you heard about them. One told of the new sculpture studio opened by Jim Franklin on the south side of the square. Jim took early retirement last year from the Charles Machine Works, Inc., where he was part of the research and development team. Today he is one of the happiest men I know, creating magic with clay models for bronze sculptures in his studio. He used to do stuff like that in a sort of makeshift basement studio at his home, laboring until the wee hours of the morning and then hurrying off to work at CMW at an early hour the next day. Now he can sculpt 24 hours a day if he chooses. It's a dream come true for Jim, who is loaded with more kinds of artistic gifts than your average person. He was once described as a Renaissance man, and the description fits him like a glove.

Another article concerned the business life of Mary R. Grace, described as a farm girl from Perry who majored in English at Oklahoma City University, where she earned a bachelor's degree, and at Central Oklahoma University, Edmond, where she received a master's degree. Ms Grace is the sister of Edward Appelbaum of Perry, which she still calls home. She is now managing member-broker for Grace Commercial Real Estate Services LLC in Oklahoma City. The article was an executive Q&A piece. It tells how, after working several years in the city's biggest realty firms, she took the advice of friends and opened her own commercial brokerage business in an office on the Northwest Expressway in Oklahoma City. It's an interesting story.

Another piece was a full-page article with color photos that told about Perry's wonderful Cherokee Strip Museum on West Fir avenue. And still another full-page Saturday layout dealt admirably with the Dr. Renfrow-Miller museum in Billlings. The Perry story appeared just before the Rural Heritage Festival when we celebrated our legacy of agriculture and other features in this special little city on the prairie. The text and the choice of photos for both articles gave the pages a life of their own. How lucky we are to be living in communities like Perry and Billings.

A separate article in a Sunday issue related to "the oldest standing Carnegie Library" in the state of Oklahoma - the one at Guthrie, which is no longer a library but a part of the Oklahoma Territorial Museum. The story about the centennial observance is interesting in its own right, but an accompanying sidebar lists all the Oklahoma libraries that were endowed by the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie between 1901 (Oklahoma City) and 1922 (Lawton). The Carnegie Library in Perry was opened in 1910, and of course it is still very much a library, one of our proudest possessions. Two other Cherokee Strip cities - Enid and Ponca City - also opened Carnegie libraries in 1910. I wager neither of them has been maintained and updated more lovingly and in better shape than ours.

One other piece in the Big Town newspaper was a major disappointment. The thrust of the story, also in a Sunday edition, was headlined, "Band directors share insights to excellence." As you would expect from that title, it featured interviews with some of the state's outstanding high school band directors. If you've been in Perry very long, you know that we regard Professor Leopold Radgowsky as the one who put the Perry high school band program on its current phenomenal winning track. His successors through the years also have been masters of the art but not one of them was mentioned in this piece. Bill Rotter, Sandy Hentges, Jim Parham, Ashley Alexander Jr. and all the others who have waved the baton here should have been included. Hard to believe they were overlooked.



May 21, 2002

Another reader provides the amusing stuff that follows for today's column. You might find some of your own experiences in a few of these. At any rate, they should bring a chuckle or two. The title is "We Are Survivors. Consider the changes we have witnessed." (Name of the author is not given.)

We were born before television, before penicillin, before polio shots, frozen food, Xerox, plastic, contact lenses, Frisbees and the Pill.

We were born before radar, credit cards, split atoms, laser beams and ball-point pens. Before panty hose, dishwashers, clothes dryers, electric blankets, air conditioners, drip-dry clothes and before man walked on the moon.

We got married first and then lived together. How quaint can you be?

In our time, closets were for clothes, not for "coming out of." Bunnies were small rabbits and rabbits were not Volkswagens. Designer Jeans were scheming girls named Jean or Jeanne, and having a meaningful relationship meant getting along with your cousins.

We thought fast food was what you ate during Lent, and outer space was the back of the Roxy or Annex Theatre.

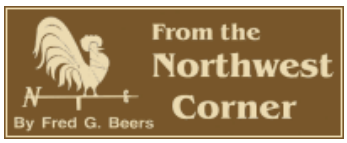
We were born before house-husbands, gay rights, computer dating, dual careers and computer marriages. We were born before day-care centers, group therapy and nursing homes. We never heard of FM radio, tape decks, electric typewriters, artificial hearts, word processors, yogurt and guys wearing earrings. For us, time-sharing meant togetherness - not computers or condominiums, a "chip" meant a piece of wood, hardware meant hardware and software wasn't even a word.

In 1940, "made in Japan" meant junk and the term "making out" referred to how you did on your exam. Pizzas, McDonald's and instant coffee were unheard of.

We hit the scene when there were 5-cent and 10-cent stores, where you bought things for a nickel or a dime. You could buy an ice cream cone for 5 or 10 cents. For one nickel you could ride a streetcar, make a phone call, buy a Pepsi, a Coke or enough stamps to mail one letter and two postcards. You could buy a new Chevy coupe for $600, but who could afford one? A pity, too, because gas was only 11 cents a gallon.

In our day, cigarette smoking was fashionable, grass was mowed, Coke was a drink and pot was something you cooked in. Rock music was a grandma's lullaby and AIDS were helpers in the principal's office. We were certainly not born before the difference between the sexes was discovered but we were surely born before the sex change. We made do with what we had and we were the last generation that was so dumb as to think you needed a husband to have a baby. No wonder we are so confused and there is such a generation gap today.

But we survived. What better reason to celebrate?



May 24, 2002

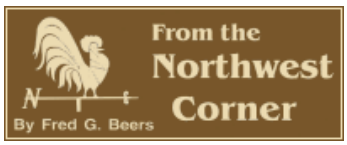
Scott and Marty Collins have reason to be excited, and not just because they are buying one of the city's finest historic homes - the one-time residence of Mr. and Mrs. E.J. Coyle at the corner of 11th and Elm streets. That alone is enough to get the juices flowing as they consider all the possibilities for renovation and restoration. It's like we often see on "This Old House" and other TV projects.

The Collins' are making plans for a long-term overhaul of that two-story frame house. It was built in 1902, one century ago, by Mr. and Mrs. E.J. Coyle, pioneer residents of this city. Records show the Coyles imported a professional builder from Kansas to take charge of the original construction. In more recent years the home was owned by the late Mr. and Mrs. Everett Chaffin, who maintained it very well while rearing their four sons there.

Mr. Coyle operated a grocery store and meat market here in the early days after the Cherokee Strip land run of 1893, but later was more widely known as operator of the Coyle Cotton Gin. Added to the acquisition of this home is the publication of a most interesting story excerpted from a new book written by Marty's Dad, Denzel D. Garrison of Bartlesville, a former leader of Republicans in the Oklahoma State Senate. The article appears in the new edition of *Oklahoma Chronicles*, the official quarterly publication of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Mr. Garrison has retired from the legislature and now practices law in Bartlesville. His book, scheduled for publication later this year, is titled *Remembrances of a Redleg: The Story of a Korean War Artilleryman of the 45th Thunderbird Division*. It is a personal account of Mr. Garrison's recollections as a Field Artillery officer in that "police action," but the sweep of the story will bring it to an individual level for anyone who lived through that period. The Chronicles article touches on some of the highlights from that book.

Many men from this area went to Korea when the 45th was federalized in 1950. As such, they also were members of the Thunderbird division and Mr. Garrison's article should be of interest to all of them. Mr. Garrison is a member of the Oklahoma Historical Society board of directors. His book will be published by the Oklahoma Heritage Association, Oklahoma City.



May 28, 2002

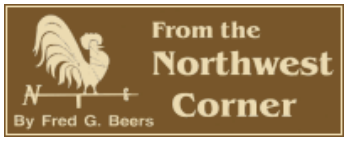
Buster Keaton, the frozen-faced comic from Perry, scaled the heights of popularity during Hollywood's early years. He is still making news today although he has been dead since February 1966. Buster wasn't born in Perry but he sort of grew up here. His parents were vaudeville performers and Perry was their home when they were between engagements. (Buster was born in 1895 in Piqua, Kansas.) Many of us remember Buster Keaton primarily because of the 1957 world premiere of the biographical Paramount movie, allegedly based on Keaton's life. He was one of filmdom's brightest stars for more than four decades, surviving the transition to "talkies" despite his early ascension in the silent movie era. The Paramount film was not nominated for an Oscar, but that is beside the point. Despite some personal and career problems, Buster Keaton is generally considered to be on the same level with Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, and that is pretty respectable company. Perry should do something to make tourists and other visitors aware of this city's connection with the famous film star. But I digress.

The thing that brings all this into focus now is a clipping from a recent issue of *The Wall Street Journal* that I received from Ed Kelley, a 1971 graduate of Perry high school and former managing editor of *The Daily Oklahoman*. Ed is now a member of that newspaper's editorial department staff. The WSJ piece tells about Buster's Beverly Hills home, now for sale with an asking price of $30 million. That is not a typo. The opening bid is set at $25 million, so you know the present owners have high hopes.

The Keaton home has been featured in some recent television programs that tell viewers about fabulous "American castles." For the most part, these are luxurious homes that were built in the 1920s by zillionaire icons in entertainment, industry and other fields. Buster's Beverly Hills dwelling certainly qualifies. According to the *Wall Street Journal* piece, it includes carved fireplaces, a 55-foot long kitchen/family room, original screening room with new 35mm projectors, tennis court, swimming pool, 500-foot driveway, formal Italian garden, three rooms above a four-car garage, pool house with three bedrooms, tennis pavilion with two bedroom suites, and new mechanical, electrical, security and plumbing systems. The house itself has 14 bedrooms and 16 bathrooms in 12,000 square feet on a little less than two acres. It's more than just a snug little cottage in the Hollywood hills.

The *WSJ* reports that the mansion was built by Keaton in 1926 and that it is one of the last surviving palaces from that era. Later, in the 1940s, it was owned by actor Cary Grant and his wife at the time, heiress Barbara Hutton. In the 1950s it was owned by the actor James Mason and his wife, Pamela. It remained in the Mason family's hands until 1999 when it was "on the verge of becoming yet another teardown." Then it was bought by real estate investors John Bercsi and Christopher Bedrosian for $5 million, who spent more than $10 million to restore the house. Beverly Hills brokers believe the property will be eyed by international buyers as well as U.S. interests. The $30 million asking price may not be so unreasonable.

When the Keaton family lived in Perry, their home was in the 600 block on Grove street. It is still standing. Recently it was sold by Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Beier. I saw Marvin the other day and told him about the Keaton home in Beverly Hills. Marvin was pretty sure the house on Grove street brought something less than $30 million. As Ed Kelley notes, "Ol' Buster did OK after he left Perry."



May 31, 2002

The other day we were talking about the $30 million asking price for the former home of the late Buster Keaton in Beverly Hills, California. Things that concern the old stone-faced comic are of interest here because he spent some of his growing-up years in Perry. His parents were nomadic vaudeville performers who lived here in the late 1890s and the early 1900s when Buster was just a tot. He learned about show business with his parents as they tried out some of their slapstick material on audiences at the old Grand Opera House on the east side of the Perry square. In 1995, the centennial year of Buster's birth in Piqua, Kansas, there was a renewal of interest in his life story. He continues to have a fascination for young people as well as old-timers who remember some of the classic Keaton movies.

Because of that revival of curiosity about Mr. Keaton's life, several books are now available in paperback or cloth covers. Some friend has kindly sent me copies of two of them and I am grateful to that thoughtful, anonymous benefactor. Despite some of the inevitable typographical errors, they make good reading. One is titled simply Keaton with the sub-title, *The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down*, a reference to his ability to bounce back from life's adversities as well as he

survived physical problems in the movies. The author is Tom Dardis and the publisher of the revised edition is Limelight Editions of New York. Scribner published the original version in 1979. Limited Editions brought out the paperback in 1996. It has 278 pages plus appendices and a filmography and listing of notes and sources. A real bonus is the great collection of photographs throughout the book. It's worth your time, if you can find a copy.

The other paperback is *Buster Keaton: My Wonderful World of Slapstick*. This one was written by Buster Keaton himself with the aid of Charles Samuels. It is a Da Capo paperback originally published in 1960 by Doubleday. The new edition was reprinted by arrangement with Charles Samuels and the estate of Buster Keaton. The paperback has 282 pages and an exhaustive filmography plus several great photos. Two of the pictures show Buster as a baby and later at about the age of five. Both may have been taken in Perry, but they are credited to the New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) Library. Another interesting sidelight is provided by a new introduction by Dwight Macdonald of the New York Review of Books. He writes: "I think that during the seventies Buster Keaton replaced (Charlie) Chaplin as the master of movie comedy most admired by Americans seriously interested in cinema.. This is the age of Keaton." That is high praise from a respected observer. This book, Buster's autobiography, contains many thoughts related by the star himself. Unfortunately, the years he and his family spent in this little prairie city are shunted to the background. That's too bad because they could have provided at least an additional chapter that would have been of great general interest.

I'll have more on the new Buster Keaton books in a subsequent column.