



September 1, 1998

The public hanging of Henry Armstrong in the Noble county courthouse park in 1909 was the subject of this column a while back, and the story remains one of the most intriguing tales to emerge from the early years of this city. More recently, a couple of items have been in other media to bring the saga of Mr. Armstrong to mind once again.

Jim Etter of Bethany, a retired roving reporter for the Daily Oklahoman and the author of several books about state lore, had an interesting letter to the editor in a recent Sunday issue of the Oklahoman. I have met Mr. Etter and I know of his great love of this state. I'm going to quote part of his letter:

"There's a colorful, albeit gruesome, period of Oklahoma history that apparently has been forgotten: a time when the legal means of execution was hanging. During a stretch (no pun intended) of seven years following statehood, some 30 condemned criminals died at the end of a rope. Oklahoma's first legal hanging --and the state's first legal execution by any means -- is reported to have taken place in June of 1908 in Frederick. The man wearing the noose was Frank Ford, a Tillman county convicted wife killer. The rest of the state's legal hangings occurred in other counties until the gallows was replaced by the electric chair, which reportedly was used for the first time in December 1915 (this was unrelated to the federal hanging in 1936).

"By some oddity, all this usually has been either overlooked or ignored by top journalists when they write reviews of capital punishment, but it can be confirmed by library research and records of the state's Corrections Department. These legal hangings by the state would bring the total number, of legal executions by various means in Oklahoma to 124, and not 94 as recently reported..."

Mr. Etter is a thoroughly competent historical researcher and his comments on this particular grisly topic can be accepted as correct. It's not a subject matter most people want to delve into, but legal executions in our past and also in today's society are part of our story.

Along about the same time as Jim Etter's letter appeared, the Arts & Entertainment (A&E) TV channel had a one-hour history of executions through the centuries, including the bloody Dark Ages. Pondering some of the most bizarre is very unsettling, including those poor souls who were sentenced to be "hanged, drawn and quartered," along with a few additional atrocities on their bodies. The burning of witches in Salem gave us a shameful chapter in this land's early history, as did the busy swish of Parisian guillotines while enemies of the emerging revolutionary French government lost their heads.

Meanwhile, this country sustains the debate on legal executions as a deterrent to crime. Each time a juridical entity in the U.S. carries out the elimination of one convicted of a capital crime, proponents on both sides of the question demonstrate and strive to get their point across. It is something worthy of our most serious consideration and resolution. Even in Henry Armstrong's day there was controversy on the subject. What do you think?



September 4, 1998

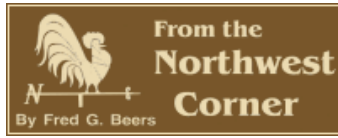
The conversation about some of Perry's colorful early-day characters got around to Jack E. Stone the other day, and we began to realize that the two of us had some interesting tales to share. My friend Frank A. Ley and I were jawing about various people and things related to the pioneer era of this community.

Frank was saying that he at one time had an accounting office on the second floor of the building next to the Foucart building on the east side of the square. Several others, professional men like Dr. A.M. Evans MD, attorneys Kenneth and T. Jean Reed, and dentists Dr. O.W. Boyer and Dr. W.C. Marshall, also were located there. Jack E. Stone, a justice of the peace, was one of the tenants. Jack divided his time between two locations: During the morning hours, he usually could be found at Dr. J.W. Francis' office, above the City Drug Store on the north side of the square. In the afternoons he was open for business at his own place on the east side. We no longer have justices of the peace in Oklahoma, but back then they were elective, offices; and Perry usually had at least two of them to hear minor court matters, officiate at weddings and notarize documents. Barney Woolverton was another justice of the peace along about the same time as Jack Stone.

Jack was passionately, devoted to the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. He was never far from a radio when a Cardinals game was on the air. In the late 1930s, our family lived across the hall from Dr. Francis' office and I have this mental image of seeing Jack each day seated at the receptionist's desk there, smoking a pipe, reading a book or magazine, and listening to a Cardinals game, all at the same time, and handling the telephone or receiving patients if the regular receptionist (Belle Ruff at that time) was assisting Dr. Francis in the treatment room. I believe he would have been about 65 or 70 years of age. He had a fairly full crop of gleaming white hair which he allowed to grow a bit long, giving him a sort of leonine or judicial image. A lighted pipe, filled to the brim with Prince Albert or, occasionally, an aromatic tobacco, was usually in his hand or clamped in his mouth. He was rather small, perhaps 5'4", slender and normally pleasant in greeting everyone. He had a ready, but rather high-pitched, laugh when someone shared a good joke. His demeanor was dignified. Jack invariably wore a three-piece suit.

Frank remembers Mr. Stone in his east side office, just down the hall from the Ley Accounting firm. Rosemary Bezdicek was Frank's office assistant at the time, and as a courtesy she would sometimes also serve as the justice's secretary. Quite a few people chose to be married by a justice of the peace. "When a couple arrived in Jack's office with a valid marriage license," Frank says, "he would come hustling down the hall to our office and say that he could use a little help. That meant Rosemary and I were needed to witness the ceremony. If the Cardinals game was on the radio, Jack wouldn't turn the sound down. He tried to keep track of every play even while reading the wedding vows, and if he didn't understand something the announcer said he would interrupt the service long enough to ask one of us what had happened on the field. Later, after receiving his fee and perhaps a little tip, Jack would come back to our place with a bag of candy to thank us for our service."

Back in the earlier years of this century, Jack Stone was the owner and general manager of a popular store called Everybody's Store. The 1910-11 city directory shows Everybody's Store was at 317 Seventh street, near the middle of the block on the west side of the square. Other Perry department stores in the early decades of this century included Knox & Stout Clothing Co. (the Famous), at 626-28 Cedar, south side of the square; and B.J. Woodruff's large store at 631 Delaware, north side of the square. Everybody's Store was one of Perry's most successful businesses for years, but eventually Jack had to lock the doors and look for another line of work. Far as I know, he was good at being a justice of the peace and the hour seemed to suit him, if they didn't interfere with a Cardinals game.



September 8, 1998

Perry started from scratch 'way back there in 1893 when an estimated 100,000 homesteaders flocked to the Cherokee Strip for a monumental land run. It is called the largest, most spectacular competitive event in history (according to the Oklahoma Historical Society) and a tumultuous finale to what many have called the last American frontier. Some 40,000 men and women landed in the Perry area and spent the first night camped out in this vicinity. Only about 4,000 were still here a few days later.

There was no ready-made water processing and distribution system, no electrical system, and certainly no provision for manufacturing ice to serve those hardy pioneers who staked their claims here. Water, of course, was a basic concern, it being an essential ingredient to sustain life for man and beast. The need for it 105 years ago was painfully obvious to those pioneers as they struggled to deal with extreme heat and a prolonged drought, two problems that continue to this day.

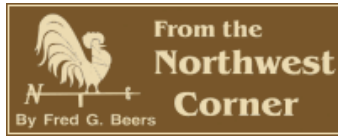
An interesting story about Perry's first municipal water, light and ice plant is told in the August issue of OMPA Outlet, the periodic newsletter of the Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority, based on information from the city's record of council proceedings from 1893-1897 and from 1897-1904. I'll attempt to capsulize some of the salient points.

Discussion by the town council concerning the need for electric lights started barely two months after the run, on November 14, 1893. At that meeting, the council laid aside a resolution to grant the Perry Heat, Power and Light Company a franchise to operate here. The resolution was referred to the Committee on Gas and Lights. Two days later, on November 16, the council referred another resolution to the Gas and Lights Committee calling for a franchise for electric service to be granted to the Electric Light and Power Company of Perry.

The council continued to receive requests from others interested in building, operating and maintaining an electric plant in the city. On December 12, 1893, the council unanimously approved Ordinance No. 28, granting J.W. O'Neill and F. W Sweet the right to "erect, construct, maintain and operate" an electric light plant and street railway and to furnish heat, light and motor power in the city of Perry, and contracting for arc lights to be used in lighting the streets, alleys and public avenues of Perry and stipulating the price to be paid by Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Sweet. No subsequent reference is found concerning the street railway.

However, on January 18, 1894, council members reversed their earlier decision of granting the electric franchise to Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Sweet by approving Ordinance No. 56. This ordinance, which passed after three readings, granted E.W. Griffith and George M. Stele the right to "construct an electric plant." One explanation for the city granting the franchise to two different groups could be that Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Sweet did not have adequate funds to build the electric plant. The plant was built in 1895.

For the first ten years or so, Perry's water, ice and electric services were provided by various private enterprises. How the city got into the business of providing these essential services to Perry residents will be told in the next Northwest Corner. Please stay tuned.



September 11, 1998

Today's column continues the history of water and electricity service in the city of Perry, from the time of the opening of the Cherokee Strip on September 16, 1893, to the present day. Much of the information contained here was researched from our city council records by the Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority (OMPA), which now serves this city. In the previous column, we related how various private enterprises were franchised by the city to provide water and electricity in the early years.

An entry in the January 6, 1898, council proceedings shows that the cost of light service from the Perry Water, Light and Ice Company from July 1, 1897, to December 31, 1897, was \$1,125. At the time, David McKinstry was the treasurer and manager of the Perry Water, Light and Ice Company, and he also was the owner of Perry Milling Co., where "Pride of Perry" flour was milled. Mr. McKinstry issued a report to the council which was read into the proceedings of January 27, 1899. He advised the council that the company "suspended operations temporarily on account of necessity of making repairs ... and the company having been unable to secure sufficient cash for running expenses from warrants and obligations of city."

The dispute between Perry and the power plant prompted the city council to hold a special meeting on January 31, 1899. Members then unanimously passed and approved a resolution rescinding the water works and electric lights franchise. The resolution also made and passed by council resolving that Mayor (R.E. Wade) be authorized to notify Perry Water, Light and Ice Company to fill water mains and keep proper pressure thereon without delay throughout the city."

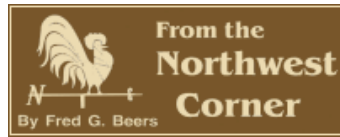
Council proceedings on February 6, 1899, mention that stockholders of the plant were going to meet to discuss repairs to the plant and to choose a contractor to undertake the repairs. Less than one year later, on January 13, 1900, the council exempted the Water, Light and Ice Company from taxes levied by the city.

After nearly a decade of buying water and electricity from privately owned companies, the city's leaders began taking a serious look at providing these services from the municipality. In other words, city ownership of utilities. On October 17, 1902, the council called a special election for city residents to vote on a water works bond issue. The issue was approved and on June 30, 1903, council members passed a resolution enabling the municipality to purchase the "Perry Water, Light and Ice Company, their entire water and electric plant, located in the City of Perry..." Included were all real estate, buildings, smoke stacks, boilers, machinery, franchises, water mains and everything else that belonged to the plant, except the machinery located in the main building. The price tag was \$25,000 cash. From that point, the City of Perry was in the business of supplying water and electricity to its businesses and residents.

The water treatment plant that came with the purchase was vacated in 1992 when our new treatment plant was completed near the southwest edge of the city. The plant had not been used to generate electricity for some 30 years prior to that. Plant records show that two 20,000-gallon diesel tanks once held fuel to run electric generators and engines used in purifying water from Perry Municipal Lake for drinking water. The plant also manufactured ice. The old building, virtually abandoned years ago and badly in need of major repairs, was demolished earlier this summer. Various groups interested in preserving that bit of Perry history were unable to find an economical way of doing so.

The council's 1903 resolution allowed ice-making machinery to remain in the building for a period of five years, at a fee of \$1 per year and to furnish Mr. McKinstry or his designated assignees steam power and water for the manufacture of ice in the building.

Thanks to the Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority for providing most of the information contained in this brief history of Perry's water, light, ice and electric railway systems.



September 15, 1998

This special little portion of north-central Oklahoma is celebrating its 105th birthday this week and that's a good enough excuse to pause for a reflective backward look at how we made it this far and perhaps a little speculation on what the future is likely to bring for Perry and Noble county. When the dust settled after the spectacular Cherokee Strip run of September 16, 1893, this particular patch of the prairie was swarming with humanity and Perry's prospects looked bright indeed. Newspapers of the day called this "The queen city of the Cherokee Strip." That label still is appropriate. Some 40,000 people made this area their target in the run and spent the first night after the opening camped out on the drought-stricken land making up Noble county. Not all of them stayed long enough to carve out a future here, but those who did were a unique breed.

Life was cruel for those early settlers, desperately so. Hardships were commonplace, the rule, not the exception. They knew beforehand that they would have to battle primitive living conditions on the frontier, and that included evil men who schemed to take what little they had from them. Their mettle was tested over and over by extremes in the weather and deprivations of many kinds. Those "free" homesteads came with a steep price.

Many of them left soon after the opening, convinced that this was not going to be the life for them. They were not necessarily weaker than those who remained, but other horizons beckoned for a variety of reasons. Perhaps in their exodus they cursed the tides of fortune that first brought them here and then quickly persuaded them to move on. But those who stayed behind and persisted in the battle left a proud legacy of much more than just a piece of real estate. Each of them must have been born with character genes that endowed them with exceptional tenacity and gave them the strength to clasp misfortune to their breast so tightly that it squeezed out the bad and left only a residue of goodness. They were the pioneers of the Perry and Noble county community who made it possible for the rest of us to live in a truly blessed land. Through the years, others of kindred spirit have followed them. Thank God for every one of them.

In the century that followed the run, the Perry area has established a stable base of population. Census figures show mostly minor adjustments through the years but a bar graph would be close to a flat line. Leaders in every area of community life have risen up with successive generations because men and women have taken their responsibilities seriously and have done what had to be done when challenges and opportunities faced them. I think they were the true heirs of the hardy pioneers who settled the Cherokee Strip. They were positive people who loved this land enough to take risks, to stand up against overwhelming odds. They looked after each other. If misfortune befell a neighbor, help was forthcoming from near and far. That's still the way things are done in this part of the country.

Perry will continue to deal with perplexing problems in the future but the strength of character willed to us by those early-day settlers, and those who succeeded them, will provide the endurance we need while looking for the answers. Human nature being what it is, there will always be stumbling blocks along the path. Thanks to those brave people who survived the great run of 1893 and to the generations that followed, our community will continue to thrive here on the prairie. Our task today is to keep those "Hopes and Dreams" alive while looking confidently into the future. We owe that to those daring predecessors who led the way for us. We are the beneficiaries of their bold risktaking in 1893 and beyond. We are

the remnants of that hardy, independent band of mostly youthful homesteaders who braved the elements and the unknown. Now we are creating a legacy for our own children and all those who come after us. Let's make them proud, just as we are proud of those long-ago pioneers of the Cherokee Strip land opening on that historic September afternoon in 1893.



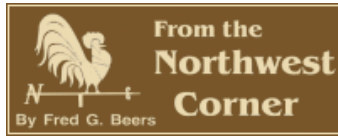
September 18, 1998

There must be a record number of Perry high school class reunions going on here this weekend because of the Cherokee Strip celebration. Congratulations to the class of 1938 for their 60-year get-together, also to all the other old (and some not so old) grads who are returning for this eventful weekend. So many classes wanted to have their reunion during the celebration that we just about ran out of places to have them. The old Elite Hotel building on the north side of the square was a lifesaver for one group that almost gave up on locating an assembly hall. Some creative alumni had the good sense to think of the old Elite for their reunion, and it saved the day for them. That should be a great place for a class party.

Missing from the celebration and reunion scene this year will be Bill Jensen. He has made his home in California for quite some time but for the past few years he has been a faithful attendee at our annual Cherokee Strip commemorative weekends. He would have been here today but a malignant tumor was discovered in his brain only a short time ago and, sadly, Bill died this week. Bill and Robert (Hook) Edwards of Houston were classmates here and usually came back together to see old friends as well as their hometown each September. They were a pair of outstanding Maroon football players back in the heyday of Coach Hump Daniels. We'll miss our annual visit with Bill Jensen. He was one of the last surviving members of the C.D. Jensen family, prominent folks in the early development of Perry. Jandryd Lawson is Bill's niece. Her mother was Dortha (Dickie) Jensen Casey.

It's always good to see again so many familiar faces of those boys and girls who used to roam the halls of Dear Old Perry High. Some of them don't seem to change much from year to year. Welcome to all of you and to all of our visitors this weekend. Keep us on your list for next year! Perry has never failed to have a Cherokee Strip celebration since the first year after the 1893 land run that settled this great area, so you can be sure we'll be ready to entertain you again in 1999.

PHS graduates and all others here for the celebration should by all means go by the new home of the Perry High School Alumni Association on the south side of the square. Although a lot of work remains to be done there, you can see the fine facility we'll have very soon when everything is in place. It's the old Gem Cafe building with the front end completely restored to its original early-1900s splendor. The interior features a pressed metal ceiling and ceiling fans, with a soft restful color decorating the wall. One area of exposed stonework has been left in place to show the original construction. The building will be centrally heated and cooled and it will provide a space for the Alumni office and displays of PHS memorabilia. A lot of the work has been donated by some old grads and the building itself is being provided by Leroy Rolling, a Perry alum and faithful supporter of the association. This is going to be a popular place in the future. Go take a look at it if you haven't already done so. Thanks to Leroy and the Alumni Association for their dedication in seeing this project through to completion.



September 22, 1998

Once again the autumn season stands trembling on the threshold, ready to spread its glorious colors and refreshing breath across the vista of our lives. Many hold that autumn is the best time of year because it brings relief from allergies and the stifling heat of July and August. Just as important, Nature also offers breathtaking and spectacular displays to dazzle us day by day, like a living kaleidoscope. It is indeed a season of promise and renewal.

When Indian summer causes the heat to linger, it only heightens our sense of anticipation while awaiting the inevitable. Autumn leaves start to fall, the song lyrics say, and we are transported to pleasant memories of days gone by. Perhaps a September morn on the campus, reminding us of the way we were, or a purposely delayed vacation deliberately calculated to catch some of the most awesome sights this glorious season provides.

Cares of the world don't altogether disappear but somehow they seem a little easier to bear when a hint of chill makes the morning air noticeably brisk and bracing. The World Series of baseball draws nigh climaxing a summer of divisional competition by favorite teams and individual challenges to traditional records. Meanwhile, Saturday afternoons inside college football arenas place on display the unsurpassed enthusiasm of youth, the stirring tunes of marching bands, the athleticism of modern warriors and the provocative chanting of dynamic cheerleaders. Who can resist the temptation to return to the unfettered joy of childhood in the midst of so much unabashed, zestful fervor?

It's a long, long time from May to December. These words, sung in his own husky fashion a half century ago by the late actor Walter Huston in "Knickerbocker Holiday" on Broadway, lead us into "September Song," a brief, soliloquy on the transition of life as expressed in the change of seasons. It is a love song inspired by a May-December romance. The melody and the words have become classics and the musical arrangements have been delightfully varied, from lush orchestral interpretations to the less restrained versions of popular dance bands. Chief among, these, in my estimation, is the harmonic brass and vocal ensemble recording of the Stan Kenton orchestra. It is a distinctive, unique style emphasizing the laconic but, simple cascading of trombones and other brass instruments leading the way from one passage to another. Listen to this particular arrangement every chance you get. Come by and I'll gladly put my CD on for your enjoyment.

But back to the point again. Summer wore out its welcome long ago and for a while it seemed we would never be rid of it. But Mother Nature does not play tricks so severe as that and we are on the accustomed path leading into autumn once again, right on schedule. When I become too impatient for the transition, I go back to Mr. Kenton's classical glissandos and listen as his singers intone the haunting words of "September Song," and I know that all's well with the world again. Please, though, just spare us the ice and snow of winter later on.



September 25, 1998

Marvie Rotter has created a tasteful little garden in the corner of her yard where the city formerly had a large, fenced in power transformer. Recent electrical circuit work eliminated the need for the transformer and the city eventually removed

all traces of it -- the gravel bed, chain-link security fence and the industrial-strength equipment that had been located there for 20 years or more. It was something of a necessary eyesore and the removal left only an ugly, scarred bit of soil along the alley. But now it's gone and Marvie has done the whole neighborhood a favor by dressing up the area into something very attractive. A stacked stone rampart facing the street holds a bed of enriched soil which someday will be ablaze with lush and colorful greenery. Anything would have been an improvement, but this project will transform the corner into a thing of genuine beauty. Congratulations, Marvie, and thank you.

Frank Scheide, the University of Arkansas history professor who is doing a video documentary on the life of the comic genius Buster Keaton, has nearly completed the first phase of his project. Buster, you will recall, was a megastar in the early days of motion pictures and on the vaudeville stage. Because he and his parents and other members of the family were settlers here and lived in Perry during the early part of this century, Mr. Scheide visited Perry earlier this year to gather factual information for the documentary. It is being shown this month at the annual Keaton day celebration in the community of Iola, Kansas, which is believed to be Buster's birthplace. Mr. Scheide says his piece will run about 20 minutes and he also has been invited to show it in December at a "moving images" symposium in London. It does include references to Perry.

Mr. Scheide will be returning to Perry one day soon to shoot some still pictures of Buster's boyhood home at 610 Grove street, along with some other scenes of our city. The house is owned by three brothers, Marvin, Leroy and Ralph Beier, and it is rental property. Iola or neighboring Piqua, Kansas, apparently has a rightful claim to the title of Buster Keaton's birthplace, although some folks used to say he was born here. Mr Scheide became interested in Buster Keaton as a child when he used to watch a "Silents, Please" TV show. Classic Keaton comedies were frequently shown. Incidentally, the Perry Carnegie Library has a very nice collection of Keaton films on video tape if you'd like to check them out. No charge, of course.

At the Cherokee Strip Museum we have a bronze reproduction of Buster's trademark pork-pie hat, given to us by Paramount Studio when their film biography of Keaton's career was premiered here in 1957. But in addition to that I do wish we had a more visible sign that he at least did part of his growing up in Perry, Oklahoma, and that, indeed, he began his career as an entertainer as a very young boy right here on the stage of the old Grand Theatre on the east side of the courthouse square. Perry may never again have a favorite son who advances as far as Buster Keaton did in the world of entertainment.

Too bad we weren't able to put some kind of celebration together in time for Keaton's birthday centennial in 1995. Iola has an annual Keaton Day observance much like our Cherokee Strip celebration. We should do something to keep reminding visitors that Buster Keaton, the clown prince, was one of our own.



September 28, 1998

Cars we have owned in years past give us landmark memories. We can date periods of our life by the particular auto that was parked in the garage at that time. I have a really misty recollection of driving to the top of Pike's Peak with my parents and sisters when I was not yet of school age. The specific day was my birthday one summer and the car was a four-door sedan that chugged mightily on the inclines, but got us up there and back down again without a single flat tire. That was a considerable achievement in the late 1920s. Harry and Edith Donaldson and their son, Bobby, were with us on that trip.

Our car at that time was a black Buick. It had a squarish, boxy body style, high running boards, a visor over the windshield, pull-down shades for rear seat windows and a thermometer atop the radiator cap on the hood to warn the driver when water was needed to cool the engine. It also had small ceramic fixtures on either side of the back seat to hold fresh flowers. That was a charming optional feature, but of course such niceties as factory-installed heaters, air-conditioners and radios were unknown. That was just fine because we didn't know what we were missing. Lap robes were always carried in the winter, windows were cranked down in the summer, and our family sang songs when we traveled. So much for comfort and entertainment.

My cousin Dorothy from Kansas City used to tell me about trips to Perry that she made in the early 1920s with her parents, my Uncle Irving and Aunt Mollie, and Dorothy's younger brother, my cousin Fred. There were no paved highways in those days long ago and the travel time from Kansas City to Perry was a good two-day drive. An enterprising man, Mr. Hockaday, had some road maps made up which could be purchased by travelers in the Midwest. His charts were indispensable for those early motorists. Most roads were rutted and, for the most part, two-lane thoroughfares barely wide enough for cars to pass coming from opposite directions. They were made for horse-drawn traffic.

Mr. Hockaday had placed markers bearing a large letter "H" on fence posts to help guide motorists along the routes shown on his map. There were no curves, just square corners at section lines or wherever the roads bent. Driving at night was perilous because headlights were bright only when the engine was accelerated. If the driver slowed down for any reason, the lights nearly faded out. Fortunately, traffic in those days was not heavy. Uncle Irving solved the headlight problem by letting my cousin Fred sit on a front fender with a flashlight to provide extra visibility as they sped along, sometimes at more than 20 miles per hour. It was a thrill for young Fred but Aunt Mollie was not ecstatic about those times. Windshield wipers were hand operated by the driver or a passenger beside him. For a trip of that distance (about 300 miles), two or three flat tires were normal. Uncle Irving was a patient man but I think the ordeal of changing tires on a dark, sometimes muddy, road must have tested his endurance. Wichita was the usual overnight stopping place.

Cousin Dorothy remembered those trips as fun times because my dad, proprietor of the City Drug Store, always rewarded Uncle Irving's two children with candy and ice cream from his white marble soda fountain. The Kansas City family all enjoyed the leisurely pace of the small town life they found here, far from the noise, crowds and the hustle and bustle of the Missouri metropolis, even though everything was pretty much up to date there.

More reflections on automobiles when we return.