



September 5, 2000

We're just back from one of those periodic weekend trips to visit our daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren in Kansas City, and yes (to anticipate your question) everything is still up to date there. What made this trip so special was the opportunity it provided to share in the joy of ushering our one and only grandson into that near adulthood stage known as "teen-ager."

Can this actually be happening? Was it really 13 years ago when we peered at that pitiful little form in a neo-natal intensive care unit? We looked on helplessly as he clung precariously to the life he had just begun, while his mother fought off an equally insidious blood disorder that accompanied the unexpectedly early birth. It's true. The calendar does not lie. Tom and his mom both survived that shaky episode. Only yesterday, it seems, he weighed in at slightly more than three pounds. Today he is an athletic, growing boy, wolfing down generous helpings of his favorite foods. He is a five-foot, four-inch, 115-pound bundle of seemingly endless energy who soon will be the tallest member of our family. A pitcher and shortstop for his little league baseball team, good at both soccer and basketball, a drummer in the school band and a promising pianist. On the Saturday we were there, he arose early and rode his brand new birthday bike 11 miles before playing a baseball game in triple digit heat that afternoon. A teen-ager!

Thinking back to that scary, tumultuous beginning, and gazing upon him today, we can only again give thanks for answered prayers. Now we have three more beautiful grandchildren to adore and enjoy, and two of them live right here in Perry with their mom (our daughter) and their dad. We have known dark moments, including the loss of a tiny baby girl, in this process of regeneration and through that we have come to appreciate the miracle that accompanies each new life.

We waited longer to have grandchildren than some of our friends, but now that there are four of them to brag about it only seems that the restrained impatience we felt without them was worth the wait. They give us such joy, such feeling of family continuity. If you have some, you know what I am struggling to say. Is it enough just to say, "Thank you?" No, much more is warranted, but it will have to do for now.

We celebrate what each of them will achieve in the magic years that await their maturity, through childhood, teen-agehood and beyond into wonderful lives of their own crafting and design. To be there, standing on the sidelines and cheering them on with whatever encouragement our presence and our words can offer, perhaps through that they will sense what they mean to us, their grandparents.



September 8, 2000

We're not planning a formal ribbon cutting ceremony or anything like that, but the folks on our block invite you to come look at our new portion of Park Lane between Wakefield Drive and North Brookwood. The city street department and its contractor, Evans Associates, have just finished the job and I must say it looks great. Gone are the many potholes, crumbling edges, ruts and all of the other problems that have troubled drivers along that little stretch, where axles and tires have been abused for so long.

It seemed like a long and tiresome process after the first work started back there in early August. They peeled off the entire old surface and did some things to stabilize the base, and there was a period of two weeks when all work ceased. During that time those hot summer breezes carried layers of dust all over the neighborhood, making the wait seem interminable, but now that the job is finished everyone should be happy again.

I know there are many other worthy projects waiting their turn, and the sales tax we're paying should make it possible to work on all of them while this street program is going on. When you consider the rebuilding job that's also been underway on I-35 highway on the west side of town, it's obvious that we are experiencing considerable road improvement work in this community during the dog day heat of August in the year 2000.

It seems to me that these new streets in the city limits should have center stripes and edge markers so drivers can steer their vehicles down the right path. Fir avenue has just been re-striped and so has the downtown square, as they annually are just before the Sept. 16th celebration. Many Perry motorists forget that there are two lanes and just drive down the middle of the street until oncoming traffic appears. Maybe if we had visible centerlines some of that problem could be eliminated, along with the potential for a costly and deadly collision. What do you think?

While I'm making suggestions, here's another that was passed along to me. After attending a recent nighttime public performance in the high school auditorium, many motorists again realized the high school parking lot at Eighth and Elm is not well lighted. Actually, it is virtually altogether unlighted. That makes it difficult to find a car in the darkness and it also poses the possible hazard of bumping fenders or waylaying pedestrians. Maybe the school board would like to think about adding some light poles in the parking area. While they're at it, I hope they will also take a look at the way bumpers on pickups and cars parked in the south tier hang out over the sidewalk, making it impossible for pedestrians to use the sidewalks. This particular problem occurs each weekday during the school year. Could the parking pattern be fixed to eliminate that nuisance? What's your opinion?



September 12, 2000

An unexpected bit of correspondence the other day evoked another one of those waves of nostalgia, conjuring up names and remembered faces from an almost forgotten era in this little city. We were all several decades younger then and our day to day concerns were different. They seemed important at the time, but as we know now, they were mere speed bumps on the road to what we have become today.

The writer was a former Perry resident, Elfreda Kerr Wells, now of Stillwater, whose family lived here in the 1930s and early 1940s. Her father, James C. Kerr, was the Dodge and Plymouth automobile dealer here at that time. His showroom and shop were on "automobile row," the stretch of Sixth street between Fir avenue and Delaware where several other car dealerships were located. The Kerr family lived in the 700 block of Locust street, but Elfreda spent a lot of time at our house at Eighth and Elm. She and my older sister, Jeanice, were close friends. Many of their contemporaries at Perry high school hung out at our house after school hours or in the evenings when none of them had the price of admission to the Roxy or Annex Movie Theater. As the curious little kid of that time, I ate a lot of their fudge, listened carefully to their banter and came to feel I was almost one of them, although I was far from it. Anyway, their names and personalities became familiar and I remember nearly all of them. I'll bet many of you do, too.

"What fun we had," Elfreda writes, "I remember when the Wade family came to town. They lived upstairs on the square. They played music with bells and I was fascinated. I remember Sydney and Prudye (the Wades' son and daughter) the most. Sydney was a hunk. Our whole gang of girls were out to get him. Alas! Jeanice won. We were all very jealous. Our gang consisted of Jeanice, Dorothy Davis, Genevieve Samuelson, Gov. Johnston's daughter (Gertrude), Ethel Maurice Gottlieb, Rosemary McEwen and Frances Baer. We wound the Maypoles as 'Red Hots' pep squad members, and we proudly marched around the square on Friday nights before a Saturday afternoon football game. Our crushes were Ralph Foster Jr., Bill and Denver Dearborn, Billy Elliott, Herbert Hirschman, Pete Cutsinger, Ezra Klinglesmith, and more.

"We girls had slumber parties. We got up at 4 a.m. and walked to town, following the scent of freshly baked doughnuts, bought a bunch and hiked to the Country Club to eat breakfast and swim. Some of the guys were aware of this. Need I say more? I took dancing lessons and Ashley Alexander played piano for my recital. Bobby Donaldson and I did some radio commercials from an Enid radio station. Our moms drove us over there."

Elfreda's letter is fascinating in the details she recalls. In the portion quoted above, she discussed the Wade family. They included Mom and Pop Wade, Leigh and Gussie, and their children, Sydney and Prudye. Syd married my sister Jeanice and Prudye at one time was married to Frank Marshall. The family had been Swiss bell ringers with the 101 Ranch Show. While here, Pop Wade worked in the box office at the Annex Theater. Somewhat later, the family moved to Oklahoma City and Gussie was secretary to the manager of the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce. Syd became a member of the Oklahoma City police force. While in Perry the Wades had an apartment above our family's City Drug Store on the north side of the square. I'll have more recollections from Elfreda in another column.



September 15, 2000

As we prepare to observe the 107th anniversary of the opening of the Cherokee Outlet to non-Indian settlers on September 16th, 1893, we would do well to pause for at least a moment of reflection. While the hands on the clock neared the magic stroke of high noon on that hot, windy day in the last decade of the 19th century, what thoughts must have raced through the minds of those daring, hopeful homesteaders?

There they were, poised in a disorganized array of men, women, a few children, machines and animals, all of them straining at the entry lines in nervous anticipation of the soldiers' gunshot signal. Skittish steeds added to the tension and drama of the moment. Some of the younger men were mounted on fast ponies, others sat in flimsy buggies or wagons pulled by sturdy but slow plow horses. Bicycles were the choice of some. Many others bought tickets for a slow train ride into the territory. Were they wondering how their heirs and others of succeeding generations would deal with the land lying before them? No, more likely they were primarily worried that someone else would outmaneuver them when they reached the spot that they would like to claim for themselves.

It was a huge event, sprawled across a horizon that many believed would lead them to a land of milk and honey. History has never seen a larger dash for land. Man's innate yearning to own just a piece of soil motivated virtually all of them. They came from the upper Midwest of this country or from Back East, Down South, Up North, Out West. Rich men, mostly poor men, some only newly arrived in this hemisphere from impoverished and troubled European nations. The U.S. itself was struggling to deal with a general depression and some of the settlers came here to escape that pervasive, suffocating malaise.

It's probable that only a few were concerned with where or how they would spend their first night on the prairie. Most of them were accustomed to creature comforts in homes that had sheltered them until that day. They had little or no idea of the adventures awaiting them in Oklahoma Territory. Still they looked forward to the struggle they surely knew was awaiting them. Seconds ticked off and the long-awaited hour of 12 noon drew closer.

Some 100,000 brave souls made the run in hopes of staking a claim on one of the 40,000 homesteads in the Outlet. They lined up on the northern border of the Outlet in Kansas and on a southern line that led through Stillwater and Orlando, plunging toward each other when that long-awaited signal rang out across the rolling terrain. Some observers estimated that around 40,000 individuals were camped in the Perry area the night after the opening. They were hardy, determined people before they chose to come here, or else they would not have entered the Cherokee Outlet sweepstakes in the first place. The struggle that awaited them after the run only strengthened their resolve to win. When that long-awaited signal rang out across the treeless, sun-scorched land, a new volume was begun in the annals of this blessed bit of real estate. And today, we are the beneficiaries of their legacy. Thank God for every one of them.



September 19, 2000

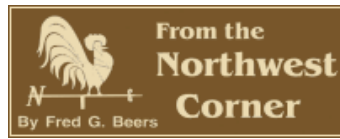
Another Perry-Blackwell gridiron donnybrook has come and gone. It's our version of the much-hyped OU-OSU Bedlam Series. I don't know when or how so much feeling came to be wrapped up in these high school athletic endeavors, but those games always enliven the season. Whatever the sport-football, wrestling, basketball, baseball, softball, track, golf – you name it – they all bring out the most spirited effort by both schools not only to win, but also to avoid losing. Bragging rights go to the victor along with a claim to the title, "the REAL Maroons."

My friend Mel, the sports editor of this newspaper, attempted to learn last week how long that nickname, Maroons, has been used by both schools. As best I can tell, Perry has never had any other nickname. That much was confirmed to me several times by the late Kenneth Coldiron, who was an authority on many kinds of such trivia. My earliest personal recollections go back to at least 1930 and I know the name was used for Perry teams at that time.

A related question that seems to surface periodically has to do with the meaning of the name, Maroon. I've attempted to answer that on several occasions, so let me toss this out again in case you're still wondering. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines the noun, maroon, as "a variable color averaging a dark red." That's fine, but it doesn't help us understand why athletes would be called by that name. Dig a little deeper. Another Webster's dictionary on my shelf has something else to say about the noun maroon. It comments: "A modification of the Spanish/American word 'Cimarron,' or the French word with the same spelling, meaning 'wild, savage'." Now, with that in mind, think of the rampaging Cimarron River at flood stage. The application to an athletic team then seems to make good sense.

It is quite possible that both Perry and Blackwell high schools have always used Maroon as a nickname. Both cities are products of the 1893 Cherokee Outlet land rush, so they are exactly the same age, but still it is peculiar that two schools so close together would take up the same moniker. To the best of my knowledge, the only other team using that name, Maroon, is one of the major Mississippi universities. At one time, when the University of Chicago had a football program, they also were known as the Maroons, and they were the terrors of the Midwest.

This looks like a puzzle that may never really be satisfactorily resolved, so perhaps we should just leave it alone and let our Perry high school representatives earn the right to claim that they are "the REAL Maroons." In my estimation, they will always deserve that title.



September 22, 2000

A few choice thoughts on selected short subjects...

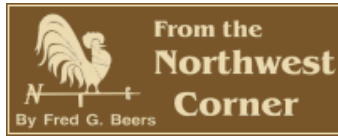
Before we close the books on the 2000 Cherokee Strip Celebration in Perry, let's hear it for the Perry high school student council and their faculty sponsor, Sharon Yost. Thousands of people jammed the downtown area Saturday for the parade and other things related to this annual mega-event. As you would expect, paper and all kinds of trash quickly appeared and continued to pile up throughout the day. By Sunday morning at church time, however, the Perry square and streets within a broad perimeter were clear and you'd hardly know anything had happened here the day before. Sharon, her students and some Chamber of Commerce folks met downtown at about 7 a.m. Sunday and picked up the litter before most of us had finished that first cup of coffee. Thanks to them, and to everyone who had a hand in planning and carrying out this annual Perry birthday anniversary. It was a huge success.

Once again portable potties were located throughout the downtown area. Like most other towns in the U. S., Perry has a shortage of public rest rooms to serve visitors. The courthouse is equipped with them but that's about it. Thanks to the celebration planners for keeping this item on their checklist.

If there's a sour note, it may be about the candy thrown by walkers and those who ride on floats, all along the parade route. This always excites young people as they scurry to pick up some of those goodies off the street. Consequently, the potential for a serious accident is very real. I know the people who toss out the candy mean well, but I fear for the safety of those little tikes. We used to have a ban on throwing candy, gum and souvenirs from floats, but it was never enforced and I don't think any such restriction now exists. Let's don't wait too long to do something about the problem.

The new quarterly issue (for Summer, 2000) of The Chronicles of Oklahoma, published by the Oklahoma Historical Society, is just being distributed and once again it contains articles of local interest. One of these is about the 179th Infantry Regiment of the Oklahoma National Guard, which used to include Company I, based in Perry. This particular article tells about the 179th's participation in the Korean conflict 50 years ago. The piece deals with an incident involving the late Capt. David C. Matthews, Perry attorney who commanded Company I at the time. This article, by Penn V. Rabb Jr., tells about Capt. Matthews' great success in recruiting veterans by selling them on a six-month enlistment. Summer camp time came, many of the veterans left the unit because they did not want to go to camp, and Company I had fewer than 20 men in the ranks.

As a result, Capt. Matthews had to do a little explaining to Col. Frederick Daugherty, regimental commander. It all worked out fine, however. Capt. Matthews eventually rose to the rank of major general and commanded the Oklahoma National Guard before his death. Find or buy a copy of the book and read the entire article.



September 26, 2000

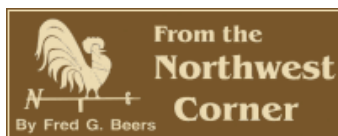
Here's more from Elfreda Kerr Wells, now of Stillwater, as she recalls what it was like to grow up in Perry during the 1930s. (The notes in parentheses are mine.) "When I was a little girl we had a neighbor whose job was to put figures (of actors) in front of theaters to advertise a current movie. One time when I went over to visit them there was a wax head of 'Jesse James' on the dining room table. That freaked me out. During World War II, when the feature film was over, they projected a giant U. S. flag on the screen with the words 'Buy Bonds,' urging the audience to support the war effort with their money. The audience would clap and clap. Would they do so today? I doubt it.

"The girls in our Coke club picked Sanford's Drug (now the location of Chris' Pharmacy) as a favorite because that's where the cutest soda jerk was. City Drug (my Dad's store) had the best ice cream. I remember Wacker's five and dime store and Fry's Meat Market, but mostly I remember the Famous dry goods store. I loved to watch the clerk put my Mom's money in a little silver canister, pull a cord and send that little booger up a wire to an elevated office. Mom's change would shoot back down to the counter in a canister." (The J. C. Penney store on the north side of the square had the same system.)

Elfreda recalls several other highlights, including the first airplane to land on a new Perry airfield. It was carrying mail-air mail. At school she remembers two teachers in particular, Mrs. Merrill and Professor Elliott. "My very favorite teacher," she writes, was "Humpy Daniels. Thanks to him I love history." (As most of you know, Hump Daniels also was the legendary football coach at PHS in the 1930s and 1940s.)/p>

On another topic, Elfreda writes: "You and my brother Buddy rode bikes. You two pestered your sisters, played marbles and cowboys and Indians. Buddy was always Ken Maynard. He made scooters with apple crates and skate wheels. I remember all of us kids walked on stilts. Buddy (who is now deceased) was in the Navy during the war. He was aboard blimps in California guarding the coast. At the age of 16 I moved to Tulsa and became a professional dancer with Milton Hill Enterprises. I danced all over Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Texas and other places.

Elfreda's first husband died of pneumonia. They had one daughter, Gayle. She later married Sergeant Major James Wells of the U. S. Marine Corps, and they had a daughter, Melody, and a son, James Wells Jr. They moved, to Stillwater and she worked at Oklahoma State University for 25 years. All three children graduated from OSU. Jim Jr. is with CitiBank in Hagerstown, Md., Gayle lives in California and Melody is in Stillwater. "About twice a month," Elfreda writes, "Melody and I go to Perry to shop at Wal-Mart as the store here is too big for me. We eat cheese fries at the Kumback and before we leave town we go to Foster's Drug for great chocolate ice cream sodas and gifts." Hearing from Elfreda gave me a lift, with her recollections of that era in Perry when many of us were just growing up. Hope you enjoyed her comments, too.



September 29, 2000

It seems that every now and then someone thinks we should enact a law to make English the "official language" of this country. The idea has merit and it deserves the public debate it is getting right now. Personally, I don't know. It seems strange that anyone would consider some other language to be our "official" tongue, even though this country was

populated by diverse people from Europe, Asia and many other places. For uniformity's sake, yes, English should be designated as our one and only official language. But, I don't think we should pass a law to that effect until all of us have mastered the English language. If you have noticed the mangled grammatical boo-boos, the bad spelling, wrong word selections, and similar errors in public use of the King's English in this country, you understand what I'm saying. English would be OK as our official national language if we just knew how to use it.

Something needs, to be said about the new look in the women's building at the fairgrounds. I've been reading about the improvements made out there in time for the year 2000 Noble county free fair, but I was unable to appreciate it until I saw it with my own eyes. The floor, walls and ceilings all look better and the new insulation allows the cooling system to work the way it's supposed to. It is no longer necessary to have the doors standing open to catch stray breezes. Now that the doors can be kept closed we have a greatly reduced problem with flies. In the past those pests have dined pretty well during county fair week but now they seem to be under control and out of sight. Samples of good things to eat from several Noble county kitchens can be properly displayed without someone standing by to chase away insects. The building has a much cozier feel to it. Thanks to the fair board and others who assist with things like that. The public appreciates it.

Recent discussion concerning the three-story former Masonic Temple at the corner of Seventh and Delaware, on the west side of the square, has brought up anew the subject of that superstructure on the roof of the building. What is it and why is it there? Many have conjectured wrong answers to those questions. The steel structure spans the roof at the east end of the building. Some thought it might have been intended for use as a fly loft, to store elevated sets for plays to be presented in the building's auditorium. It's out of place for that. The auditorium occupied the west two-thirds of the building, so a fly loft would have to have been several feet farther west.

Victor Green, who has owned the building the past 20 years, tells me that after construction was completed in 1924, the Masons noticed that the roof was sagging. The contractor solved the roof problem by anchoring the north and south walls with the steel superstructure and it became a permanent part of the skyline on that side of the square. It has served the purpose very well and it has been there so long that most of us hardly notice it any more. Next question.