

## Reflections on the Fourth of July

Donald Hooper 2010

When I was young each summer my mother would take my brother Ron and I back to Arkansas to visit my grandparents. This was done, in part, to escape the problem of infantile paralysis, which was rampant in the larger cities during the heat of summer. We usually caught the train to St. Louis, MO., switched to the Missouri Pacific railroad train to Corning, AR. I remember watching out the train window for the water tower with Corning on its side. You could see it from about 3 miles outside of town. When we travelled my mother would pack small box with sandwiches and fried chicken for us to eat. The train trip took about 24 hours in those days. We could not afford to eat in the dining car or purchase meals from vendors who came on the train at each stop along the way.

My grandfather and grandmother lived in Corning, AR. He was, for a time period during World War II, the town marshal. There was a day marshal and a night marshal, and he alternated with another man in this position. I don't know what his salary was, but I am sure it was not very much given the size and locality. During the war he also had a job with the Missouri Pacific railroad. He had to go to a location on the railroad and record the trains as they passed through town. We would sometime go with him to his post out on the track. He always carried a sidearm in a holster, and sometimes he would let us shoot at snakes and turtles in the water alongside the track. I don't think I ever hit anything, but he could very easily. He had modified a .38 pistol and had it mounted on a .45 frame. Once he had to shoot an escaping prisoner. As the man started to run away, he yelled, " Stop or I will shoot!" The man continued running, and he said I fired to scare him,

but ended up shooting him in the leg my mistake. He said he regretted that as much as anything he had ever done. My grandfather had lost the ring finger on his left hand when he was a child. The barn door of his father's barn slammed shut on his hand and amputated that finger very cleanly just below the second knuckle.

My grandfather grew and raised most of his own food on his small plot behind his house. He had chickens, a vegetable garden, no indoors plumbing, and the water source was a hand pump on the back porch. There was no electricity until the middle of the war when the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) finally wired the town of about 2500 residents. Corning, AR is in Clay County, and was the seat of county government. Corning, AR was a largely agricultural community,

with cotton, corn, and milo as the major crops. Following WWII many of the cotton farms were converted to rice farms, and for kids, this was adventure beyond imagination. We could swim in the rice ponds, explore the fields and woods, hunt, fish and generally spend the entire day out of sight of any adults.

My grandmother cooked on a wood-burning stove, and one of our duties was to split the wood into pieces, which would be burned in the stove. Next to the firebox was a water reservoir,

which was kept, filled and provided hot water for washing and cleaning. On wash day a large washtub in the back yard was filled with water, a fire build underneath, and the water was heated that way and the clothes were washed by hand. On Saturday night, bath night, the washtub was filled with hot water in the kitchen and everybody, in turn, took a bath. Fresh hot water was added for each person, but no clean water was possible after the first person had bathed.





The toilet was a two seater out at the very back of the lot, next to grandpa's small barn and workshop. The heat and smell are childhood memories I will never forget.

My grandparents had little money, and as indicated, grew most of their food, which was fresh daily. They would kill a chicken or two on Sunday for dinner, pick the corn, potatoes, vegetables and we would eat one large meal about noon. For supper we had left over's. The table was covered with a tablecloth to keep away the flies. Most of the glassware was from jelly jars, and when all the family gathered, the children were given tin cans to drink from. Mostly we drank water, and on occasion iced tea. I remember how the outside of the can would have condensation and it was such a pleasant sight.

From the July 4th Family reunion in 1977

My two uncles, Fred and Jim Grayson, were both in the military during the war. Fred in the Army Air Corps, and Jim in the U. S. Marines. They sent some money home from their pay, and I am sure this made a big difference in my grandparent's lives.

After WWII my uncle Jim had running water and an indoor toilet added to the house.

On Saturday the movie theatre was open at 1PM for the most recent "cowboy" movie from Hollywood. We saw Gene Autry, Tom Mix, Tim Holt, Roy Rogers, et al, and a chapter in the continuing adventures of Buck Rogers or some other serial that was current at the time. On Saturday night they changed the movie and featured one of the "horror" movies, Frankenstein,

Wolf Man and called it the OWL show. We went to the movie at 8 or 9 PM, and got out near midnight. It was always a full house at both the afternoon and evening show. As I remember we paid \$.10-or \$.15 cents for the ticket, and \$.05 for a bag of popcorn. My cousin, Bill Watson was the popcorn seller and he could get us a second bag free if we brought back the original bag. Most folks crumpled up the bag and would throw it at the bad guy in the movie if he did something outrageous. We tried to sneak in the side door of the movie on one or two occasions, but were not successful as I remember.

On Saturdays the town was filled with farm wagons, horses and mules as the farmers came to town to trade and barter their products for staples needed to operate the farm.

There was a pool hall in town, and in fact a very nice pool table was manufactured in Corning for many years. We would sit on benches around the three tables and watch the older men and young men play for money.... not much....but a wager on each game. We were too young to play, but enjoyed the pool playing.

My grandfather, when he got older would sit on a bench with the other old men and they would whittle. He made toys for us, guns, paddleboats run with a rubber band, walking canes for himself and others, and he even carved a linked chain from a pine plank. How I wished that I had saved and preserved some of these works of art. He carved a round ball inside an open cage from a block of pinewood. I can still see it and marvel at the time, effort and craftsmanship it took to create.



Grandpa Grayson with some mighty tall corn, behind him the rear screened porch Ken and Fred used to sleep in sometimes.



There was a pop bottling plant and an icehouse in town, and we would go to the icehouse and watch the ice being made. It was also a lot cooler in the ice plant than out in the fields and streams. Out on the highway the Greyhound bus station was a gas station, restaurant, and small store. We used to go out to see the bus arrive and see who was coming to town. The train went through Corning several times a day, and my grandfather's house was about 300 yards from the track. I remember going to stand and watch the very first diesel locomotive pass through town. I think the entire population of Corning was standing along side the track when the train finally passed. It was beautiful, large, and very loud. The engineer blew his horn over and over as he went by.

We played pinball machines for a nickel, bought firecrackers and fireworks if we had any money, and blew up tin cans and other containers to see what would happen. My grandfather, as the local marshal, took us to the jailhouse (called the calaboose for some reason) and put us in the single cell. It had a dirt floor, smelled, was hot, and he said...don't ever get in trouble and locked up cause this is what it will be like. I remembered that lesson my entire lifetime.

I know that each of the local merchants provided credit to the citizens of Corning. If my grandparents needed bread or tobacco, we would go to the store, pick it up, and have it put on the tab. At the end of the month, or at the end of the cotton-picking season, everyone was expected to settle up his or her debt to the storeowner. School restarted in July or early August, but then stopped for three or four weeks in late September so that the cotton could be harvested. It was the practice for whole families to go to the field and pick

the cotton. A large sack was dragged on the ground behind the worker and filled with cotton picked from the plant. The worker was paid for each full bag.... about 100 pounds that he produced. It was hard, backbreaking labor.

The Fourth of July was what they called Home Coming, and a big celebration was held each year at Wynn Park. They had tents, games of chance, picnic tables, and even a small merry-go-round. The local high school baseball team would play a game with another high school and the stands would be filled to watch the game.

In the evening they would have fireworks, and once they played a game of baseball on donkeys. The batter hit the ball, jumped on the back of a donkey and tried to get him to run to first base before the ball was caught. It was great fun to watch.

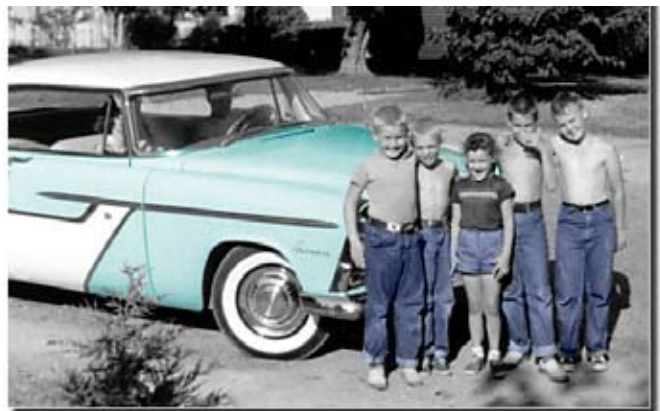
I thought it was the greatest time of the year. I was with the folks I loved the most, in a small town where no one locked a door or worried about crime. Where each moment was filled with wonders and adventure. We read all the Hardy Boy books by lamplight...kerosene lamps...which had to be cleaned each morning because the soot collected on the inside of the globe. When electricity was finally brought in, my grandfather had a single light bulb hung from the ceiling in each room. It was a marvel to flip a switch and have light. Problem was that the light attracted bugs and moths, so it was used sparingly since there were few screens on the windows.

We could listen to the radio in the evening and listen to the St. Louis Cardinal baseball games during the day...there were no night games in those days. We listened to war news, but paid little attention. We saw the newsreels at the movie theatre, watch the movies about the war, and had no doubt about America's ultimate victory.

I hope that your memories of childhood are as sweet as mine.

## Reflections on Corning

Fred Hooper 2010



Kenny, Little Freddy, Becky, Me and Gregory in our summer uniform standing in front of what years later would become my very first car... but that's another story.

I was born in the town and house Don just described. It was on one of Mom's trips down home to see "the folks" she had misjudged my delivery time. It was March 30, 1945. Roughly a month before the end of World War II.





Our last trip down as kids from July of 1959, with our dog Tippy.

My first memories of Corning start with catching "The Cannonball Express" the train from Detroit to St. Louis. The train rides were a real adventure for us. Watching the fields and backyards of America roll by our window. The small towns with their train stations. The conductor calling off the names of the stops, boarding people and checking their tickets. Then we switched trains as I recall and headed south to Popular Bluff I think. The train no longer stopped in Corning. Someone would

meet us and drive us down to Corning. Usually Uncle Fred or Uncle Jim.

Our visit always began the same way a trip to the county line where the barber shop was where we got a buzz cut. Off came our shoes for the two or three weeks of our visit. We visited and played with our cousins Gregory, Becky, and "Little Freddie" (younger and smaller than me) I was just Freddie. While I was in town there were three "Fred's" in the family my Uncle Fred, Freddie, and Little Freddie. Uncle Fred was the butcher at the local IGA, he was married to my Aunt Evelyn and Little Freddie their only child. They lived in Corning.

Gregory and Becky lived in Reyno about 12 miles away. We would spend a few days and nights with them. Aunt Irene and Uncle Russ were their parents. Gregory was a relay country boy and used to get us in trouble more often than not. Trying to get us to smoke corn silk, Playing tricks on Becky, and making contraptions to catch and kill toads and bats..

On the tamer side of entertainment we would each get a quarter. This would pay for an ice cold (out of an ice chest kind of cooler) Dr. Pepper and four games on a pin ball machine. Unless like Gregory you wanted a bag of peanuts to pour into your "soda" then you could only play three games on the pinball machine. Also like Don said on Saturday and





Back Row: Bob Langston Carrie Hooper Glen Hooper (holding Fred Hooper) George Hooper Anita Lane Reta Sue Lane Carl Hooper Perry Nimmo  
 Seated: Onnie Prince Nimmo Aaron Nimmo Perry Hooper Eva Nance Hooper Mabel Hooper Nimmo  
 Front Row: Ronald Hooper Donald Hooper Stanley Langston Rob Lane Roy Lane

Saturday night the Movie was the big attraction and they still had the "Owl" show when you might get to see "the Mummy" or some other scary movie if you were lucky.

Grandpa would usually chase us off because we were making too much noise, but one year he made us a sling and arrow type of toy which was great fun until we stuck the arrow into a neighbor's roof... that kinda ended that. I still have an expandable hat/coat rack that he completely whittled. As far as I know the only thing left that he did. Grandma used to sit in her chair all day and quilt. Early on she would help with the meals, but as she aged she just quilted from morning till night. I also have one of her quilts.

All of the Grayson girls were great cooks. Their fried chicken was legend, and the fruit cobblers were to die for... I've

never found any one who made one like they did in a cast iron skillet with three crusts... unbelievable.

The worst part of the trips to Arkansas were the mosquitoes. Not only were they big, but plentiful. We slept on a feather mattress under a window fan one particularly hot night and I woke with 27 mosquito bites. A lot of the mosquitoes were still on the bed so fat with my blood they couldn't fly.

Somehow we never watched TV, listened to the radio, there were no video games or computers, cell phones or any other electronics and we were never bored... always outside playing.

Many memories of much simpler times. They may not have been the best of times but you couldn't have proved it by asking us. We were having fun and not wanting for anything.