

As I Saw It

(Sam Newlan: An Owens Valley Life)

By Iri Newlan

When we were nearing the end of the big depression, Bishop wasn't the gateway to anyplace. It was just the almost -end of a long, desert California road. And most folks in Bishop believed that all important places and people were someplace else.

We dreamed for the green, lush days of our forefathers' valley, not realizing that our lives were beautifully simple. Time passed in a gentle way, and we did embrace two strongly sustaining beliefs: eventually the depression would end, and because the Great War was over, there would be lasting world peace forever.

We grumbled, though it didn't really matter that the mail wasn't delivered to our doorstep, as it was in the cities. It wasn't really important; we had time to go to the post office and it gave us a chance to visit with friends we might meet there.

Radios were getting better - so good we could really tell what music was being played, and we could understand the announcers. But we grumbled about the radios, too, not realizing our culture and lives revolved around them. Until after the next great war, which we knew wouldn't happen, radios would be our ears, our main method of knowing what was happening in the outside world.

Oh happy day! We had ice cream cones, malted milks and radios that worked!

The radios told of the happenings in the big cities, and the announcers never mentioned Bishop. We knew what was going on in the world, and best of all, both old and young heard a different kind of music. The radio announcers talked of things beyond our Mt. Tom's world. Many of us knew exactly the very instant in the world's championship fight when Gene Tunney knocked Dempsey down and out. I even think I heard the big guy hit the canvas! We laughed at Amos and Andy, Fibber McGee and Molly, Jack Benny and Rochester, and we worried about the fellow who walked at night.

We had phonograph records and could listen to the world's great orchestras, bands and singers. But with good radios we heard new melodies and lyrics live. We came into the age of the big bands and we knew names like Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Harry James, Count Basie. Every young person who could, whistled and sang popular songs like "Cocktails for Two."

*We called the records *platters.' Bing Crosby was crooning, though older folks didn't like him very much. Sinatra was in the wings, just starting to make "bobbie sockers" scream. There were pretty girl singers like Margaret Whiting, the Andrews Sisters, and Rosemary Clooney.*

Despite what our parents thought and said, we really did our homework while we listened, and though it may have sometimes made us glad or sad, we dreamed to the

slow ballad music. We shook, ratted and rolled to the snappy-happy tunes, and some high school kids learned that tap dancing was almost easy.

Isn't it sad that most of today's young sweethearts have probably never danced and dreamed to the magic tones of a jeweled Wurlitzer quietly singing the lovely "Moonlight Serenade?"

Some of our music had nonsensical words like "the music goes round and round, and it comes out here." "... does the Spearmint lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?" But we were laughing almost all of every day.

There were happy times at Keough's Hot Springs; the Vonderheides invited the whole town to Easter egg hunts. On the fourth of July there were fireworks, fat man's and three-legged races, baseball, picnics, swimming and dancing.

Our town was dance crazy; there were high school dances, Legion Hall dances, and old-time dances at the Masonic Temple. Outside of Bishop, on Rock Creek, there were Paradise Camp dances on Saturday nights. In the winter we had two dances each week in Big Pine, and all summer the lodges around Mammoth and June Lake had dances.

Every year there were two or three parades, sometimes with skittish prancing horses. Dr. Boody was bucked from his horse and killed, but that kind of accident only happened once. I remember three great Spanish American War veterans who were almost too old to march, but they did, proudly in uniform. Those gallant three had been the pride of Inyo County.



Mr. Evers gave kids hair cuts for a dime. He charged the grownups maybe twenty-five cents, and he could tap dance too. At the Bishop Toggery you could buy Levis for seventy-five cents. When they got dirty you just bought a new pair so they wouldn't look old and shrunken from being washed. Everyone thought you were poor and felt sorry for you if you had to wear Levis that had been washed.

There used to be five and dime stores where you could buy stuff for five or ten cents. As a vital community service, and to augment his salary, Coke Wood, a Bishop High School history teacher, sold two heads of lettuce for the price of five cents, as well as other fresh produce. Five cents was what we called "good money." You could buy a good soft drink, or make a good telephone call,

or mail two letters and a good penny post card for five cents.

It wasn't long ago that rich fattening food only cost a few dollars a week, and almost everyone could buy it because most people made plenty - sixty to a hundred or more dollars per month. I was still in school when I made thirty cents per hour, and sometimes they let me work 12-hour days. It added up!

If you had twenty thousand dollars you were so rich you could retire for life and have money left over when you were dead. Cheap houses cost more today than most people used to earn in a lifetime, or in several lifetimes. On February 12, 1940, Ben Hogan won the golf championship of the world and he was paid the unheard -of amount of five thousand dollars. There was one happy guy, he even threw several golf balls into the crowd!

In the mid 1930s, new Fords or Chevys cost only about \$600, and that was with extras and a radio.

Of course, sometimes the engines wouldn't start, tire tubes would occasionally leak, leather cracked and paint faded. But with a neighbor's help, we usually could fix most cars.

FDR, JFK, and LBJ became famous household terms, but who would have suspected that an Ms could ever be a head of state? Today, NATO, CIA, UN, DOD, FBI, USAF, NASA and many others sometimes worry about what UFOs are doing. Not only that, worldwide automobile manufacturers mix the alphabet with numbers and strange names to describe their cars.

In the good old days in Bishop, California, we existed without making up new words, and we also managed to get along without zippers, pantyhose, electric shavers, all kinds of plastic everythings, and underarm deodorants too.

Most things, which are commonplace and taken for granted today, were actually invented and put to use during our lifetime. On the other hand, there are not many things we handled, touched and used, that are still required in our lives today. The long cross-cut wood saw, the sheep shears, the water dipper, the fire irons, the bamboo fishing rod, the crank ice cream freezer, the popcorn toaster, the foot powered sewing machine - are as useful now as the old automobile license plates that used to hang on garage walls.

When we were young, horse drawn wagons brought ice, milk, meat and produce to our doorsteps and that was a very convenient thing. But the Bishop area has always been a very convenient place in which to live. Its only 45 miles from Bishop to Mammoth, and in that distance there were 43 bootleggers which, for medicinal purposes, was quite convenient. The town's only brothel was right in back of both the city jail and the Smith Auto Company's taxi service, and that was convenient too.

The doctor used to come to the house and have a cup of coffee. In times gone by, right out in the open, drug stores sold banana splits, ice cream sodas and soft drinks, and in so doing they provided nice community flirting places free.

Our youths often say that their vision of the world is much improved, while our vision was through old-fashioned glasses. True, in our days glass was only used for windows, milk bottles, dishes and that's all. Glass would break. It wasn't used in the manufacturing of boats, automobile bodies and fenders, rockets, hair dryers or fishing rods. That's not all. Charcoal was only used by blacksmiths, not cooks, and there was no such thing as brickettes. We knew when to go to bed or get up without daylight savings time, and no one would dare to think of moving Washington's or Lincoln's birthday so he could get a three-day weekend.

I remember that people had plenty of time and seemed to be kinder and more considerate than they are today. If you were a little kid in Bishop, Harry Holland would invite you to see a motion picture if you had a dime or not. Tom Williams always gave kids aweiner, and al of the business men got together every Christmas to pass out toys at the town's Christmas tree. Marshall Spray Kinney talked to folks and let people know he was around, but it didn't seem that he ever put anyone in jail.

Those gestures were just some of the real "time sharing," and had nothing to do with computers, which we didn't know about back then. To us, chips were bits of wood that were left over from cutting down trees or were found in Hess' Lumber yard. Hardware was tools or the metal objects sold in Watterson's Hardware Store.

It was a joyous time back when we thought that bunnies were baby rabbits, and we didn't know that rabbits were really VWs. We didn't know about or miss credit cards, fluorescent lights, ball point pens, pizza parlors, video tapes, electronic music and that gibberish would have sounded crazy to our ears.

Without TVs and VCRs, what did we do? Strangely enough we were quite busy. I don't remember if we watched the radio as the sound came out, or if we closed our eyes. We did fish, and we hunted, skied, ice skated, rode sleds, talked to each other, played games, read magazines and books, went to dances, watched school plays and rooted for football, basketball and track teams. We cruised up and down main street because that was where we would be seen. We weren't showing off our cars, they belonged to our parents. We just wanted our friends to know we were around.

We walked a lot, and sometimes we stood around on the few streets that had cement sidewalks. We liked to watch people, and wondered what they were doing.

One day, standing on a street corner, we noticed that every day, after lunch, Mr. Chalfant walked the half block from his house back to his newspaper office. He always wore a dark, wrinkled suit and the same hat with the brim turned down almost over his eyes. When he walked, he always looked down at his feet. After taking seven deliberate steps, he would quickly look up and then down again, for seven more steps.

We wondered if he counted his steps or if the number of his footfalls were just his natural gait before looking, but we didn't dare ask. Because he was a brilliant writer, I don't think he was counting, I imagine he was thinking of important things.

I have wondered what he thought about. And I have also wondered if back then, Willie Chalfant or Coke Wood or anyone of those older people had any inkling of what our new, "useless, tumbleweed generation" was about to do. In only five or six decades, we would change the whole face of the earth.

In addition to ushering in the nuclear and space ages, we slipped in, as if it was an aside, a happy, labor 'gadget age" that screechingly upset most natural rhythms of people-life.

If today, suddenly, our fine, efficient conveniences became mere lumps of unworkable mass, we would all be in one hell of a mess. All of life as we know it would slump right back to where it used to be, right back into the middle of the good old days! Confess now, we wouldn't like that!

You see, it wasn't a better life five or six decades ago; it only seemed to be. The reason back in the good old days we were young, enthusiastic and full of piss and vinegar. We did change the way the world lives, but we didn't even come close to changing the people.

In this whole living process there looms a fundamental fact. Bishop wasn't the almost end of a long, desert road; it was and it is a lovely place called home. All homes are places to stay and live in; and, they also are world gateways bridges to any place you might want to go, to anything you may want to do. Each new generation learns that fact, over and over again.

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