

# LIFE IN BIG PINE – 1927 TO 1940

By Velma Connor Zimmerman

It was confusing to a seven-year-old that Millard Smith and Howard Miller ("Dutch" Miller) ran the butcher shop, their names were so similar. I loved watching them sharpen their huge knives on a steel before slicing down through a quarter of beef. Then they'd take out the hand saw, and it was fascinating to watch the bone reduced to meal and mingling with the sawdust on the floor.

They also had the ice service. "Dutch" drove the ice wagon. He managed each time to chip off the right size chunk to fit into our ice box. He'd hoist it - gripped by silver ice tongs - up to his leather-covered shoulder and come whistling in the back door, stamping his feet. He always had time for a visit while I carefully balanced the brimming pan that had caught the melted ice from the last delivery. I'd dump the water at the back step - on the chrysanthemums, or sometimes on my cat, Midnight.

Walter George delivered the milk in a rack that held four glass quart bottles. On cold mornings sometimes the cream at the top of the bottle would freeze and raise the cardboard lid as much as two inches above the bottle. Then "Cholly" (my brother Charles Connor, 1914-1970) and I would race to see who could get it on his Cream of Wheat. The rest of the milk then tasted like today's "low-fat" milk.

Remember the Gypsies? Frightening tales were told that they stole children, so we were always whisked into the house as they passed by in their horse-drawn wagons. Sometimes they would camp down under the trees by the road that led up to the weir (Little Pine Creek where the Big Pine water supply was impounded). This is the only time I can remember that we locked our doors. The Gypsies were dark-skinned and wore lots of jewelry. They looked rather unwashed, as well they might, traveling in a wagon. The women wore long, full-gathered skirts which we children envied.



Main Street Big Pine, CA

(Photocard courtesy of Rich McCutchan)

On the first warm day of spring, Miss Bulpit (Ruth Bulpit of Bishop, the cousin of Ed, the dentist) gathered up the 3rd graders and we took a walk along the stream (Big Pine Creek) to the weir to gather pussy willows and listen to the birds and skip flat stones across the water.

Once we met Cy Ott who had ditched school for the first day of fishing season (May 1). He had a creel full of fat rainbow trout nested on a bed of green grass and moss. We 3rd graders thought he was a big shot. He did too!

The dances at Hall's Hall, a two-story frame building that stood on Big Pine Creek where the stream ran under the highway bridge, were the most important social events of our town. There was one almost every Saturday night. Who, then, had heard of baby sitters? Everyone came, brought their babies in carriages which they parked near the huge furnace. Anyone dancing by and hearing a baby fuss would give the carriage a few jiggles and the baby would go back to sleep.

Everyone danced with everyone. We had the Paul Jones, the Varsuvian, and Polkas, and we learned from each other. During the 30's the side step became popular and as a 7th grader, I and my friends would fill our mouths with several sticks of gum and side step all evening with the boys who had never learned any other step.

The music was always wonderful. Sometimes Betty Smith (Howard "Howdy" Smith's wife) would play the piano, but mostly our music came from a Bishop "combo" - piano, trumpet and drum. They were untiring and took few intermissions.

The moment we young people arrived, usually with our parents, we'd start looking around to see who we'd work on to take us to supper, upstairs above the dance floor.

The Masons, Eastern Star, and other lodges held meeting in one part, but the dining room was huge and had a large kitchen where big pots of coffee steamed. Pounds of coffee were poured into cheesecloth sacks and boiled in water. The coffee was transferred into chipped porcelain pitchers from which high school girls poured cups of coffee to seated customers, sometimes scalding a few backs as they flirted with the boys who had asked them to supper. Supper was usually a great assortment of sandwiches. Tuna predominated. Isn't it a wonder we didn't get ptomaine? Dessert was a luscious variety of cakes that presented difficult decisions. The Young Mothers' Club often provided the refreshments as a money-making project, and since they were all notoriously excellent cooks, they had their reputations to uphold and competed to see whose cake was the "lightest." My mother (Mary Connor) always pronounced hers as "not fit to eat," but, like the others it was always consumed to the last crumb.

One year I remember particularly, the Young Mothers' Club put on a play - another money-raiser, I suspect. They all had delightful costumes and had such fun performing that they were an instant success. In their more serious meetings they discussed the articles in "Parents' Magazine" and tried to better themselves - and us children. Isn't that refreshing?

Bill Lowe worked for the City of Los Angeles and was in charge of the Big Pine Power Plant where the family lived. One of the daughters, Margaret (Maggie), and I were close friends. On steamy hot summer days she and I would lie on top of the mesh that covered the cement weir box. As the huge turbines churned the water, they created sprays of mist that came up to cool us - much better than today's air-conditioning.

If our parents had followed us to see the dangerous spots where we swam in Big Pine Creek, under the bridge, they would have forbidden it, but somehow they trusted us and knew that "the Lord takes care of children," so there never were any serious mishaps. As the creek's current carried us down toward the cement piling, we had to swim furiously to keep from being dashed against the wall. We wore sneakers because the rocks in the creek bottom would have cut our feet to ribbons.



Keough Hot Springs  
(Photocard courtesy of Rich McCutchan)

When the new highway between Big Pine and Bishop was built there was need for extra dirt. As the steam shovels scooped deeper and deeper, they hit underground springs. The area was between Big Pine and Keough's. These springs formed a wonderful lake for swimming and some were warm - probably a source similar to that which supplied Keough's and Warren's Hot Springs.

One day we rode our bikes out to the new lake and a new acquaintance, Edith Mendenhall's niece who was visiting from somewhere outside the valley came with us. Obviously she hadn't had much "country swimming" training for she stepped

off a shallow place into a deep hole and grabbed for me. I did everything I'd always heard I should do to fight off a panicked swimmer - kicked, hit, pulled hair - to no avail. We had both gone under three times when Jack Short, on shore, decided we weren't just playing and came to our rescue. I don't think I ever properly thanked him for saving my life, and now it's too late. He's gone.

Another wonderful summer meeting place was the canal. It was always muddy and bits of glass and snags of trees waited submerged to injure us, but the wonderful companionship we enjoyed overshadowed all dangers.

On Sunday nights we had Epworth League, another social event to look forward to. The minister who came down to Big Pine from Bishop to try to encourage the young people to stay in church taught us folk dances on Epworth League nights.

Some of us joined the Rainbow Girls, a young people's group connected with the Eastern Star and Masons. Meetings were held in Bishop every Saturday night. The boys would wait outside until the meeting was over and then we'd all head for Keough's where we danced on the outdoor pavilion under the stars. This was very romantic and the older folks would sometimes drive up and park their cars close, just to watch the dancers and see who had new clothes.

We were always big on birthday parties too, and this enthusiasm continued through high school. Sometimes we'd take wieners and buns and marshmallows and go down to the river (Owens River). We'd light a roaring fire which usually managed to burn all the food, but it was great to sit around and sing after we ate. We prided ourselves on knowing the words to every song on the Hit Parade.