

Motor City Memories

By Mary J. Slayton

Back in 1924, Detroit seemed like a faraway big city in the “frozen north” to my dad and me. We were living in a sleepy little town in the rolling hills of southeastern Missouri on the banks of the beautiful Current River. My mother had died two years earlier, and Daddy and I had gone there to live with his mother, an energetic 60-year-old.

But there was no industry in the rural county, and jobs for young men were scarce to nonexistent. When some of the older fellows ventured to Detroit seeking work, they sent back glowing stories of good-paying jobs in the automobile factories and plentiful housing.

My dad’s older brother and brother-in-law were among the first to leave our county. Dad had recently remarried and had another child, so he was anxious to find a more lucrative means of supporting his growing family.

My young stepmother was from a neighboring village and had never been more than 25 miles from her birthplace. However, when my dad wanted to join his brother in Detroit, she unquestioningly agreed to go. This was long before interstate highways made travel between Missouri and Detroit relatively easy. There were no motels along the way, and the roads were “uncertain,” to be charitable in their description.

My dad, stepmother and baby sister were eager to leave for Detroit, but I was not. My grandmother was the only mother figure I had ever known; I had no recollection of my birth mother. To say that I was reluctant to leave her is the understatement of the century.

Adding to my problem was the fact that I was suffering from a severe case of whooping cough. Aided by the local doctor, Grandma won a reprieve for me, delaying my move to Detroit, where the cold Northern air would no doubt hamper my recovery.

There followed an exodus of most of the young

able-bodied men from our rural county to Detroit. My dad was one of the first family men to settle there, and those who arrived first helped many others come to the city and find jobs and housing.

The folks who came to Detroit tended to stick together, forming enclaves of friends and relatives from their respective states of origin: Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and so on.

When the longest case of whooping cough on record finally subsided, my dad insisted that I join the family. I remember vividly those early days. There were five or six Missouri families in our area, and each Saturday night we all would gather at one of the homes to visit, eat, play Rook and listen to the *Grand Ole Opry* on the radio.

There were, of course, children of all ages. The women

exchanged recipes, admired each other’s babies, and talked the usual woman talk. The men talked about sports, their jobs and cars.

Some of the men enjoyed singing, and if they lacked talent, they made up for it in enthusiasm. Their barbershop-harmony rendition of *Sweet Adeline* was part of the Saturday-night fun.

The transplants from Missouri and other states to the south were glad they had come to the “big city in the frozen north.” They were blissfully unaware of what Detroit was to become in the cruel grip of the Great Depression.

Sadly, the Detroit of my childhood is gone now, along with those Saturday nights of laughter, friendship and the wholesome fun of Rook, *Grand Ole Opry* and *Sweet Adeline*. But the names remain, the names of the transplants from our Missouri county: the Ator boys and their sister; the Odom brothers; the Pulliam brothers, Neal, Ellison and Gib; Garland James; my stepmother’s brothers and sister; Sarah Ray and family, and many others. All these are stored in the memory bin marked “Motor City Memories.” ❖

