



REMEMBERING THE GOOD OL' DAYS

# Saturday In Naples

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 Naples Resident 1941-1953

When I visit Naples and take my drive up past the water tower, I attempt to equate the foreign appearing vacant lot to the old school buildings full of noisy children. A nice, quiet East Texas town surrounds the area.

It's mostly a bedroom community with its inhabitants working all over Northeast Texas. Naples appears clean even with some of the main street buildings empty and some gone.

The new world of motor cars, TVs, and Wal-Marts left many such small towns behind. As a matter of course, town businesses, and the merchants who ran them, went the way of the farmer.

However, the town I committed to memory during the 1940s was something entirely different especially on a Saturday. It was noisy, colorful, and odors permeated the air, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not. Smells of giant steam engines and the wet coats of free-running dogs. They spoke of hot popcorn, spent spring showers, and passing livestock and their residue.

They spoke of freshly mown lawns and chicken fried steaks, if one was near the City Cafe, or moist hamburgers and coconut cream pie if one was near Joe's Cafe on the other end of town. One could close their eyes, take in some of the clean air, and paint a picture of life in the Naples of my childhood.

Even the colors seemed brighter especially the variety on the advertisements in front of the Inez Theater depicting coming attractions.

On the streets of Naples, women wore bright cotton frocks often accented with radiant head scarves and wide belts. Both men and women wore hats. In the summer, straw hats were the order of the day. In the winter, men wore impressive felt hats with snap brims. Strangely enough, only the men who worked cattle wore cowboy style hats. A few wore Stetsons, but not nearly as many as today. The skies exuded blue, the lawns oozed green, and trees radiated fall colors more impressive to the eyes of a child. It was as if God decreed that clouds and bad weather were not welcome in Naples on a Saturday.

Sounds permeated the air. The sounds of runaway herds of cattle emanated from the Inez Theater. No Saturday movie was complete without stampeding cattle, numerous fist fights, and countless shootouts. A few songs and some slapstick were thrown in for good measure. They were all on the silver screen.

The horns of automobiles often accented the noisy atmosphere. The toot of a horn was considered a form of greeting. Heavy trucks rumbled northeast and southwest on Highway 67, competing with the endless rattle of freight and passenger trains.

Soldiers shouted in strange accents from troop trains, as they directed us kids to bring them Cokes and cigarettes while the train was on a siding. I wonder how many lived and how many died. We heard countless people in conversation on the streets, and we could mostly recognize the person just from the sound of their voices. We heard small children squealing as they raced from one end of town to the other, their safety assured.

No air conditioning existed in either automobiles, homes, or in town. Even during the dog days of summer, only the shade of awnings alleviated the heat. In the places of business, the whir of countless electric fans moved the air and afforded patrons a small measure of relief. The only time I noticed the high temperature was when I walked on the burning sidewalks or highways.

The Naples I knew and loved is gone. The world and my town evolved since I moved away in 1953 to the extent that little bares a resemblance to the past. I did not witness the transformation which marks the changes even more noticeably. Naples of fifty years ago was a vibrant, busy place whose inhabitants had a lot at stake.

However, not all was peace and light. The wolf was much closer to the door in those days and adults were a serious albeit fun loving lot. Poverty-stricken people still lived in Morris County during the 1940s. Some went to bed hungry with several sharing a room and sometimes a bed. We did not all enjoy the latest styles in our wardrobes. Thirty-five cents per hour was the going wage around town, and one had to work long and hard to earn enough money to make a difference. I have no way of knowing how well the local mer-

chants were doing in those days, but there were a lot of them. I do know that they stayed open long hours, and that in some cases, the competition was fierce. The stakes were high.

The town supported three major grocery stores and several minor ones. There was a movie house, a dry goods store, a five-and-dime, a barber shop, a bus station, a train station, two major automobile dealerships complete with repair facilities, a thriving newspaper, a cotton gin, seasonal produce including watermelons and cucumbers, three drugstores, a solid bank, numerous eating establishments, a dry cleaners, numerous gas stations, a physician, a dentist, a lawyer, an auto supply store, a public restroom, and on a couple of occasions a summer snow-cone stand operated by entrepreneur Don Nance.

I can count one high school student who drove his own car and it was a Model A Ford ... I think.

There was no little league but lots of games underway. The most important days of the week for me and my contemporaries, were Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Friday was important, because school was out for the week, and one could look forward to Saturday. Saturday was exceptional because it was so exciting from 7 a.m. until 1 a.m. on Sunday. Sunday was extraordinary, because it was truly a day of rest that included church services and maybe an afternoon movie at the Inez Theater.

On Saturday people from the surrounding area descended on Naples with whatever money or credit they had in order to buy food and supplies for the week.

Citizens arranged transportation if they had none of their own, purchased whatever they needed or could afford, and then just roamed the streets watching others or visiting with acquaintances.

People on the move virtually choked the street from one end to the other. A Coke was a treat, and none of us knew that it was laced with caffeine. A burger cost 25¢, but it would take two to equal a normal burger today.

Patrons filled the Inez Theater to overflowing from the time it opened until it closed at 1 a.m., Saturday. Parents went about the events of the day and left children to look out for themselves as parents went about the events of the day. That meant that kids were racing from one end of the street to the other and from store to store. Most of the adults knew them by sight and accepted them as a part of the landscape. The children spoke to adults when they met one they knew by name, and there was interest between the two.

Highway 67 was the major transportation and commercial artery that ran through our town, and eighteen-wheelers rolled through the city during all hours. Crossing the highway was not taken lightly. Freight and passenger trains rumbled through moving the nations goods across the country.

One could take a Cotton Belt train or Greyhound bus ride to Texarkana and points east or to Dallas and points west. Few people in Naples at that time had ever seen an airplane on the ground and only a very few

had ever flown in one. Occasionally, a mule drawn wagon creaked down the street and parked behind the buildings.

The major sources of entertainment were radio shows and movies. One became familiar with radio voices rather than the faces of movie stars. Examples were Laraine Tuttle and Dashell Hammet. Soap operas such as Young Widow Brown ran during the day along with music by the Light Crust Doughboys from Burrus Mills. After listening to a flour commercial, one would have thought that a Light Crust biscuit could cure cancer.

W. Leo Daniel became governor of Texas by using the radio to reach voters and promising outlandish pensions to the old folks should he be elected and he was.

Names like Red Skelton and Jack Benny became known all over the country. The Shadow, the Green Hornet, and Mr. District Attorney fought crime and always won. Radio was available to most and children re-enacted their favorite programs at school the next day.

Edward R. Murrow reported national and world news in his distinctive style. The children of my generation listened to the reality of war news and the unreality of radio and movie heroes. The focus of the nation postponed school athletics until after the war.

Was the Naples of the 1940s a better place? That is a question that can never be answered. Ignorance was more pervasive. Little real crime came to our attention other than a constable shooting up a neighborhood doing his duty.

People were out and about, and as a result, spent more time together. A social error such as a pregnancy destroyed lives and rarely came to light. The cast system was real and in place. Rock hard racism flourished. A white child playing with a black child, except for exchanging stones in a rock fight, was not allowed.

My first playmate when I moved to Naples in 1941 was a black child named Junior. We had such a wonderful time until the grownups involved themselves. Junior would be about eighty by now, and I hope he flourishes.

I always got a howdy from Miss Veenie and her sons Jack and Red. Some of us followed our own instincts where other folks were concerned, but that held true for many others as well. It was a town, much like most of the USA, that was severely segregated by thoughts and deeds.

At present, one cannot find a similar way of life in small towns or even large towns for that matter. There is little reason for people to get out of their air-conditioned houses on a regular basis and intermingling. Maybe it exists in developing third world countries, where citizens still rub elbows, but not in this country. Will it ever return? Not likely. People have too many reasons to stay at home.

The witnesses of life in Naples of sixty years ago are showing the signs of age. Some of us are not the healthiest people on the planet, and many of us are not here anymore at all. How can we be so near the end of our time and have so few answers?

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**Before too many more years, the memories of the vibrant Naples of our youth will pass with us, and the noisy, bustling place of the fabulous festivities will cease to be even a memory.**

**It was something special.**

**Considering the times, the people, modern conveniences, the rearing of children, the kindred spirits, and the opportunities, if I could roll back the clock and design my own hometown, I would not change a thing.**

