

THE BACK UP ON CARTHAGE SQUARE

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I know it might not look like it these days, since one can drive down the streets of Carthage and seldom see anyone not headed to either D. T. McCall and Sons or a lawyer's office, but there was a time when traffic jams were all the more common in Carthage.



In later years of the town's bustling existence it revolved around "drawing day," when you put into play all of the tickets you had collected from shopping at Western Auto, Carthage Grocery and Locker, Hire and Jent, Wilburn's Jewelry or nay one of the other stores that clustered around the square and up Main Street toward Mr. Glen Sanderson's Ben Franklin Store. The tickets were dropped into a big wooden cylinder covered with chicken wire and turned around and around while tension in the crowd mounted.

The crowds covered the courthouse lawn, mot of Main Street, bringing traffic to a halt, and pushed into the store fronts of Turners, Western Auto, Smith County Bank and other air conditioned nooks directly across from the "you must be present to win" barrel which that day represented the source of all greed and avarice in our little town. It was our version of the Lottery and it did not matter that the winnings were extremely meager by today's standards. Winning was winning and our expectations were low so we turned out no matter what.

The baby sick, get Grandma to stay with him while you go to the drawing. The car won't start; get Junior to ride you down on his Cushman Eagle Scooter. One just did not miss drawing day. I know my own mother was religious about getting all of her tickets into the barrel because "it only takes one ticket to win" and you never knew which ticket the chubby toddler picked to do that day's honors would grasp in his or her pudgy little hand. To my knowledge, Mama never did win anything, but that in no way diminished the thrill of the hunt. After all, at the barrel there was hope, at the barrel there was a chance, something often in short supply for many of our community, and "you must be present to win."

I loved the way Jerry Futtrell would often tell the story of his first rip to Carthage to investigate the possibility of purchasing Read Brothers Drugs. Mr. Bill Read had casually suggested that he drop by on a certain Saturday and they would discuss possible terms or sale fort he drugstore on the corner of Third Avenue and Main Street. When Jerry arrived the town was crowded and abuzz with people shopping with a purpose.

"Oh man," Jerry though to himself, "this place is a gold mine." Over the next several weeks the transaction was completed and when Jerry next returned to Carthage it was not

a drawing Saturday. “Well,” he would say, eyes wide, “you could have driven on the sidewalk and not hurt a soul.”

The traffic jams I am referring to however, came years before the drawings or the sale of Read Brothers Drugs, these traffic jams were in the 1950s and 1960s prior to the opening of Interstates 40, 24, or 65. In those years the route to Florida with its sunshine and beaches included U. S. Highways 31E and 31W if you were southbound from most parts of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, or Kentucky and a quick look at a map of the day would reveal that Highway 25 looked, at least on paper, like a great way to miss the “traffic” of Nashville and work one’s way southeast to pick up Highway 70N and continue on the track of the annual trek to the land of citrus.

As a result, on certain Saturday afternoons in the late fall, the town would be already crowded with farmers and their families coming into town to do the family shopping or visit with neighbors. The stars would align just right and Highway 25 would be jammed bumper to bumper with Midwestern city folk seeking the warmth of Florida beaches and this perfect storm of too much automobile and too little road would converge on the little town of Carthage. The one red light in town had only a single mode of operation and that was to give equal amounts of time to cars on Main Street and cars on Third Avenue. Since the strangers knew but one way to get through Carthage and across the bridge, they stayed on Main Street occasionally honking their horns as the Main Street light turned red with nary a car on Third Avenue either side. It was well before the days of the average family having an air conditioned car so windows were down and tempers were up. Daddy mopped sweat from his brow while Mama flailed away at Suzy and Junior in the backseat and they yelled at one another at the top of their lungs. The locals, well it was no problem for them since they worked their way up or down Spring Street or Water Street and avoided the maelstrom.

I have always heard that you ought to be careful what you pray for since you might receive just as you asked. Do you suppose some of those folks in the out of state cars may have prayed for patience? I’m pretty sure from the look of things it was not self-control in which they were being schooled. Life presents us with lots of situations which we tend to perceive as major trials and temptations, but which the Lord, the giver of every good and perfect gift, can change to work together to send us good.

What a happy thought, and have a blessed day.

*Read more of Robert Chaffin stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

