MEMORIES OF DYER BENNETT

I was born on May 29, 1908, in Dyer. My mother was Susie Dyer and my father was Marcet Bennett. I went to school in the old school house down by Uncle Dan Chitwood's place. The school teacher was Verdie Henson and Mr. Maynard was the superintendent. The school was moved to the new brick school house and teachers were Mr. Clark, Ada Love, and Mr. MacNutt.

People in business in Dyer were John Smith, Tom James, Henry Burrough, who had the Hardware store, and Mr. Oxford had a grocery store. Other businessmen were Mr. Fine, Joe Mullens, and Buck Davidson. Joe Wells had a blacksmith shop. The Weavers had the picture show. I would like to know the year of that but I don't remember. MacNeely was the Depot Agent for awhile and Seab Phillips was the first one that I remember. Shannahan was the foreman of the railroad Section hands.

Jake Wells had a grist mill, and he was the Justice of the Peace.

I sold the Saturday Evening Post on the streets of Dyer at 5¢ a copy. Of course Mack Dyer, my granddad bought them. Others customers were Sam Morse, Dave Morse, Herman Selby, John Chitwood, Thurman Hurd, Dave Cottrell, Charlie Moss, Bill James, Spec Stevenson, Tom James, Jake Wells, Joe Wells, Dave Chitwood, Marvin Selby, and others.

Mr Oxford had a store and it burned down. Vernon Chitwood, Phillip Selby, and I stood around and later, after dark went back in and got into the hot coals trying to find the jewelry that we knew that Mr. Oxford had in his store which turned out to be nothing but pewter. We burned our fingers and they stayed burned for a whole week.

The picture show was behind Buck Davidson's store in the old Wells blacksmith shop.

Of course another thing that was a big deal was to ride the Dinky to Coal Hill to visit Seab Phillips who was the Depot Agent before Bill MacNeely and he was transferred to Coal Hill. He was a very good friend with my dad and mother.

My dad had a Confectionary store for awhile. He had carbonated water which you had to make and roll; and as young kid I rolled a barrel over my toes and Dr. Haney fixed it up. We also had a Dr. Hunt there too. He lived across the street from where my dad and mother lived. There was another blacksmith shop between the lumberyard and the Depot and don't know who ran it. We had a rodeo and a wild west show in Dyer. Guy Gray had a drugstore.

My granddad had the first service station in Dyer and that was up on the old Wire road going toward the Heard place and he sold buttermilk and cokes and a little bit of gas now and then. We had a cotton gin. I worked for awhile with a fellow named Brannon. I don't remember what I did. It seemed like I used a suction to suck the cotton out of the wagons.

The river overflowed. I don't remember what year that was. It was really bad. I remember that it came up to the old Selby place down by the gin. I guess the law was Vilus Manuel as far as I remember. ***[Editor's note: September 1914 per Olen Kincy, page 84]***

Bill Renfroe had a model T Ford, I guess the first one in town. He drove it in the garage and was hollering "Whoa! Whoa!" Of course he drove it right on through the back end of the garage.

Had a crazy man in a cave up by the old Davidson place upon Pea Ridge which was a big story for us young kids. We used to roam in the mountains and go swimming in the creek. When we found that man in the cave up there that stopped a lot of going up as far as Davidsons.

My granddad's name was Mack Dyer and his wife was named Kate, and he had Susie, Cy, Ace, Reba, Georgeann, and Jack. That was my mother's side of the house. On my dad's side I don't remember my granddad Bennett. I remember my grandmother Bennett. She lived in front of the Methodist Church and she had my father, Marcet, Otis, Chester, and Minnie Lee.

When I sold the Saturday Evening Post I made 2¢ a copy; of course a lot of the men bought it because they knew my dad. This was after my dad died in 1913. One of the great tragedies of my life was when I left home in 1926 to come to California was wondering why my dad died and why he left a little boy like he did to have no daddy. That was one of the sad things in my life. I came to California in 1926 and have lived here in Brea for 60 years: a long time

One of the big things was my uncle had some hound dogs. This was Uncle Ace. He went hunting with the Heard boys. When the older boys asked us to go fox hunting with them or coon hunting that was a great time for us.

The Chitwood boys had a ball team. That was a great Saturday afternoon show for us. Mrs. Eichelbarger lived beside the Methodist Church, there was an alley between her place and down toward where the lumberyard was. There was a cow down there with a young calf. The calf got out and the old cow jumped the fence and took out after the calf and ran down through where they were having a tabernacle meeting. It caused quite a commotion. I would like to know the dates of some of these things but I don't remember them.

We didn't have many kids at our school but we tried to play basketball and some track. We had a good basketball team. That was a big deal when we could beat Mulberry and Alma.

Another big deal was going down to the Depot and seeing the Dinky go by in the morning and returning at four in the afternoon. Of course I can remember my Aunt Georgeann, Beulah Chitwood, and Lula Chitwood and all the girls laughing and going on.

One of the sad things I remember when I was going to school was one of the Hayes boys getting kicked by a horse and died a week or so later. I remember when the first airplane came to Dyer. It landed in the old McCullough place. We jumped out of the school windows and ran a mile down the railroad tracks trying to see that airplane. I think this was when Grandma Selby took an airplane ride when she was 80 or 90 years old.

Another tragedy was when the Bank of Dyer went busted My mother got married again and married a real nice man with a family. His name was Seab Tomlinson. I made one crop with him in 1925. I just got my bills paid and had $100 dollars left and the bank went busted. It hurt a lot of people in Dyer and the community around.

I remember carrying watermelons out of the wagons and putting them in cattle cars with hay on them, some of them weighed 50 and 60 pounds. I don't remember when it was but I remember one evening that Spec Stevenson came by with the largest watermelon that I had ever seen in my life. He grew a lot of melons on sandy land down by the river bottoms, put them in these cars and the train would take them away to St. Louis.

I remember one time when I worked at the gin and they started it up and a team ran away in the gin yard and dumped the wagon over. That was quite an event with all that cotton scattered all over the yard.

Another tragedy was when Lloyd Stephenson—I believe that he was a year older than me—a cousin to Jewel Chitwood, died with typhoid fever. They had a lot of us younger boys dress him and help bury him

All I am talking about is the tragedy part of Dyer but we had a lot of good times too. We would go to the creek and go swimming. We didn't have many picnics because we had to work; for everybody had to work on the farm. I remember when we had a real cold winter we skated on Bill Renfroe's pond.

Of course a great time in the year was killing hogs in the fall. Mr Stephens had a sorghum mill at Wiley Chitwood place. He would let us eat the sorghum. We had a lot of good times but we also had to work hard so didn't have too much time to play.

My dad was the president of the school board before he died in 1918. He was working in the Hardware Store when he took ill. One year I was the janitor at the High School and I will never forget it. Mr John Smith must have been the treasurer because he gave me a warrant to pay me for the work I did at the high school. Of course I didn't understand what the warrant was and I had to go to Van Buren and take reduction from what it was and I never did understand why I couldn't get the money that was due me. I got $13 dollars a month for cleaning six school rooms night and morning.

I still don't know what year the flood was but when the river went back into its banks a good friend of mine that still lives in Dyer, George Jensen, took me down to one of the sloughs and came back with a lot of fish and we have talked about how many fish we caught that day.

Of course we had school parties and we would try to play post office with the girls. We had a party at Dad Johnsons and had ice cream. I think it was a Sunday school class. There were some people from 61 there: Millie James, Hilda Rhodes, a lot of girls and boys, and we had a good time. That's the way we got our recreation I guess you would call it.

At one party Daisy Renfro found some mice droppings somewhere and put it in several of the cups and that was quite a show that night.

A bunch of us boys found some rags on the railroad track and we put them in an old oil drum and lit a fire in back of Buck Davidson's store. Buck was quite excitable, we never will forget him coming out the back and hollering, "Good God, Cory, the store is on fire." That was a great saying in later years.

I hope these memories will help you in your book, I don't remember those days like I should.

APRIL 1927

Biting waters takes land from the Dyer Bottoms.

Most of Terrell Rhodes farm, the James farm, and the Cottrell farms were taken from the river banks during the 1927 flood.

IT WASN'T AN EASY MOVE TO MAKE FROM DYER TO CALIFORNIA

By

Dyer Bennett

A few months after Dyer Bennett graduated from Dyer High School in 1925 he left the town of Dyer, which his forebears came to in 1850, and moved to Southern California in search of work. He settled in a town called Brea, California, hoping, naturally, for a better life.

Back in Dyer, he worked on the family farm two hours at daybreak, went to school, came home and worked until dark. "That's starting at 8, 9, 10 years old." His father died when Bennett was 10 years old.

"In the early 1920s, Brea, Orange County, California, was a booming oil town," Bennett, now 76, told an interviewer for an oral history project at California State University in Fullerton. "The boys in school who were four or five years older than I was came out and came back telling how they could make $4 a day. We were used to 50¢ and 75¢ a day on the farm. I wanted to come out when I was 16, but I promised my mother to finish High School."

Jobs were hard to come by even in California. He worked on and off in the oil fields, never making very much, but he was glad to get whatever work he could find. When the oil jobs ran out, he would pick tomatoes and beans or find work at Sam's cafe in Brea, where he worked 12 hours a day and got $1 a day and room and board.

Prosperity was supposed to be only a business cycle away but it never seemed to arrive. Life was hard back home in Arkansas but it was not much better in Brea. The Depression made things worse. Folk got desperate, says Bennett, "So many people would steal, I'll use a different word—

so many people would take things that didn't belong to them. Let me say this, if I had been married and had children, I'd had done more than they did. I'd have gone out and got something, whether it had been right or wrong. I don't believe that a little kid should go to bed hungry at night, not in our Country. I know a man that stole, I bet you, 500 pounds of walnuts, and the family didn't get a one of them. He sold them to buy groceries. I don't blame him a bit in the world. If I had been married and had kids, well, I would have been worse. I would have done more than they did, that's what I believe about it.

"I was by myself, and you try to be as proud as you can. I couldn't go to the Assembly of God Church and ask them for a pair of pants, I just could not do it. Maybe I would have looked better walking the streets if I had, but I just couldn't do it."

Bennett married during the Depression. "We bought our home for $770 and paid $15 down and $15 a month for it. That's right, we bought a home. The day we went out to talk to them, the realtors, we both told these gentlemen we can't buy a house and one of them said, "Well, I'm not going to take you around if you can't buy but here's a list of 28 houses in Brea and all of them are less than $1,000" We knew we couldn't buy a house, I wasn't working half the time and my wife was working for 15 cents an hour in a bakery but we bought a house for $15 a month, moved in it and cleaned it up. I was 26, you see, and she was 22 or 23 or something like that. We were just a couple of foolish kids.

"There wasn't anything good that came out of the Depression. It made a real conservative out of me. I've had a lot of expenses.

My wife was sick for a long time but I had the money to pay for that of which I am proud. I didn't go in debt but I should have given her more, a lot more than she got.

"My wife and I worked for years and never spent money for anything we didn't need. We were thinking about how it might reflect back and another Depression could happen again, you know."

He remembered how tough it was just to decide to see a movie, "No, we can't afford it, its just another movie" they'd say to each other. "Of course, don't forget, in those days, going to a movie cost 15¢ for a show and sitting in the loges cost you a nickel more. People would think that with a nickel more one could buy a loaf of bread. Two loges will buy you a can of pork and beans or a dozen hot dogs or a can of fish or something."

"I wish somebody, somehow, someway, could show the people how it was in those years."

Three years after the Depression started, Bennett at last was getting on his feet; "Now for me, the last of 1934, I went to work for the Union Oil Company, and I never knew what the Depression was after that. The good times came for me because I had a good job. My wife got a raise, she worked in the bakery all this time and then she got a better wage. I went to work in the oil fields and got better wages. Everything picked up, every thing had improved from 1934 on. It just kept on and kept on: Textiles, oil, minerals, and manufacturing of trucks and cars. Every year it was getting more prosperous. You couldn't believe how it was, how the improvements were, how many more men would be going to work. People looked better walking the streets for their appearances were better. Their kids going to school looked better. Money started to circulate. Ninety percent of the working people spent their money. They circulated it around to grocery stores, hardware, and clothing stores. They bought cars. The first brand new car that I bought was in 1936, it cost $615. I bought one in the 1940's for $700 a brand new one."

But it hasn't always been easy, far from it. As he looks back on his life, Bennett says, "You've heard folk say 'The good old days' when everything was at a slower pace and things didn't cost so much. I lost my wife seven years ago, but I can still say the good old days are now. The young people today, I don't believe they appreciate what they have...you should get up every morning and give thanks."

***Filename: WeRememberDyer post-1986 Book 03, 112-116 ~ Dyer Bennett***