



IRRICANA MEMORIES

Acknowledgments

The following collection of stories was compiled in 1986 by local authors and was reprinted to be included in the year 2000 Millennium Park Time Capsule scheduled to be opened on Canada Day in the year 2025. It is thanks to the efforts of those who cared enough to help save some of our history, that we can better understand what things were like so many years ago. Our heartfelt thanks to those who took the time to record for posterity, such delightful stories.

Dote and Anecdotes of Early Irricana

Irricana, like any other small town has its moments of sadness, joy and comedy. Some of the folk who lived in and about the town have put some of these interesting moments on paper for one and all to enjoy.

Going To The City

Going to the city was an event - planned for days as it was not just a daily thing. The train, being the best mode of travel, was most inaccommodating as to times. It passed through Irricana at 9:00 a.m. going north and again at 4:00 p.m. going south, which meant that if you wanted to shop, you left Irricana at 4:00 p.m., arrived in the city after the stores were closed, stayed overnight, shopped the next day, stayed over another night and then finally headed home again the next day arriving in Irricana at 9:00 a.m. You then crossed the road to the livery barn which stood behind the lumber yard and faced the station. Here you picked up your horse or horse and buggy and proceeded home - quite a change from today's thirty minute car trip!

Naturally, this only happened at rare intervals and the main source of personal, daily and family needs were to be found in the General Store in Irricana.

The Irricana Store

Upon opening the door of the store the tinkle of a bell or even several bells alerted the storekeeper that someone had entered the premises. Sometimes it took a bit of maneuvering on the part of the customer to make his way to the counter where the owner usually stationed himself. This part of the store was the grocery, meat and dairy area. Some hardware, dry goods, shoes and clothing were usually found in the front of the store as you came in off the street. Here the farmer would find work gloves, work shoes, rubber boots, overalls, work pants and work shirts. If sizes weren't available here, you, no doubt, could leave an order from Eaton's Catalogue at the Post Office which was usually handy to the counter at the rear of the store.

In most of the stores could be found a large pot-bellied stove which served to keep the store warm in the winter and a spot to prop one foot on the rim in the summer when the cool of the store was enjoyed while the men chatted and the women shopped for their weekly supplies. The fragrance of the town store is familiar only to those who frequented it in the days of its popularity. The nippy fragrance of the big round of cheese on the counter (which if you were lucky a sample might be had for tasting) or the sweet smell of penny candies which were held in large glass jars where the eyes of every child with a penny to spend would have ample space to decide on what his or her purchase would be - these were the smells which will never be forgotten.

Such stores were built in Irricana in the early days but unfortunately two of these were the victims of the dreaded FIRE which was the bane of early times.

The Horror and the Humour of Fire

Even with the horror of fire, people did the strangest things while assisting at these times of duress. One lad caught his foot in the ball of cord at the rear of the store and it started to unwind. Another person grabbed the cord cone and followed right along furiously winding up the cord. Another lad stood at the cigar/cigarette counter at the front of the burning edifice and threw plugs of chewing tobacco, one at a time out onto the street area. Another time a person decided to unload the shoes so they wouldn't burn and proceeded to pitch one shoe at a time out of the window. It was said that many of the residents of that day wore odd shoes for some time!

Homes also suffered the same plight as businesses but humour could be found in the dramatic attempts to save a house or at least some of its contents. One case was the lady whose house was burning in the kitchen area and many men arrived to save what they could for her. Now, she possessed a beautiful piano and there just wasn't time for the manipulations necessary to take the turns to get the piano out of the door so an aggressive young lad broke out the big front room window and the piano was passed through. After the fire was over the poor helper was reprimanded for breaking the window!

Another lady, afraid that her home would be lost when a fire was burning at her neighbour's home, packed all her good dishes and her fancy dishes, which were no doubt treasures from earlier events and other places, into large washtubs. These she passed to some lads to take outside but alas, in the excitement of the fire, they just hauled the tubs outside, dumped the contents on the ground and returned for a second load!

Yes, fire was a serious thing but fortunately many humorous memories have survived along with the tragedy of the time.

Wild West Show

In the early days, Irricana boasted it's own Wild West Show - by one person. He got all the trimmings - a horse, chaps, hat and a six shooter. He often rode his horse into the poolroom and 'tis said he was seen in the bar.

One evening, however, when he was feeling particularly perky, he shot his gun into the air with the familiar hoot and holler. The next day people told about how that bullet had passed through nearly every house in town and just missed innumerable numbers of heads.

So go the old days. The stories are many and these are but a few - I hope you have enjoyed them.

Enyde Black

What A Ride!

My first encounter with formal education wasn't until I was eight years old. Truant officers were a bit scarce in those days and even if they had come across me, my folks would have explained that they were very busy building the house (which is the house that I still live in) and that transportation was a problem.

Eventually Father purchased a two wheel cart, put a temperamental old nag between the shafts, handed me the reins and told me to drive to the Dennis Livery Stable and walk the rest of the way. The schoolhouse was east on what is now Fifth Street.

After school old Bill Dennis would hitch up for me and send me home. But after standing in the barn all day Old Maud usually felt her oats and that often resulted in a quick trip home. This schedule lasted for a year or two and then the two McCune boys caught a ride with me and we were able to manage on our own. Mind you, it took a bit of doing! Sometimes one had to hang on to the halter to lower her head while another had to pry her mouth open with a stick so we could get the bit in her mouth and the bridle over her ears. We often had to put a little weight on the back of the seat to help us get her settled between the shafts.

One night, a young lad decided he would like to join us for a ride. He wasn't satisfied with my horsemanship so he took possession of the reins. Now we always took a short-cut over the hill and toward the bridge but there were several badger holes which the kids had named after the cities they had heard their parents talk about (Chicago, New York, etc.). We loved to pass by these places at a good clip but no one had told him to hang on - so when we got to San Francisco he made a quick departure. Out over the wheel he went and right over him we went! Fortunately the weight of the wagon passing over his middle didn't seem to do much damage but he went home bawling. I don't remember him ever hitching a ride with us again!

How did we make it home? I don't remember but we did.

Ester Crawford

Early Irricana - The Beginning

Irricana - a town that delivered its name from the irrigation canal that never arrived within shouting distance of it; and that tried to straddle two town sites staked out for it and never quite covered either one. When I was young I knew where some of the stakes were situated but after almost 70 years I sort of forget. One I think was west of the track as you come from town, and another one was south of the elevators, but I'm not sure where.

The first store was "housed" in a tent until they got a building put up. Of course, the important businesses were the blacksmith, the lumber yard and the machine company. The blacksmith kept the horses shod and the wagons and buggies repaired. A lot of the vital parts were forged by hand. "Setting" the rims on the wheels and sharpening and reshaping plough shares were regular chores at the shop as the many stones in the sod played havoc with the

edges and points. Repairs for other machines often required a lot of improvising by the “Smithy.”

The lumber yard did a brisk business as families and stock had to be sheltered. It is a sad fact that some times the stock fared better than the family.

The progress of the town was a hard thirsty business with the building of the railway and the town and the farmers busily breaking sod for the new farms so it was felt that a “watering hole” was needed. The “powers that be” decreed that it could only be housed in a Hotel and that such a hotel could only be built in a town of proper size. Unfortunately the facts were that the town was too small but they (the thirsty villagers) were short on citizens but long on ingenuity. Someone came up with the idea of building a row of shacks and furnishing them with a stove, bed and table and chairs, with a few other homey touches added so that when the inspector came to look the situation over things would be impressive. When he came he inquired where all the owners were and he was told that they were away working on the railroad along with the men from the Negro settlement (which was situated where the park is now and was vacated when these people moved along as that section of the railway was finished). So they got their permit and they built the Hotel - a grand three story building with a verandah across the front of all three stories. It tried hard to live up to its expectations but finally gave up and settled for just two stories and no verandahs. They tried to make the third story into apartments for a while but it didn’t work - one reason is that it was a long way down to the outside plumbing!

And so Irricana settled into a typical country town with fire department, bank, grocery store, pool hall, blacksmith, hardware and lumber yard, a livery stable, of course the hotel, a bakery, a drugstore and the inevitable Chinese restaurant. There were two railroad stations, a section house, stock yards, a pump house and a water tank and of course the residential section complete with a doctor and mid-wife, a church and a school. The town was graced with wooden sidewalks and several hitching posts. The latter was needed to accommodate the Saturday night influx who came to shop and socialize. Ah, I mustn’t forget the town pump. How many neighbours met and settled the world’s affairs while hauling the day’s water supply! Imagine the trips hauling the water for Saturday night’s bath or Monday’s wash!

When I start remembering so many things crowd in, but I’ll stop here at the beginning.

Harvine Gilberg

At The Creek

It was a hot, hot day in the summer of 1918. The teacher of the Irricana school told the boys he would take them swimming at four when school told the boys he would take them swimming at four when school was over. Of course in 1918 you didn’t go by car, you walked! So off they went to the Crossfield Creek north of town.

My sister and I on our way home had to cross the same creek. Well, when the boys saw us they hid under the bridge. As we were crossing there was a garter snake on the bridge ahead of us. Over the side it went and flopped into the water. All of the boys came running from under the bridge in the nude. THEN CAME THE TEACHER but he was only wading.

Inez Cate

A Bit Of Early Satire

In the early days in Irricana, a gentleman who lived across from the little white church would often open his house door during a Sunday service and play as loudly as possible on his gramophone a lively humorous song called, "The Preacher and the Bear".

Mary E. Culp

The Night Rider

Many years ago during the late hours of the evening, there came a hurried pounding at the door. Upon opening it, my Dad faced a stranger who seemed quite agitated. The man wondered if he could borrow a saddle horse as his was tired and covered in sweat. My Dad said, "All I have is a bronc in the corral."

"That will do," the man quipped. So my father, not wishing to aggravate him, got the lantern and they went to the barn. They roped and saddled the horse and the stranger mounted it. The bronc bucked quite a bit as it raced around the corral but Dad opened the gate and off they disappeared into the night at a full gallop. That was the last that he ever saw of the horse or the stranger.

Mary E. Culp

Strange But True

Once there was a widow who lived by herself a few miles out of Irricana. She was all alone except for her many cats, dogs, sheep, chickens, and cows. Now I can't remember why one of her sheep got as far as the local butcher shop, but it did and that was not to her liking! In her anger she marched in and hauled the half-skinned sheep out into the street and sat on it, defying anyone to take it from her.

Mary E. Culp

An Unknown Grave

Once a small plot of land with a cross on it, surrounded by a small white picket fence, marked the grave of a young man who drowned in the nearby Crossfield Creek about one mile northeast of the village of Irricana. This story, told to me by my pioneer father, Percy Hallman, has a way of tugging at my heart strings whenever I think of it.

A young lad barely in his twenties had come across the sea from one of the "Old Countries" to make his way and seek his fortune in this country. What were his ambitions? His hopes? His dreams? We do know that he was working on the railroad grade that was being built at that time in this area, but it seems that no one really knew him or where he came from. I don't know the details but it has been told that he and perhaps a fellow worker decided to go for a swim in the creek after work or perhaps during a lunch time break or even perhaps on a Sunday afternoon. Whatever the reason, it seems that he drowned in the creek while he was swimming.

No one knew how to get in touch with relatives or even where they might be. There were no established grave yards close by, or anything like a mortician, so a grave was dug on the prairie not far from the creek. There were no clergymen within easy reach as there were very few villages on the miles and miles of open prairie, so my father was asked to say a few words by the graveside. A young fellow, his life gone before it had hardly begun, laid to rest in a lonely spot with only a few knowing he had passed along this way. Somewhere a mother and father would wonder what had become of a son that had ventured into a far away land never to be heard from again.

For years that small picket fence stood there in our pasture, an obscure and lonely memorial. On many occasions I rode by it on horseback while rounding up our cattle. Sometimes I would stop for a minute in a sort of forlorn reverie, wondering if someone should paint and make repairs or let time and the weather continue its slow but sure process of erasing forever the mark of an unknown grave.

Now, in this year of 1986, over seventy-five years have come and gone. The fence, finally rotted away, no longer stands. Only some gray looking old pickets lie scattered haphazardly on the ground and seem devoid of any meaning at all.

For the sake of posterity, I felt I must tell this story. There is no longer a small white picket fence to mark the grave of that young man so long ago.

Mary E. Culp