



WORK & PLAY:

“To Get Our Hands On Every Cent We Could Possibly Earn”

In the furnace room there were three large fire-tube boilers. We used slack (almost powdered) coal, and clinkers formed. With a slice bar, twelve feet or so in length, I would push the burning coal to one side, loosen the clinkers from the grates, then haul them out with a hoelike tool while another man turned a stream of water on the clinker. In this small inferno, life lost its charm but the job led to another promotion.

--Dwight D. Eisenhower

Children and young people in the early years of the twentieth century worked and played much the same as they do today. Early in life, children learned the value of work firsthand. “These were the days when children had real chores to do and did them as a matter of course.”¹ Parents taught them how to cook, wash and dry dishes, and clean. They helped to wash, hang, and iron laundry as soon as they were old enough to be taught.

Out-of-doors, children were responsible for the care of pets and livestock. Stalls and pens were cleaned, the garden was hoed and weeded, and the cow milked twice a day. Local farmers or small business owners hired older boys to work in the summer. Many jobs required long hours of physical toil for very modest pay.

During the school year, some students had after-school jobs in downtown businesses or local industries. Many had summer jobs that required hard physical labor. When they were in their early teens, some girls worked as “hired girls,” doing household chores for another family in exchange for room, board, and a small wage.

¹Deane Malott, *Growing Up In Abilene, Kansas: 1898—1916* (Abilene, KS: Dickinson County Historical Society, 1992), p. 14.

Life for children in 1900 wasn’t all work. After chores and schoolwork were finished, children enjoyed playing and having fun. Most little girls had a rag doll and perhaps a “penny” doll, a miniature china doll. “Nickel” dolls were larger and nicer. One popular brand of oatmeal contained a pattern for a cloth doll that mothers sewed and stuffed for their daughters. Every little girl dreamed of receiving a life-sized doll with a porcelain head, real hair and lashes, and moveable eyes. Little boys preferred a cloth bag of prized marbles which they carried around in their pockets. On the first warm day of spring, they gathered outside, testing their skill and luck with their friends. Older boys were allowed to carry jackknives and competed at a game called “Mumblety-peg” in which they took turns flipping the knife blades into the ground.

Outside games were as popular as they are today. Children organized themselves to play “hide-and-seek,” “ring-around-a-rosy,” “drop-the-handkerchief,” and “follow-the-leader.” Baseball was not considered a proper game for girls; however, it was a favorite sport for boys, along with football, boxing, wrestling, and foot races. The hayloft in the barn out back was the perfect place to practice gymnastics and put on amateur shows and circuses.

This was a time when children freely explored the countryside. In summer, the local creek became the community swimming hole and, in winter, an ice-skating rink. Homemade kites flew in the summer sky, and many Sunday-afternoon, horse-and-buggy rides ended with a river-side picnic. The river was a perfect setting for fishing, boating, and camping. Hikes and hayrides were other typical outdoor activities in pleasant weather. When there was enough snow in the winter, children hitched their sleds behind a wagon or horse and thrilled to a slippery ride down country roads.



As early as 1890, every town had at least one drugstore with a soda fountain or ice cream parlor. Young people met their friends “downtown” for sodas, sundaes, and malted milks, already American favorites. Another popular activity for young people was to go to one another’s homes in the evenings. All gathered around the piano or organ in the parlor for a sing-along to the musical hits of the day. “Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” “Whippoorwill Song,” and “Over the Garden Wall” were among the most requested.

Every town had at least one band; most had several. By far, this was the most popular of all local music entertainment. Dazzling uniforms, the flash of silver instruments, and snappy high-stepping young men were a reflection of the town’s own spirit and pride. Girls who wanted to play had to organize their own bands.

Every “progressive” town boasted an Opera House where traveling troupes performed plays, musicals, and light opera. By the early 1900s, opera houses were being converted to movie theaters at a rapid pace. It was the age of the three-reel, silent picture. Regular admission was 15 to 40 cents, but most fans waited for the Saturday ten-cent matinee to view popular films such as *Trip to the Moon* and *The Great Train Robbery*.

County fairs and carnivals featured exhibits, horse races, pulling contests, hot-air balloon rides, and games of chance. The occasional medicine show that pulled into town was a magnet for a curious, and sometimes gullible, crowd. Summer Chautauqua shows entertained the community with a week of lectures, speeches, and musical performances. Nothing, however, compared with the glamour of the circus. For Midwesterners, who had limited contact with the outside world, exotic animals, death-defying acts, and chariots made the day the circus came to town a major event in small town life.

When Dwight Eisenhower was growing up in Abilene, Kansas, the greater part of the ordinary person’s day was spent working. Life was no different for the Eisenhowers. As soon as her sons were able to help, Ida devised a weekly schedule of rotating chores. That way, each boy learned every job in the busy household. Because there were no Eisenhower daughters, even what were traditionally “girls” chores such as cooking and sewing were mastered by the six sons. After school and in the summers, Dwight and his brothers worked at a variety of jobs including farm and factory work. With his earnings he bought treats and athletic equipment and took dates to the “picture show” at the Seeyle Theater.

After high school graduation, Dwight began working fulltime at the Belle Springs Creamery. He and his brother Edgar devised a plan to put each other through college. Dwight would remain in Abilene to work and pay for his brother’s education. After a couple of years, Ed would drop out to work for a time so Dwight could attend college. Dwight’s appointment to West Point changed all that.

Like young people today, Dwight enjoyed himself when he had the time. He thrilled at pistol-shooting contests down at Mud Creek by men who actually knew Wild Bill Hickok. Now and then, they allowed him to practice. Baseball and football were his passion, and he enjoyed boxing and working out in a make-shift gym at the back of a print shop downtown. He and his friends swam and skated at nearby Mud Creek. With Bob Davis, as guide and teacher, Dwight fished, flat-boat paddled, camped, and learned how to win at poker on the Smoky Hill River. W.C. Parker’s Amusement Company was only a few blocks from his home, but the people and activity of downtown Abilene were often entertainment enough for a small-town boy growing up at the turn of the century.

Recommended Reading from *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*: 73-75, 68-71, 83-86, 88-92, 94-95, 97-98, 102-104.



SWEDE HAZLETT LETTER, 1970

Childhood Friend

I am pleased that you are undertaking this story of Ike - and will proceed to unburden myself of more material than you contracted for. After all these years I may be a bit hazy as to details, but I'll do the best I can. Where Ike is concerned I think my memory is pretty good, for, ever since I've known him intimately, I've admired him tremendously and have always known he was headed for the top - none of his many honors has surprised me in the least. This stuff about a prophet being without honor in his own home town is the bunk!

Ike was somewhat more than a year older than I, and lived in a different part of town, so went to a different grammar school. Accordingly, although I knew him and liked him, I never knew him intimately until we landed in the same high school. Here he was not only an excellent student but, what was more important in my eyes, the star halfback of the football team - what would be known as the "triple-threat" nowadays. But I liked him most for his sterling qualities - he was calm, frank, laconic and sensible, and not in the least affected by being the school hero.

I spent only one year in high school, then went away for 3 years at a military school in Wisconsin. Living near a cavalry post (Fort Riley) and having been brought up astride a pony, I early set my goal as West Point and had corresponded with my Congressman since I was 12, seeking an appointment that never materialized. My father, I believe, felt that military school might cure my ambition. It didn't. In the late spring of 1910 my Congressman offered me an appointment to Annapolis and I, with some misgivings about the sea, accepted it. I left school and arrived in Annapolis in early May to prep at a cram school for the June exams. But the time was too short - I failed in mathematics. My Congressman, probably because no one else from Kansas was interested in the Navy in those days, kindly reappointed me. For I had seen just enough of Annapolis to be tremendously enthusiastic about it, and to know that there was nothing I wanted quite as much as to be a naval officer. (Incidentally, in spite of a tough break in health that keeps me out of the fighting, I still feel the same way about it.) All thoughts of West Point were gone.

I went back to Abilene and got a job managing the office of a very small manufacturing concern - studying for next year whenever the demands of the job permitted. Ike had graduated from high school in 1909 and, because of lack of funds, had taken a job in the local Belle Springs Creamery. This was a fairly large concern, employing probably 40 people and serving most of east-central Kansas. Eventually Ike expected to go to Kansas University (I have no idea what he intended to take up) but he felt it necessary to build up a nest egg first. He did very well in the creamery and in the summer of 1910 was made the night foreman, having entire charge from 6 pm to 6 am. True, he had only a couple of men under him, to keep the boilers and refrigerating plant running and to guard the plant, but it was considered a quite responsible job for a youngster only 19 years old.



I had been seeing more and more of Ike, during vacations, as the years went on, and this summer I spent many of my evenings at the creamery, helping him to while away the hours. We played a bit of penny-ante poker - giving him the start that ended in his reputation as the best stud player in the Army. Still being kids, more or less, we also weren't above raiding the company's refrigerating room occasionally - for ice cream, and for cold storage eggs and chickens which were cooked on a well-scrubbed shovel in the boiler room.

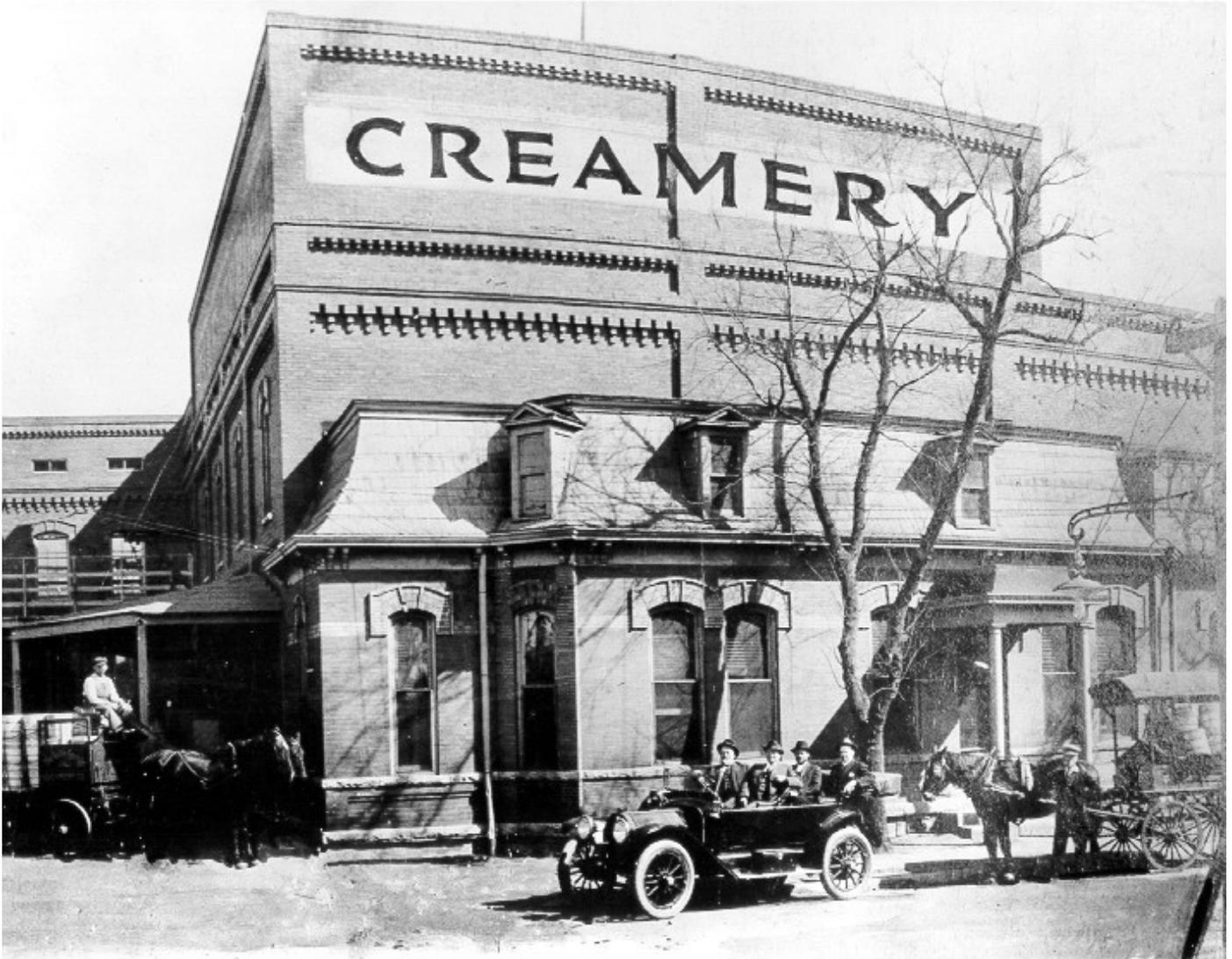
During this period our friendship grew very close. There was something fine about him that drew me to him - as it is drawing so many today. He had qualities of leadership of the best sort, combined with the most likeable human traits, - candor, honesty, horse-sense and a keen sense of humor. Naturally I talked a good deal about the Naval Academy, and gradually he became interested. At last it dawned on me that nothing could please me more than to have him go to the Academy with me. So I proposed to him that he try for an appointment, too. He was intrigued with the idea, but not very sanguine.

"What chance have I got?" he asked. "You already have the only vacancy from this district."

I suggested that he might try the Senators, and he was interested enough to write them both. One had no vacancies, but the other (I believe it was Senator Bristow) wrote that he had vacancies both for Annapolis and West Point. As was very unusual in those days when most appointments were political cumshaw, he was holding competitive exams for them, and he authorized Ike to appear in Topeka in November to compete. It was already September, so he had but little time to prepare. Here was where I came in - again. I had been studying for the same type of exams all summer, and was well up in the methods and shortcuts of the cram school, so we started working together. Every afternoon at about two Ike would come to my office and we would work until about five. During these 3-hour periods I managed to sandwich in enough office work to keep my job, but not much more. Ike's God-given brain sped him along and soon he was way ahead of his self-appointed teacher. In November he journeyed to Topeka and competed with about 20 other applicants. He returned, confident he had done his best, but none too confident of the outcome. That's another trait of his - he always puts forth his best efforts, but never underrates the opposition.

One afternoon he came into the office, grinning that wide, heart-warming grin of his, and waving a letter. The Senator wrote that he had stood first in the exam. But there was a catch in it. He also

BELLE SPRINGS CREAMERY, 1902
Photograph # 64-481



SEELYE THEATER, circa 1905
Photograph # 70-255-11



MUD CREEK, circa 1905
Photograph # 70-255-6



Abram Forney Oral History, 1964

Pages 8-9:

BARBASH: Mr. Forney, could you, please, tell us when you worked the creamery with Dwight Eisenhower and could you tell us any interesting incidents that took place while you worked there with him?

FORNEY: I remember an incident during school vacation when I was employed on the second floor of the building and nailing together butter boxes. I happened to come down through the engine room to the wash room which was on the ground floor. On returning to the second floor I had stopped on the first floor to talk to D.J. Eisenhower—a little conversation—and as we parted he went through the door into the boiler room and I started to return to the second floor. As I stood at the landing going up to the second floor there was this terrific noise. The governor belt on an engine which operated all the churns and the power elevators in the building broke and, of course, there was the engine just “running away” with such velocity that the fly wheel which was about 6 feet in diameter exploded. Portions of that flywheel had broken a steam line, and also, hit one of the ammonia pipes which turned the ammonia pipes loose. I remember very well, standing on that landing, that the first thing I saw was Mr. Eisenhower coming back in and cutting off the steam. This engine was still running, although all it was, was the shaft. He cut off the steam from that ran over and cut off the ammonia from the ammonia tank. Fortunately, if this had happened approximately 10 seconds sooner and where I was standing right in front of this engine talking to Mr. Eisenhower I don’t think I would be here today to tell this story.

BARBASH: Mr. Forney, do you remember what kind of work Dwight did at the Creamery and did you ever have an opportunity to work with him?

FORNEY: Well, there was one summer during school vacation that both operated what they called the “ice tank”, by taking out 300 pound blocks of ice and dumping and setting them through a chute into the ice room and Dwight had the night shift at that time. I had day shift. His salary was 32.50 and I was given 35.00 a month on the day shift. I had considerably more work to do serving the delivery trucks and the people from outer communities who came in here to purchase ice.