

## Bluff Country Tales:

I have a special treat for you this week. I recently had the privilege of visiting with E. Thomas Holiday. He is the oldest surviving contributor to the Houston Banner. We had pancakes in the lovely dining room over at Shady Rest Manor and Campground, near Lanesboro.

What follows are his recollections, word for word, recorded by me.

"I started writing for the Houston Banner when I was twenty-two years old. That's a long time ago, sixty-odd years, give or take. Those were the days when Houston had a population of over thirty thousand, the days when it was the candy capitol of the upper Midwest. The big Necco Wafer factory was here. M&Ms started in a small shop on Ellsworth only then they were just called M's. Cedar Street (it was called Broadway back then) was lit up till all hours of the early a.m. You could go from Chez Madrid to the Double Diamond Dance Hall and then to Little Jimmy's which was an after hours joint. After all of that we'd go and get some breakfast at Lucinda's. Lucinda herself disappeared after the hot cross buns scandal. But everyone knows that story. No need to tell it again.

I was a drifter rolling through Houston County, no roots, no responsibilities. Heck, I didn't even have tent stakes. I worked for the Circus in those days. Back then all the big shows came through Houston. I was signed on with Farnum's outfit, which has also gone the way of all things mortal. I did two shows a night. In the first I was billed as the world's tallest midget. At five feet six the claim seemed reasonable. In the second show I came out as the world's shortest giant. At five feet nine (shoe lifts) and a lot of makeup no one seemed to notice. My sideshow happened to be between two of the beer tents. I think that may have had something to do with our popularity. You could do a lot of things in those days that you couldn't get away with today.

The publisher of the paper was a real smart gal. Fiery redhead. Seemed to know something about everything. She would edit my column while setting type (real type in those days) while giving me the inside dope on Houston politics while serving up a mean gumbo. She was out of Denver, you could tell. Sweet mountain air combined with a miner's nerve. Some dame. She started the paper and she kept it going, even through the big flood. That was in....the year doesn't matter. What matters is she toughed it out. Some dame.

She pretty much talked me into writing for the paper. I knew the Circus wasn't my final destination. I kind of viewed it as a stepping stone, a rung in the ladder, if you will. I had hoped to head west to write stories for the movies or, to head east and write facts for the politicians. It's pretty much the same deal except out east you didn't use your real name. This wasn't long after WW II. The cold war was just starting. Hollywood needed the films and Washington needed the spin. I could have done either, or both. I'm just glad the red-haired gal talked me into settling in Houston.

I'm a lucky guy. I got to cover the local scene any way I wanted. I would do politics one day, the crime blotter next and follow it all with a byline in the social pages. In those days the gossip columns were all the rage. We had a guy working in the back room who had the job of creating exciting lives and episodes for our prominent citizens. He kept it relatively clean and the "swells" didn't mind because their names were in print on a regular basis. There was one family (which shall remain nameless because they are still in the area) who would call on a daily basis. They would complain that a story in the Banner cast them in a bad light. They would also complain that the article was too short.

There was a Packard dealer along Highway 16 who was one of our big advertisers. He used to send his cousin Billy up in a hot air balloon with a megaphone. As he floated around the valley he would shout to no one in particular, "See the USA in your...Packard." Or "Packard is the Cadillac of motorcars." Billy wasn't much good at writing copy but he was fearless.

Well that Packard dealership and the Necco factory and Chez Madrid are all gone now but there's still plenty to write about. I'm just glad the Banner keeps me on as columnist emeritus, so to speak. Helps keep me sharp.

Now, young fella, pour us anther cup of that Shady Rest coffee and I'll tell you about the time the Root River flowed backwards into Rushford. That's right backwards!"