

GROWING UP IN NEW ORLEANS

(Originally published January 1979)

Someone asked recently if we could recall what we were doing fifty years ago. That's a full half-century past, and if we ever thought about time at all then, it was in terms of weeks instead of years. Fifty years ago was 1929, and most of the adults of that day would have good reason to remember it as the year of the stock market crash and the start of the Great Depression. As a thirteen-year-old the hard times didn't impress us much.

We had finished the eighth grade of the public elementary school just across the street from our house on South Carrollton Avenue in the June before, and by January 1929 were already four months into a new experience as a cadet freshman in the private, military, all-boy New Orleans Academy. We had been introduced to Algebra, Latin grammar, French verbs, English syntax, military discipline, and the intricacies of close order drill and manual of arms all at the same time. It was a busy year, and we found it exciting even though the khaki, choke collar, and World War I type tunic we had to wear was uncomfortable, and the heavy rifle we shouldered was almost as tall as we were.

It was a year of transition in which old neighborhood friends scattered out and disappeared into other public, private, and parochial boys and girls high schools. Secondary education in New Orleans then was still segregated by sex, and a whole new set of friendships and interests took over. There were more than twenty of us in the Academy's freshman class that year, but the number would drop almost by half a year later as the Depression hit and families could no longer afford the \$200 yearly tuition. Popeye, Shoose, Micky, Meatball, Motzah, Dopey, Mokka, Runt, Monkey, Hensy Joe, Froggie, White Meat, Dark Meat, few of us escaped the indignity of a nickname and, actually, not many wanted to since it was a sign of acceptance. Egos did not bruise easily in those days before they were discovered by psychologists and agonized over by tenderhearted social scientists.

Instead of running across the street at the last minute as the morning school bell sounded, we had to rise early and hop the St. Charles/Tulane Belt streetcar that passed in front of our house. We rode for forty minutes to get to morning assembly and bugle call in time for the flag-raising. Classes ended at three, but we had to stay on for an extra hour of marching and drill each afternoon. Once or twice a week one of our parents or someone's chauffeur-driven Packard would pick us up after drill, but on other days it was another long streetcar ride home. We weren't too fond of streetcars then because the ride was a jerky one of stops and starts, and we often fell victim to the malady of motion sickness. The only way to fight off nausea was to stand in the front of the car next to the motorman at the open window to his left and gulp in fresh air. It was always annoying to make our way forward only to find that some other weak-stomached rider had preempted our place.

School occupied most of our time that year, and our out-of-school activities seemed

to consist mainly of playing backlot football or building model airplanes. In spring, after drill, we learned about golf at the old Audubon Park course from the colored caddies Big Time Frazier, Cholly Creek, Cream, Lil Dennis, and Big Daddy and on weekends there were movie matinees. During the season, there were the Tulane and Loyola football games and the Pelican baseball games. After study and homework at night, trying to tune in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Schenectady, and Denver on the radio kept us occupied.

Time passed slowly that year. All of us anticipated the annual Competitive Drill night in early May, after which the rifles could be disassembled and packed away in grease, and the afternoon drill sessions would stop. It was a signal that the school year was almost over and that summer vacation lay ahead. Some of our classmates were going off with Captain Perrin, the Academy owner and principal, to summer camp in North Carolina, but we were scheduled again for a trip alone on the old Sunset Limited, a two-and-a-half day adventure by train to Los Angeles where we would spend another summer with our aunt and her brood.

Our only awareness of the hard times that were developing was that Dad had bought a second-hand car, and said he couldn't afford to send us to summer camp. Once out in California we also discovered that some of the cousins (all of whom were older) no longer had jobs and were uncharacteristically counting pennies. Fortunately, Anna, the oldest and our favorite cousin, was married to a jovial Greek candy maker who owned the Mesa Sweet Shop, next door to the Mesa Theater on Crenshaw Boulevard, and he was still in business. As an active thirteen-year-old who liked English Toffee, devilled egg sandwiches, and movies every night, we couldn't get too worried about hard times or a Great Depression.