

Miller's Hack

Dewayne Bethea

When our family moved from the old two story country house out on Farm Road 6 in 1946, I was eight years old. My daddy, Conard Bethea, moved our meager belongings piece by piece in the family vehicle, a red, 1936 Ford truck. I was about to become a town kid. We moved two miles east to Caddo Mills into a small modest frame house on Brewster Street.

Our old house was surrounded on all sides by cotton fields, that allowed plenty of space to run and play. I wasn't ready to move away. My friend, classmate, and neighbor, Bill Ingle, lived a half mile away down Farm Road 6. I knew I would really miss him. One of our favorite summer outings was to pedal our bikes to either of the two local peach orchards and snatch a few Elberta over-ripes. That part of my life was about to end, but there were good times ahead; I just didn't know it.

Brewster Street was a black dirt street, as most of the streets were in Caddo Mills, a town of less than 500 people. My grandfather, Charlie Council Bethea, lived across the street from our new location. He was known by the family as Papa and living close to him was a promise of happy times to come for my sister and me. Helen, my mother was a pretty woman who enjoyed people, so I have always thought she was happy to leave the country-life. Another benefit for the move into town, we would no longer have to draw

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water from an underground well cistern. Instead we would have real running water. The days of bathing in a galvanized, number three bathtub had ended. We were getting a small built-in bathroom which meant no more trips to an outdoor two-holer.

In Caddo Mills I found new ditches to crawfish, a cotton gin seed house to play in, new streets to ride my bike on, and I could walk to school, but my most exciting discovery, as a town kid, was riding on Miller's hack. The old hack, a faded red color, had short sideboards and four rubber tires.

Two years have passed since the move into Caddo Mills, and now I am ten. I have adjusted well, am confident, and am comfortably entrenched on Brewster Street. The neighborhood is mine! My work chores consist of mowing the yard with a non-motorized iron-wheeled push mower, running errands for Mother and Papa, and picking a little cotton. However, most of the days were spent playing and roaming through the town, usually on my twenty-four inch bike.

That bike was a hand-me-down 1940 Schwinn that Santa brought in 1943 when I was five years old and still living in the country. Steel and rubber were scarce during World War 11. I sold it to Charlie Burkett for five bucks when I was fifteen. It was the only bike I ever owned.

One pleasant June morning after a bowl of Post Toasties, I sat on the front steps bare footed, cut-off jeans, shirtless, and burred hair waiting to hear the anticipated

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sound ... clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop. The big bay horse with the black mane pulled a four-wheel hack up Brewster Street toward our house. Mr. L. S. Miller, the driver, was beginning his morning route delivering groceries, ice, feed, and hardware for all four grocery stores. It was simple. The customer phoned the store of choice, then Mr. Miller made deliveries three times daily. Born in 1884, at age sixty-four, Mr. Miller was a kind and gentle man. He wore blue denim overalls, a matching jumper, a long sleeved, light blue, denim shirt, and Red-Wing hook-and-eye, brogan shoes. His short beard and hair were white, and he always wore a light colored, farmer style straw hat. When I think of him, I visualize a Santa Claus in blue.

The hack appeared to be loaded with its regular supplies, and with feet dangling, Robert Jones sat at the back. I trotted out to the dirt street, spoke to Mr. Miller, looked briefly at Big Boy the horse, and mounted the back of the wagon all in one motion. It was always a guessing game as to who would show up to ride for the social hour during the town tour. Just past my house on the right, Joan Bost was nowhere to be seen, and my cousin, Nan Bethea, lived across from Joan, but she wasn't in the yard either. Four houses past mine on the left, Thomas "Red" Jenkins waited patiently wearing his familiar blue baseball cap. I smiled when I saw him, because he was two years older than I, was funny, and was chock-full of spicy stories. He hopped on, grinned, and said, "We got a baseball game Saturday at the broom-weed field against Second Street. Be there!"

We reached Greenville street and turned right. Little Glenn Newman was on his porch watching with envy. At seven, he wasn't allowed to ride with the gang on Miller's Hack. Farther along on the left, we passed my Aunt Nellie's house. She was

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working in her flower beds, and waved as the horse-drawn carriage trotted by. Mr. Miller made stops along the way for deliveries. Sometimes he let an older kid take a sack to the door, but he was cautious and selective in doing so. A select few kids got to drive old Big Boy from time to time.

The big Bay easily got us up the hill to Second Street where we turned right and stopped at the third house where Joann Sanders lived. Barney Bethea, Joann, and my sister Dois saw us coming, and jumped on. They were almost thirteen, and a few grades ahead of me, but in a small town everyone was pitched into the same pot. We moved around to make room for them. As we continued down Second Street, Bobby Harper and his little brother Billy waited. Since our attendance was good today, as usual, it was getting crowded.

When Bobby and Billy hopped on, Robert Jones bailed off in front of Henry Ramsey's house. Robert's mom took eggs from the Ramseys. Miller's hack was his mode of transportation today to get the eggs for his mom. He took the short cut through Drakes Alley and walked back home to Brewster. We passed Garnet Bowman's house. He was called "the Judge" and had a nice persimmon tree that produced well, but you could only eat them after the frost ripened the fruit.

The Pemberton boys, Phil and Johnny, lived in the house to the left, but all was silent there. Jean Anne Farr was next on the right, but no one was in her yard at the corner of Second and Main. A few streets had been graveled in Caddo Mills by 1948, and Main Street was one of them.

Mr. Miller reined Big Boy pulling the hack and its little band of socialites to the left

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onto Main Street, and into the heart of town. On the left, we rode passed the telephone office, the county barn, the fire station, Ben's Dump, Bethea's Market, Brod McWhorter's Grocery Store, and A. Fagg and Son Dry Goods Store. The water tower, the Opera House, Montgomery's Blacksmith Shop and the State National Bank all sat on the right side of main street. Like celebrities in a parade, we waved to the spit-and-whittlers sitting on their bench.

Turning left on First Street, sometimes referred to as "Church Street" I saw Daddy in his shop working on a John Deere tractor. Red and Barney slid off at the corner and headed for McClain's Drug Store to meet Dan Farr for a soda and some pinball.

Reagen's Garage, Meek's Variety Store, and the Christian Church were next. Betty Bethea another of my cousins chatted with Jo Nell Burkett on the church steps. As we passed the old pier and beam gymnasium on the right, I thought, *I wonder if anyone has slipped in to play basketball today.* If someone had there would be a half-hidden bike in the bushes. My grandfather, Papa Bethea, served on the school board for many years and gave the land site to the school for the gymnasium.

Jerry Gail and Danny Payne were next. They lived on the right. She was my classmate and good friend. Her brother Danny, was soon to become an outstanding boxer, football player, and bull rider. Jerry Gail and classmates, Sarah Nesbitt and Kay Gavin, waited at the street and motioned for us to scoot over. I managed to work myself in between Sarah and Kay. At that point, the hack was loaded, and Mr. Miller shouted, "No more for now!" So butt to butt and back to back, up the hill we went. The Baptist Church, with its big permanent outdoor tabernacle to the side, sat on the left of the street.

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It was the site of the great spiritual revival of 1949. The Methodist Church was to the right, but the most sacred place to us kids was on our left, the big red two-story, prairie style school building.

After some awkward flirting and a number of silly jokes, Mr. Miller, and his little gang, reached the top of the hill at the corner of First Street and Greenville Street. The large beautiful house at the end of the street was Buel Ray Bentley's home. He was out under the big pecan tree shooting a sling shot at a crow, so he just waved us on.

As we turned left on to Greenville Street for the second time, I noticed a big white horse in Johnson's pasture, one that didn't belong there. I thought, *Why, that's old Bill. How'd he get in there?* I grabbed a long piece of binder twine from the stash that Mr. Miller kept on board for toting ice and jumped off the hack. Without a word, I waved for them two continue without me. Bobby knew what I was up to, but he couldn't help me because it was time for him to throw his paper route. My sister wanted an explanation, but I had no time to give her one. I entered the gate, and with the twine in my hand, calmly strolled through the tall grass toward Bill, the huge 1700 pound dapple-gray draft horse. At eighty five-pounds, ten years old, and with only a piece of binder twine, what in tarnation was I thinking? Bill and Bob were matching plow horses that belonged to Charles Clyde Barnhardt's grandfather. Charles Clyde was my friend. His grandfather used the horses on his farm a mile and a half north out the Clinton road where he grew cotton, corn, and hay. As I approached Bill with my meager string, that big Percheron horse looked down at me as if I were a piss-ant. I felt like one! Most kids had ridden him when Charles Clyde had brought him to town. I saw as many as six kids on

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his back at one time.

With the help of a small rock I looped the frail little cord over Bill's thick muscular neck and gave it a wishful tug. To my surprise, Bill followed me over to a fence post, and somehow I managed to get up on his back. Shucks, there I was a ten year old sitting on a 1700 hundred pound plow horse whispering to him, "Let's go home." I had more faith than I had sense, but I wanted to ride that horse all alone, and I actually felt a call to help a neighbor. *If those girls could only see me now!*

Bill responded to my nudging, and we slowly plodded out the gate and down the hill onto Greenville Street. As we eased along, I thought, *This would never have happened had I been on Bob rather than Bill.* The two horses were stable mates and almost identical in physical appearance, but Bob had a nasty nature about him. Mr. Barnhardt never allowed us to ride Bob. I was almost to the Barnhart farm when I met Joe Johnson riding his bike south toward Caddo Mills. He looked up at me and shouted, "You're crazy Dewayne Bethea!"

When I at last rode into the front yard of the Barnhardt farm, I slid down, left Bill standing, proudly climbed the porch steps to the front door, and knocked. Mr. Barnhardt, a tall thin man of about sixty, opened the door first looked down at me and then at Bill still standing where I'd left him. He had only one good eye which he focused on me; the other socket was stuffed with cotton. To say the least, he was shocked to see Bill standing there with the twine draped over his neck-and me, a ten year old kid who'd obviously brought him home. He patiently listened to my story, which I calmly and proudly told him. He smiled, thanked me and said, "I'll take it from here, little Bethea. You'a good

boy.”

Looking back one more time at the huge gray horse, I began my mile and a half walk back to Brewster Street, back to where the day began.

Epilogue

Giddy up hoss...Whoa hoss...Good boy. I can still hear him now. You boys quit prarkin with them girls.

Miller's hack faded away during the winter of 1950-51. The horse drawn delivery service popped and sputtered for a short time in an effort to stay alive, but there was too much to overcome. Its day had come and gone. L.S. Miller was born in 1884 and died in 1953. My family left Brewster Street that same winter, and it was never quite the same.