

## RIDING THE RAILS THE FIRST TIME

Well we had to leave on Sunday to be back to Wenatchee to pick our orchard. We had talked about it some before, but we decided to ride a freight train as we had seen a lot of people riding the freights. We also knew that we would be going thru the longest railroad tunnel in the United States. That was our first experience to be followed by many more as we decided that was the cheap way to travel, especially if you weren't in too big of a hurry. That first ride was easy, even though we were quite nervous. We got in a freight car that had two or three men already inside. They stayed back in one end talking and didn't seem to pay us any attention, but we were worried about being so long in the dark tunnel. We thought they might jump us. So we sat right in the door way and pulled out our pocket knives and pretended to whittle so they could see us and our knives. Then as we started into the tunnel we moved to the other end of the car so our backs would be against the wall and we kept our knives opened and in our hands. Needless to say we were nervous as the train barely crept through the tunnel and it was pitch dark in the car. But it was a relief to see light again and they were still in their end of the car. We arrived at our place and opened the door to a terrible stench. That deer roast Velma had cooked for us was rotten. We buried that out in the orchard without any ceremony. I know we slept outside that night, it smelled so bad inside.

Time passed swiftly as we were enjoying life and making money. We spent very little and put our savings in Postal Money Orders, so we wouldn't be carrying a lot of cash. Each morning it started frosting and for two weeks we had to wait for the frost to melt before we could pick the orchard. When the apple picking season was over we made plans to head for Ukiah, but we planned on going by Aunt Jo's and Curly's in Huntington, Oregon. By this time I had talked Allen into going back to finish high school and I would stay in Ukiah and find work to pay our expenses. So one cool October day we rolled up our belongings in our blankets, told our good neighbor family good bye and went into Wenatchee and found the hobo jungle near the railroad where those who rode the freights camped and gathered. In those days there were quite a few men who used the freight trains as transportation all over the United States. These men hardly ever worked, they would beg food and money and travel the country, going south in the winter and back north in the summer. Many of them were winos. They drank cheap wine. However, also during this period of time the, "depression years," there were a lot of men riding the freight trains following the harvest of crops, just looking for work to help their families and hoping for a better life.

As we were waiting for a freight train to be made up going our direction, I remembered we hadn't checked the Post Office for mail. Allen stayed with our bed rolls and I walked into town. I had a letter from my Mother in Texas giving us some sad news. She informed us that she had received word that her father (Grandpa Nicholas Coats) had died on October 10 while he and Grandma were visiting Aunt Jo in

Huntington, Oregon. That he had been buried in Mann's Creek Cemetery in Idaho, where some of his relatives were buried. This was quite a shock to Allen and I. Grandpa was only 66 years old and active and healthy when we left Ukiah. He had been out walking the hills bird hunting that October 10th and when they came home he sat down in a chair to rest and just slipped away as he rested.

Our plans were to go by way of Huntington anyway so we kept to our plan. We thought Grandma would be at Aunt Jo's. When we arrived we found out she had gone with Aunt Dora, to live with her in Oregon. I don't remember the date we arrived, but it must have been the 20th or later, since we were so late hearing about Grandpa's death. I forgot to say that earlier that year, while I was still in Texas, that in the month of March on the 20th Grandpa's youngest son "Little Elmer", passed away. He was only 23 1/2 years old. We had enjoyed him, as he was so good in taking us places and showing us around the summer of 1937 when we first visited Ukiah. His lifetime illness caught up to him. TB of the bone.

Riding the freight trains became our way of transportation and we had a lot of experiences. I will write about those experiences in one group after I tell you a little about some of the things that transpired from that fall of 1938 to the fall of 1939 when we ended up at my home in Texas.

## VISITING AUNT JO

We enjoyed our visit in Huntington as Uncle Curly and Aunt Jo were very hospitable. Being teenagers and mischievous, Allen and I gave Aunt Jo a bad time I'm sure. I remember we would often offer to dry the dishes and put them away. One of us would dry and then pitch the dish to the other, which nearly gave Aunt Jo a heart attack. We slept on a screened-in back porch. One morning we woke up early to see about 2 to 3 inches of snow on the ground. We slept in our shorts, although we had Aunt Jo convinced we slept naked. We decided to slip on our pants and make a lot of foot prints in the back yard. We did so very quietly and then got back into bed and pretended to be asleep. When Aunt Jo stepped on the porch to wake us she could see all those foot prints in the snow. We sat up in bed and told her we awoke earlier, had seen the snow and jumped up and ran around playing in the snow it was so exciting. She was horrified, she thought we had been out in the back yard running around naked. She was just sure the neighbors had seen us and how was she going to face them. She was quite naive and we never told her any difference.

A couple days Allen and I spent on the Huntington golf course. She and Curly were members of the country club and they were just getting a golf course. It was all laid out with holes, but a very rough ground course. Matter of fact what grass they had plus the native grass and shrubs and trees had just been thru a fire. We used Curly's clubs and no one else was on the course so we had fun hitting the ball and making our own rules as we knew nothing about golfing. I remember we were there for halloween and Allen and I walked around that night mostly watching the young people pull pranks. We joined in a little, but the young people didn't know us so mostly we were on our own. No trick or treating as now. Just mischief by the older kids.

We did go down the Snake River and spend a few days with Uncle John,(Mother's brother) and his wife whose name was Jo also. We referred to her as big Jo and Aunt Jo as little Jo. We helped Uncle John put up hay for 2 or 3 days, which he seemed to appreciate. Big Jo told us we could put all the cream on our cereal we wanted at first, but after a few days she stopped that when she realized how much we were consuming. Uncle John provided us with guns and we tried to shoot ducks on the river, but their eyesight was too good and those that were flying we missed as the range was too far. We also hunted chukkers in the hills. They would always scare us as they took off and go a short way and land. We walked all over the hills but never could get close enough to shoot. When we left Huntington, Curly took us to the railroad yards and since he was the roundhouse foreman he knew all the brakemen and he had a brakeman show us an empty freight car we could get in that would be heading out towards California. Aunt Jo didn't want the neighbors to see us leaving with our bed rolls like regular hobos so Curly drove us to the railroad yards and introduced us around and was sure we were on

the right train. He seemed to enjoy doing it. I remember it was cold waiting in the freight car and putting paper in my shoes for the first time to help keep my feet warm.

We had many experiences riding the freight cars on several railroad lines from Washington thru Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. I will tell you about them all at one time. However, first I will relate incidents that happened from the time we left Wenatchee, Washington till I arrived back home in Texas which was in the fall of 1939.