

on the Main Street of America Ozark Souvenirs

by Ronald D. Toops – a Reminiscence



Ronald Toops spent his early years on Route 66. The Toops' Ozark Souvenirs shop was one mile south of Buckhorn on the Mother Road, now Route 17. It was near and across the road from another Route 66 landmark, the Normandy. In an excerpt from a book he is writing, Ronald shares some memories of that place, time, and his entrepreneurial parents. Ronald lives in Troy, Illinois.

Ely Nelson Toops and Minnie Lula (Boone) Toops moved to Pulaski County, Missouri on January 25, 1933 from Oklahoma city in hopes of making some kind of living. My father was out of work, as it was near the time of the Great Depression. My grandfather, Grant Walker Toops, owned 20 acres of forest land in Missouri that had been bought sight unseen. My parents figured that since times were tough everywhere, they would go and try to scrape up a living where they would have no rent to pay. You would also have to understand that my dad was quite adventurous and would never shy away from trying something different. On a similar note, mom was always willing to go along with just about anything. On a bitter cold day in January they selected a level area in the woods, pitched a tent, and settled in to endure an unusually cold winter. It was 7 below zero the day

they set up a camp in the woods on the property which was located near the Clark National Forest about 15 miles from Richland.

They cut oak lumber to sell and built a two room cabin from some of their profits. In September of 1933, they bought 10 acres, one mile southwest of Buckhorn from Frank Goodrich. This move put them within 5 miles of the City of Waynesville and gave them a strategic location on what was then known as Route 66. They built a 10 by 8 feet single room cabin where they lived until September of 1934.

On March 1, 1940 my father got a Civil Service job doing electrical work at the new army base at Fort Leonard Wood. Although dad had a secure job, around October 1944 he volunteered for the army and on 14 December he left for training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. My mother thought my dad was pretty silly for joining the army at his age 34, especially with four children at home. She kept the car but did not know how to drive. She started driving the day she took dad to the bus station and drove every day until he returned from his army tour. Mother also developed the cigarette habit while dad was gone to the army.

After training he was eventually sent to the Philippines where he worked as an army photographer.

When I spoke to my dad about the war he said that the war was practically over before he ever got there and that the only enemies he ever saw were prisoners of war. He showed us his souvenirs which consisted of some Philippine/U.S. printed paper occupation money and a few coins.

In May of 1947 my mother opened a souvenir/novelty shop along Route 66 called "Ozark Souvenirs" and quickly began to prosper and expand her inventory with her profits. She had picked a good location with a lot of traffic on probably one of the most well known and also dangerous highways in U. S. history. In 1948 my father opened a radio shop in Waynesville. The radio shop was not successful and the rent for the building was raised so many times that dad was forced to close down. The rent was raised because of the opening of the new army base at Ft. Leonard Wood and the instant greed that it spurred. Conversely, the souvenir shop was a big success and remained in operation until 1956 when Interstate 44 went in a mile away and replaced the section of old Route 66 which passed in front of the store. Much of the store stock was stored in the white cabin where it stayed for at least 20 years or more. The family gradually brought stuff in from the cabin to use. Every

Easter dad and mom would go to the cabin and bring in little metal buckets with little matching shovels which they would leave by our beds on Easter eve. We would find them Easter morning and we would be directed to go out into the yard to search for hidden eggs. Just about every tree in the yard had these large sandstones leaning against all sides. The result was a great place to hide hard boiled Easter eggs and big plastic ones which had surprises inside.

I was only four years old when the souvenir shop was closed but I can remember standing in the main part of the store looking through the long glass enclosed counter. We had very decorative woven bed spreads hung on lines at both sides of the store and many varieties of pottery, both painted and unfinished clay, bird baths, and other novelties which sat on large white painted bleachers in front of the store or were just scattered across the lawn which stretched out on both sides of the store. A small red brick decorated asphalt sided wood fireworks stand stood prominently next to the big Coca-Cola sign. We had one of those big round Coca-Cola signs mounted on a white 4" x 4" pole. I'm not exactly sure when the cabins were built but there



Minnie Lula Toops with one of her four children in her Ozark Souvenirs shop, which was located one mile south of Buckhorn. Courtesy of Ronald D. Toops.



Interior view of Ozark Souvenirs. The shop was in "a good location with a lot of traffic" on Route 66. Courtesy of Ronald D. Toops.



Another interior view of the souvenir shop. Roadside souvenirs ran the gamut from pottery to bull horns. Local craftsmen found an outlet for their baskets and chairs. Thankfully, postcards were a staple, too. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

were three of them. Two, one red and one white, stood in the east yard about 100 feet from the road and one in the west yard (red) at approximately the same distance from the road. We were obviously pretty creative because we called the white cabin the “White Cabin” and the red cabin the “Red Cabin.” I think we called the other one the “Two Room” cabin for the same obvious reasons. The white and red cabins had refrigerators, stoves, and cabinets. The

interior of the white cabin was painted white and bright yellow. Knowing mom, I was surprised it was not bright red. The cabins were very small and by the time I was old enough to remember much, they had already been converted into storage for the leftover store goods and dad’s many broken and repaired AM radios. I say AM because FM radio stations were just coming into being during the early sixties.



Still home to one of the Toops’ children, this neat rock and stone house stands as a reminder of the enterprise of roadside vendors. Photo by Terry Primas.



Just down the road and across was the Normandy (1932), a favorite eating place for locals, as well as travelers. The restaurant, hotel, and gas station complex was razed c. 1978. A quarry is on the site now. Courtesy of Skip Curtis.

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