

## A TOWN AND ITS PEOPLE

By  
**Kurt Hafner**

Abilene, Kansas, is a small town about thirty miles southwest of Manhattan. I interviewed three generations of my family, all of whom grew up in Abilene. I asked them the same questions, and received a variety of different answers that show how the generations have experienced this place and its culture in different ways at different times.

Legend has it that Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, and Wild Bill Hickock all lived in Abilene at various times. The town was settled in the early 1850s as an ending point of the Chisholm Trail. Cowboys herded the cattle to the pens at the south end of town where they were loaded onto trains and shipped east to be processed. In the late 1800s the cattle drives ceased and the town quickly transformed from a rowdy cow town to a small, quiet, prairie community. Abilene reached its highest population of 9,500 in the early 1980s; currently the population is holding at 6,000.

My grandparents, Jerry and Jean Hafner, were born in 1928 and 1931 respectively, a quarter-century after the infamous cattle drives ended. Until he was fifteen my grandfather cleaned chicken coops for ten cents an hour. After that he began working on the farm with his father nearly full time. It was on the farm that he learned how to weld. He practiced this skill and after high school made it his full time profession.

Welding in those days, my grandfather recalled, was a skill that enabled one to make money. Welding was the only thing he could see himself doing before and after graduating from high school. Welding, for those who could travel, opened many doors and opportunities for advancement. My grandfather remarked that few jobs in Abilene offered job advancement at this time.

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My grandmother was the youngest of sixteen children and helped around the house when needed. She did not have a job until her junior year in high school, when she worked as a nurse's aide at Abilene Memorial Hospital. After graduation, she started working for Shouse Implement Company as a secretary. She also noted that not many jobs with advancement opportunities were available to women.

Life, in general, was hard while my grandparents were growing up. Money was tight and technological advancements in transportation still had far to go. My grandmother stated that "I did not realize we were poor because we had food and seemed to be doing just as well as everyone else." My grandfather mentioned that his family went into town once every other week to buy groceries. My grandmother's family moved to town when she was eight years old.

Work took up most of their time; however, an occasional time was set aside for relaxing and visiting, especially on Sundays. When they had time to relax, they would go to their neighbors' or invite them over to sit on the porch and visit. When it was too cold to be outside they would congregate inside playing cards or singing songs accompanied by guitar. Grandmother recalled going to the baseball diamonds to watch games on Friday and Saturday nights for entertainment. My grandfather said it was always a big deal when the "Movie Man" came to town. A man, paid by the store merchants, would set up a projector on the side of a building on Main Street and show a movie. The owners of the stores paid him well because of the business they received from the movie watchers.

About five percent of students from both of my grandparent's graduating classes went to college. Two main reasons for not going to college were: one, it was expensive and, two, having a specialized skill could produce enough money to raise a family, some times very well. As my grandparents remember, the kids who did go to college were mainly male and sought degrees to become doctors or lawyers. Very few women of their generation went to college; those who did went for training as nurses, secretaries, or elementary school teachers.

My grandparents felt that in Abilene they received an education equivalent to what they would have received in a larger town. They noted that back then no specialized programs or schools existed. The

curriculum across the nation was the same. To my grandparents American culture seemed homogeneous at that time. “The teachers knew the kids and their families. If a kid acted up the teacher would not hesitate to call the parents and back then the kids got in serious trouble when that happened.” This inspired, or forced, the kids to take school seriously, making education as a whole more effective.

My grandmother met my grandfather in 1947, when she was sixteen. They married after her graduation from high school. As they were settling down a new generation was being created in America, as well as Abilene.

My aunt, Debbie Johnson, was born in 1953. She is currently a fifth-grade teacher at Garfield Elementary School in Abilene. She has lived only four years of her life outside of Abilene, while attending University of Kansas. Growing up she worked at Bankies Drug store. She recalled that it was a good job to have because she saw all of her friends while she was at work. Other jobs for teenagers at this time in Abilene included gas station attendants, retail shop workers, farm workers, or at the Duckwall Alco factory and store.

About seventy percent of my aunt’s graduating class went on to college or some type of higher education. My aunt knew plenty of men who went to college to be doctors and lawyers, but no women. Most of the women she knew who went on to college planned to be nurses or teachers. Although many doors or opportunities remained closed to women, some were beginning to open. Aunt Debbie could not recall anyone telling her what she could not be; she just wanted to be a teacher.

According to Debbie, being educated in a small town has its benefits and disadvantages. “The kids respect me more because I know them and their parents. I understand the background they have because I grew up in a small town.” She feels she has a good connection with the students because of their shared background; however, they have limited exposure to cultural diversity because they are growing up in a small and relatively homogeneous community. She does feel that they get enough exposure to be successful in the world with hard work and open minds.

Growing up in Abilene, Debbie's life was hard but meaningful. She recalls helping her mother out around the house but mainly her time was spent attending school and working. She says now that she has been in Abilene over forty years she realizes the biases of a small town. An example of this is the city newspaper, *The Reflector Chronicle*, which has had the same editor expressing the same editorial views for twenty years.

Family is very important to Debbie. "Every Sunday we went to church and afterwards ate at my grandmother's house. When I was growing up, if my mom wanted me to do something I did it, and I certainly did not act up in school." On Saturdays, she recalls, the family went on picnics and played games until bedtime. She stated, "It was a religious time and the country was doing well. The people across America were opening their eyes and seeing a new way to live. The old ideas were being challenged and new ones being invented." With these new ideas came a new generation.

My cousin, Marrisa Johnson, Debbie's daughter, was born in 1978. As a teenager she worked at the city pool as a lifeguard, and said no jobs in Abilene had any opportunities for advancement. The only way for her to advance her career was to go to college or to leave the town.

Education in a small town, she felt, was just as good as in a bigger city. Marrisa liked knowing her teachers personally and seeing them around town. Once again the only thing missing in Abilene was cultural diversity. She went to the University of Kansas after high school and did very well. In her opinion this was a practical way to show how good a small town education was. When she went to college, she felt no boundaries on what career to pursue. The gender boundaries seemed to have been broken for her generation in regards to higher education.

Life as Marrisa remembers was easy. "I had to work during the summer but not during school. My mom helped me out during the school year." She did not go over to relatives' houses on a regular basis. "The only times we hung out with family was during the holidays and the occasional get together." The extended family was important, but not a part of everyday life.

Abilene is still a small prairie town, as it was a hundred years ago. This is not to say that the town and people have not been subject to change. Over the years the town and people in it have been affected by technology, new ways of thinking, and American society as a whole. It seemed that in my grandparents' days one wanted to stay close to family and in the town. People of Marrison's generation felt the need to leave to be successful in today's world. Although the place, in geographic context, stays in the same location, the ideas and culture within the place undergo constant change. We can see this in the interviews of people who all grew up in this place. No matter where you live, time, technology, and cultural influences play a part in developing the culture that is produced in the place.