

## A VENT WINDOW VIEW – *Tanks for the Memories*

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Until Wilson Bell's dad hired me, I presumed the criteria for workers in his lumberyard involved measures such as size and strength. Therefore, with dozens of State College football players available almost year-round, his job offer surprised me. Later I figured out that Mr. Bell hired me in the faint hope I'd steer his son away from trouble.

Wilson had graduated from a local high school and was attending classes at State when I met him, but that's not to say he was ready for college studies. Worse he drew attention to that fact in the art history class where we met.

Our mutual distaste for revered art led us to become acquainted outside the classroom. Wilson, for all his ignorance, was a nice fellow, but what appealed to me was his ownership of a 1949 Chevy. We began to partner-up on outings in his black "Fleetline," and it was during one of those occasions that I met his father. I'm still unsure why Mr. Bell thought I could keep Wilson out of trouble but, since I was much too skinny to throw around bagged cement that must have been the reason he gave me a job. Frankly, it was odd that Mr. Bell believed I could keep his son out of mischief. Wilson, besides being twice my size, handled anything he disliked or disagreed with by switching to "selective hearing." I'd worked with mules that were more easily directed, so my secret duties at Bell Lumber were never easy. I did not complain, however. I made more money there than from my job at the college cafeteria. Of course, I was earning every dime of it, because Wilson was quite often an embarrassing companion. In fact, it is a good bet that he was the first person ever pointed out as being able to foul up a one-car funeral.

When Wilson and I weren't unloading railroad boxcars, we were chasing around town in his Chevy. Sometimes that was fun; at other times, I knew Mr. Bell was not paying me enough.

In my mind, toting construction materials seemed more "manly" than my duties in the cafeteria where I continued to labor mornings, evenings, and weekends. In truth, feeding food-caked dishes into a machine that belched steam like a locomotive while it sanitized crockery, stainless steel utensils, and glassware was not hard. However, with 99 percent humidity blanketing the room where the cafeteria's monstrous dishwasher chugged and snorted steam like a C&GW locomotive, I had dishpan hands over my entire body at the end of a two-hour shift. On hot days, pounds dripped off my bones like fat from a stewing chicken. Unloading sheetrock from a boxcar sweated off pounds, too, but with the added misery of sore muscles from stem to stern.

Wilson's dad always assigned me to ride shotgun when Wilson took the lumberyard's 1953 Chevrolet two-ton flatbed out on delivery runs. Some of those involved highway travel. Equipped with a two-speed rear-end, the truck could reach speeds that, on one occasion, built so much vacuum above the cargo bed that a very expensive sliding door assembly lifted off and flew power-pole high before crashing in a sparkling explosion of glass and varnished oak splinters.

Mr. Bell knew his son's habit of speeding, thus, unlike Wilson I escaped censure for that mishap. Additionally, that speeding incident did give me a little more control over Wilson's reckless behavior and he never had another accident while I was riding with him.

During the holiday periods of Thanksgiving and Christmas, my income from both jobs fizzled out, but luck was with me. Wilson and I grabbed a late night janitorial job at a truck stop restaurant a few miles north of town. Most of his earnings were spent on the spot, either for coffee to stay awake or on pinball machines which paid off in cash. Wilson was an expert, so he beat the machines often enough to make money. Then during one of those "floor-scrubbing" evenings, a waitress showed us photos of her son who had joined the Army. That seed sprouted and Wilson, at semester's end, enlisted and disappeared from my life.

Still, from that day forward, the sound of a six-cylinder Chevy "cackling" through twin-Smitties brings back memories of Wilson's haphazard use of his Fleetline on Missouri's streets and highways. And, that's enough to make me wonder—did the US Army ever let him drive a tank.