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Pl. Grove woodworker traveled many roads

By Harlow Clark

Vern Farmer's birth certificate listed a stillbirth, but the 87-year-old Pleasant Grove man has hardly had a still life.

He rode the rails a bit in the 1920's, just before the Depression, and tells about riding on top of the train when he couldn't find an open boxcar.

"You had to wait till the train was going real slow, then you'd grab on the bar and swing yourself. Swing the other way to get off."

Getting off the train, his head was covered with so many cinders from the smoke stack he couldn't feel his hair.

"You'd wear a red bandanna around your neck to keep the cinders out." It was a common practice to use the bandannas to strain the alcohol from canned heat, a jelly-like substance saturated with alcohol.

"They'd pour the can out onto the bandanna then twist it and drain the alcohol back into the can, then they'd mix it with water and get high." A dangerous high since this was toxic like wood alcohol.

Farmer never used his bandanna this way, but says, "You could tell who was doing it because they had a pink nose, a different color from the rest of their face."

He didn't ride the rails a lot either, and not aimlessly, mostly to get to a particular place. He did a lot of odd jobs, like washing dishes, or shining shoes for cowboys and sheep herders outside a barber-shop in Ontario Ore.

"It was my job to brush them off,

take their hat and make sure there was no hair on it either. After I got through I'd ask them if they'd like a shine. Some accepted, some didn't. Shine was 15 cents. If I made the 15 cents I'd eat that day."

He did many other jobs and learned to play the trombone, studying with the great Hayden Simpson, before joining the army around 1934. During afternoon siestas he "would go up to a ditchbank above fort Douglas and practice trombone. One of the sergeants in army band heard me playing and recommended I be transferred into the army band. I studied with him, then the lead trumpet player took over. He had visions of me playing in Sousa's band. I didn't meet those expectations, though."

But he did play a lot. The 38th Infantry Band would give concerts on July 4th, and "on the 24th we led the pioneer parade, right after the Marshall. When the parade started getting big they had a float with the queen and her attendants. They also had some women in bathing suits. I don't think they'd ever done that before, allowed bathing beauties in the parade. Some people complained to President McKay, and he said, 'I saw nothing but beauty.' That's what I've been told."

The band also played Sunday and Wednesday night concerts. After a Wednesday night concert he met Erma Pierce. They wed on March 31, 1938, then Vern asked the army's permission to marry.

After World War II he moved his family to southern Utah and started

raising chickens, becoming a pioneer in the state's poultry industry. He had learned through study and observation that chickens get into groups. He tears and wads up some paper, dropping the pieces on the floor to show how he arranged the feeding and watering bins to accommodate the groups.

"A comfortable animal is a productive animal," he says. "The same is true for humans."

After retirement he started woodworking, making a large doll house for his grandchildren, then wooden toys, a porch swing, magazine racks, cradles, music boxes for jewelry, and about 44 clocks including the grandfather clock in the corner of his living room, the antique glass-sided clock on a shelf, and the mantle clock he just finished.

The mantle clock is an accomplishment. At the beginning of the year he was fighting cancer in a nursing home. He insisted on coming home, the cancer's in remission, and he's gradually been regaining his strength. He even takes walks now, riding his motorized wheelchair up to the top of the block then getting out and walking behind it to the end of the street.

He'd like to get enough strength to build another grandfather clock. He's also working on his life story with a friend. "Think there's enough material here to write anything interesting?" he asks.

His friend asks for another story. "There'll be plenty of time," Vern says. "I'm not going anywhere."

Well, maybe for a walk.