

- G: He was the Fourth of July orator. He was succeeded by Walter Prey. Walter Prey was succeeded by John Reed, and I don't know who has it now. But Fullerton was a very attractive town, a very clean town. I always thought it was the cleanest town I ever saw.
- Mrs. G: Well, for a long time, I heard, they didn't want any manufacturing. They wanted it just to be a residential town. Then they found out they couldn't get by so they were going to bring in some industry. Anaheim grew because they were getting all the manufacturing.
- S: Now, just to change the subject a little bit, will you tell me some of the events that happened in your family in 1939?
- G: Well, in 1939 we had a boy that won a soap box derby.
- S: Yes. Now, what got him started on soapboxes?
- G: Well, we had three boys and one day one of them said, "Dad, we'd like to have a set of four wheels and two axles." Wait a minute. "They're six dollars." And six dollars was a lot of money. And we said, "Well, we'll see." That was a standard phrase we used when any subject came up. We never said no, we never said yes. We always said, "We'll see," and then we came to a decision. So we wound up buying this set of four wheels and two axles. From that time on, the youngsters started to build carts and so forth and they'd demolish them and build another one. This boy made a trip by bicycle to San Diego and while there, he had some contact with the soap box derby. He came back and decided that they would build a car. Well, they built one one year and it wouldn't even go down the hill, so they learned a lot about the balancing of it and the needs of it and so forth. So the following year, the older brother was really the one with the motivation, but the younger brother was lighter and younger and could qualify as an entry.
- S: Was there an age limit on qualifying?
- G: Yes, the age limit was fourteen and the car itself had to be limited to 250 pounds with the driver, so the lighter the driver the more weight you could put in the car. So they entered this Los Angeles Soap Box Derby. We actually had planned a trip East in 1939. We were due to start on a Saturday. The tryouts were on Friday. Well, we didn't have any idea the boy would go anyplace at all, but he came home Friday a winner in his class and had to go back Saturday for the finals.
- S: And where was this?

- G: This was in Los Angeles out in the Baldwin Hills area in which one of the newspapers, the Daily News, and the Chevrolet people had joined hands.
- Mrs. G: Daily News.
- G: And they made quite a big thing of it. They had a tremendous number of entries, oh, 1300 or something. By elimination, he turned out to be the winner.
- Mrs. G: That was another funny thing. We were getting ready to go on this trip on Saturday, but we said, "Well, as long as you won your heat, go down and see how you get along in the finals." So we were having dinner, my daughter and I, packing and getting ready to go on this trip, and they didn't come home when they were supposed to. We thought, "Oh, they'll be through early and they'll be home early." So it was around 5:30 and my daughter said, "Something must have happened. Maybe Bill won the finals." So we just happened to turn the radio on to listen if we could hear anything and there we heard Bill's voice on the radio. He was interviewed. And we got the biggest thrill to think that he had won. And he was going to go to Akron, Ohio to compete with the others.
- S: What time of the year was this?
- G: This was in August.
- Mrs. G: It was after school. July or August. Vacation time.
- G: They flew him back by plane and, of course, you've got to remember that in 1939 airplanes were not what they are today, so that was quite an event. The local Lions Club had given him ten dollars to build his car. So they organized a caravan and the caravan went from Brea to the airport at Burbank. We had gone on.
- S: How were you traveling now?
- G: We went by car.
- S: You were driving.
- G: We drove by car.
- Mrs. G: My daughter and the other son went, and the oldest boy stayed home.
- G: It took us five days to get to Akron, Ohio.
- Mrs. G: And it took him overnight. He left in the evening and it took him all night and then got to Akron I don't know what

time in the daytime.

G: So they had a caravan, about forty-five cars, that went from Brea to the airport to see him off.

Mrs. G: They really gave him a big sendoff.

S: Now, you went from California then by car to Akron. Compared to now, how was traveling by automobile in 1939? What kind of a car did you have?

G: We had a Chevrolet.

S: What year?

G: Well, let's see. I think it was a 1937.

Mrs. G: It was a new car.

G: Well, fairly new. We didn't have any car trouble.

Mrs. G: The roads weren't like they are now, though.

G: We had had previous experience with trips and had had a lot of car trouble, so we knew what to avoid. You saw that you had good batteries and you had good tires.

Mrs. G: And not too old of a car.

G: We drove from here to Salt Lake City the first night; Salt Lake City to, oh, let's see, Cheyenne the next night; Cheyenne to Omaha the next night; Omaha to Illinois area, a place outside of Chicago, and then to Akron the next night. So we left here on a Saturday night and we got there on a Thursday.

Mrs. G: We drove all night the first night.

G: Well, we drove all night from here to Salt Lake City. But in those days, if you averaged forty miles an hour you were doing well. The roads in 1939 were fair. Narrow, but they were fair. You didn't have any motels. You had graduated from the cabin camps. Now, cabin camps dated from 1927 or 1928 to the Depression times. In the cabin camps there was nothing but pillows and mattresses. You brought your own sheets, and you brought your own cooking utensils. They were a dollar a night.

S: There certainly was no bathroom attached.

G: No, there was outdoor facilities. Little by little, after the rough times, 1928 to 1934, then a certain amount of dignity was added, or plushness. Mendota was the town we

stopped in outside of Chicago. They had a sign on the wall: "In the event that you leave anything, we have your license number in the event we miss anything." The tourist homes in the East were more available.

Mrs. G: There weren't any motels in the East. There were tourist homes. In a home where residents would room tourists, you would share the home with the owners, share the bathroom.

G: After we left Chicago, well, then you stopped in the tourist home.

Mrs. G: In August, there were tourists all over.

S: Did you hit anything that resembled a motel between here and Chicago?

G: I don't recall that we did. In Salt Lake City we stopped in a large assembly of cabin camps. Probably there were fifty or sixty in this area with trees, rather attractive.

Mrs. G: What's that one in Salt Lake City, the prettiest one?

G: No, it was a grouping of little cabins. They were cabins. They were not motels as we know them today at all. They didn't come until later.

Mrs. G: Well, we didn't do any cooking on the way on this trip in 1939.

G: No, we ate in restaurants.

Mrs. G: But we didn't take any cooking stuff with us.

G: No, I know. We figured we were going to have to travel fast. If you made three to four hundred miles a day, why, it was quite a day.

Mrs. G: We had just so many weeks.

G: Just so many days.

S: Did you do all the driving or did you share the driving?

Mrs. G: I drove, too. Whenever he got sleepy, well, then I said, "Let me take over," because it was so easy to go to sleep when you were on a stretch of road. So I'd take over for an hour or two and then he'd drive. He'd sleep and then he'd wake up, and we'd change and go on.

G: The Soap Box Derby is quite an event in the Akron area. They take over a certain floor in the Mayflower Hotel and

they give it to these youngsters. The youngsters have carte blanche. If they want a banana split they go to room service and the banana split comes up and they sign for it. They can have anything they want.

Mrs. G: It never cost them a nickel. They just signed for anything!

G: The biggest delight they got was to fill paper bags with water and drop them out of the window, on the pedestrians down below.

Mrs. G: Well, and then another thing. They had the finals, so they told us to be sure and take a big hat because it was going to be hot. So all they told the mothers was that it was going to be hot, to have a shade. And after we got there it rained.

G: Just a casual shower.

Mrs. G: Well, it rained on us till we all got pretty wet and there was no shelter around there. It was way out there where, in the winter, they use this Derby Downs for the speed thing.

G: They do now. They didn't then.

Mrs. G: And it was pretty steep and there was no place you could go. So we had to sit in the stands.

G: No overhead shelter.

Mrs. G: So then the parents had a little grandstand and it had just cheesecloth on it to kind of take most of the sun off. And then it started to rain and then it just poured for a few minutes. So they stopped the races until it stopped. And I remember that at that time we wore rayon dresses. And, you know, it got wet and my dress was shrunk three or four inches.

S: Oh!

Mrs. G: That's the truth! And I know that that was my best dress that I wore that Sunday and I wore a big hat. And everybody was wet! Some of these people could get out and go to their cars or something, but they thought it was just a shower so they stayed. But I remember what a disappointment then when I tried to wear that dress. I had to take the hem out. (laughter) And they said it had never rained before and that was on the Sunday we were there.

G: So the young man was eliminated in the first heat, but he had the satisfaction that the boy that eliminated him went

Mrs. G: They took us out for a tour of the city and we had luncheon

on and won the Derby. It is very highly organized. The parents are taken care of and everything moves along very smoothly. It is climaxed by a dinner in the armory in which these 250 boys from all over the United States--all over the world, in fact--are on an elevated dais, four or five different levels. The parents are all down in the main body of the armory. The tables held four couples and Los Angeles was at the same table as Little Rock and Louisville and Littleton, New Hampshire, I think it was. Anyway, it was four L's at the table. The gentleman who talked was a man by the name of Kettering, Charles F. Kettering, who invented the self-starter. There probably is no single thing that ever contributed more to the American motoring public than the self-starter did at that time, because everything originally had been hand-motivated: the windshield wiper, the cranking of the car, and everything was . . . self-starter. Mr. Kettering was a man of a wonderful ability. Now, he talked to these 250 boys and about 1,200 to 1,300 parents and friends for forty minutes and you could have heard a pin drop.

Mrs. G: (showing pictures) That was in Los Angeles. See, this is when he . . .

G: The machine is running all the time there, sweetheart.

S: That's all right, that's all right.

Mrs. G: This way you can really see . . .

S: Oh, yes. Now, these little soapbox cars ran downhill?

G: That's right. They're on an incline. They're just simply gravity-propelled. They have to be built by the boys themselves with no outside help. They were limited, at that time, to ten dollars cash value, and that had to include the wheels and the axles. The weight limitation was 250 pounds and the age of the driver was fourteen. But Mr. Kettering at this dinner held the attention of these boys. He spoke for about forty-five minutes and as I said, you could have heard a pin drop. One thing that I remember in particular. He was telling about in the General Motors, he said, "We go around sometimes with what we call a slipstick, or a slide rule, with our heads in the air and suddenly we stumble over something and we look down and there it is--the very thing we've been looking for. But," he said, "nobody ever stumbles over anything sitting down." In other words, it was on the move. So he was the highlight of that particular evening. But they had special lunches for the womenfolks and the parents were wonderfully well-handled.

Mrs. G: They took us out for a tour of the city and we had luncheons

and a fashion show and, oh, I don't know what all the different things we had to do for the week that we were there.

S: Do they still do that?

Mrs. G: Oh, yes. They still have that.

G: Yes, they still do that. The only change they have made was a very good change. Every boy now who wins his own local elimination event, when he gets back there they provide him with a set of wheels and axles that are all balanced, so they all have the same opportunity. They had found, which was true in our young man's case, that so much depends upon the wheels. And some boys didn't have good wheels, well-balanced wheels, though the car might have been very efficient and capable. They demand two things. One is that the boy must have perfected his steering assembly and he must have perfected the braking. And now, of course, the winning scholarship is worth \$10,000 where, then, it was only worth \$4,000. Everything has gone up in proportion.

S: There was a question I was going to ask you. Is this the boy that's in the toy business?

G: Yes, he's the boy that's in the toy business. This is really what propelled him into the toy business indirectly.

S: What kind of toy business is he in?

G: It's a retail business. He has eleven outlets.

Mrs. G: Anything that's in the toy line--dolls.

S: Has he ever designed toys?

G: No, it's all been retail. The same brother that helped him build the car, they went in business together, and after about ninety days it was evident that those two boys were not meant to be in business together. (laughter) So they separated, and he's in this area and the other boy is down in the San Diego area.

S: Is he in the toy business, too?

G: He was in the toy business until recently. He's given that up.

Mrs. G: He's out now.

G: The difference in the boys is this boy is more dynamic. He wants to be the biggest toy man in the world. And the other boy, he could care less. (laughter) But he made

some money, and he happened to have a lease next door to the largest dry goods store in San Diego, Marstons. They wanted the building so they bought his lease. He made a lot of money that one year so he laid off a year and did nothing but travel. (laughter) There's a difference in the boys.

S: Oh, well. There's a difference in people. Now, let's see. Do you want to talk any longer or do you want to go for another session?

G: Well, I think maybe we better go for another session.



(714) 635-6095

William D. Griffith

(949) 640-2856

~~William J. Griffith~~

~~(714) 635-6095~~

William H. Griffith Jr.  
(714) 974-2119