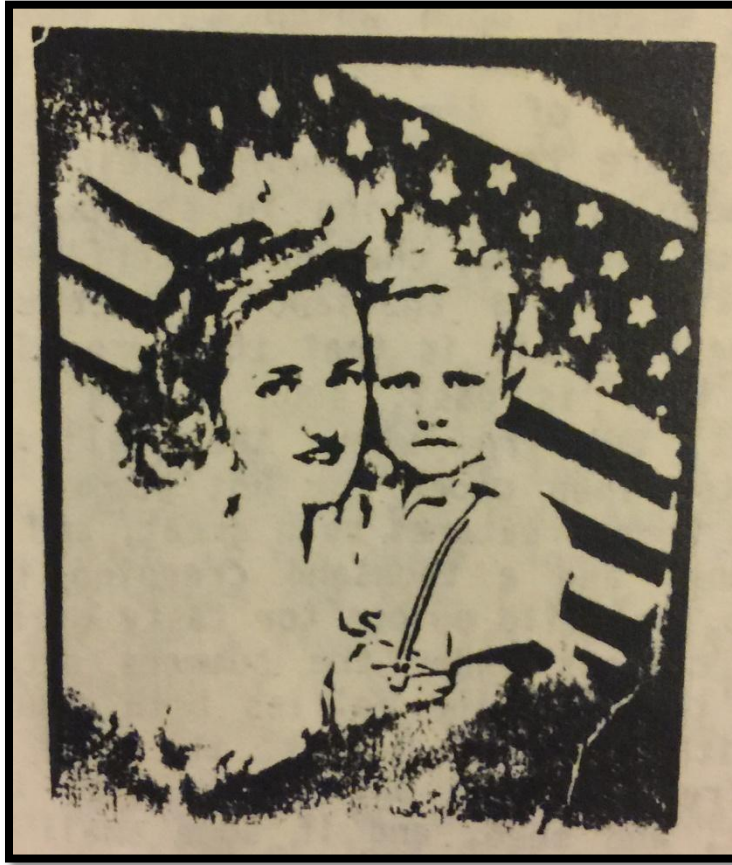


DUST

**IRON**



It was spring of 1944. America was fully committed to war. Every physically able man was under arms in the field preparing for invasion of Europe, from the British Isles, North Africa, and a thousand warships at sea.

Back home, black smoke was belching from every smoke stack, typewriter companies had been retooled to build guns, and elevator manufacturers refitted to build ship parts. Food stamps rationed food and every home had a Victory Garden to grow their own vegetables so the commercial production could be used entirely for the boys overseas. Women did most of the jobs that men normally did, children farmed and did other hard work to take up the slack wherever little people and little hands could be used to do the work of men and women.

At Union Ridge School, a one roomed country school house where R.E. and I went to school, Wednesday was "CAN DAY" when the children took all the tin cans from home to school, there we would mash them flat with a hammer then put them into a big cardboard box that Uncle Olen would pick up and take to town in the school bus, from there they would be shipped by rail to a factory to be melted down for the making of war machines.

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Mrs. Waters (our teacher) would always tell us what good Americans we were for unselfishly giving our tin cans to help the boys overseas.

One morning a boy walked to school crying, when Mrs. Waters ask, "Why are you crying?"

Looking up with tears streaming down his face, he said, "Mrs. Waters we don't have any tin cans at our house. Am I a bad American?"

She held him close to her for a long time saying, "No. We have no bad Americans in this school." While tears streamed down her face as well.

At noon I walked home for lunch down the hill and across Frymire's gulch.

At home when I told Mother what had happened, she stood at the kitchen cabinet for a long time, then turning around with tears in her eyes as well, she said, "Gary, the best Americans have already given all they have."

R.E., Mother, and I set down to a big glass of salt cornbread crumbled into a cold glass of milk while I thought about what it must mean to not even own a tin can.

Later that year in the summer of '44, Roy Zwirtz, a cousin of ours who for some reason was staying with us for a while, ask Dad, "Would you mind if I use the pickup and pull the junk iron out of a trash pile I found over in the canyon and haul it to town to sell at Mr. Ruddell's junk iron yard so I can buy some shoes and books for school this fall?"

"Of course you may if you want to do that." Dad said.

Roy, R.E., and I, went to the canyon to pull the iron out of the trash pile, when we had loaded all the pickup would hold, Roy drove the truck up the hill to the house.

Dad came out to see the load of iron we had pulled, saying, "You boys found a lot more iron in that pile than I thought was in there, but Ruddell's is only open on Saturday so you will have to wait until tomorrow to haul the iron to town for sale.

The next morning Roy was ready to haul his iron to town so R.E. and I ask Mother if we could ride with him as far as the mail box up the hill by the school house and wait for Mr. Horton to bring the mail.

All right, but you boys stay up on the grader bank out of the way so Mr. Horton can see you and doesn't run over you.

Running out the door shouting at Roy, "Can we ride on the running board up to the school house?"

OK, but you will have to hold on tight.

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Driving out of the driveway the pickup hit a big bump causing me to fall off while I held onto the spare tire rack as tight as I could. R.E. jumped up to tell Roy to stop. Bump. bump. Too late. I was already ran over by the truck loaded with junk iron.

Roy jumped out of the truck looking at me on the ground, then he turned and ran to the house as fast as he could, once in the kitchen he collapsed into a chair and announced, "I just ran over Gary with the truck and killed him!"

Roy never lied so no one thought to ask him if he was sure. (I am pleased to report that Roy was mistaken about my early demise.)

Dad ran out of the house with Mother very pale and obviously shaken right behind him, by that time R.E. was carrying me across the yard toward the house. If Roy hadn't killed me the expression on Mother's face almost scared me to death.

Dad carried me into the house and laid me on the bed while Mother called for Dr. Ryan to come quick. (Dr. Ryan was no stranger to me, he was the one who came to see if I was dead when I drank a quart of Dad's Fine Amish Wine. But of course, I wasn't dead then either. I was only drunk for three days and sick forever.)

Out through the window I could see Dr. Ryan's black '41 Ford Coup coming down the road being chased by a cloud of dust sliding to a stop in the yard. R.E. ran into the bedroom shouting, "Dr. Ryan's car is here."

(I hope it's Dr. Ryan. That thing looks more like a little short hearse to me.)

Dr. Ryan stepped into the room with a black bag in hand, cigar stuck in his face, and a very serious look that would scare a grown man. Setting his bag on the bed, he said, "Well what do we have here?"

(If he doesn't know what I am this must look real bad.)

Dr. looking at me, pulled something out of his bag, then poked the things in his ears.

(Oh no! This is really going to hurt and he doesn't want to hear me scream!)

Holding the cold thing to my chest, he ask, "How do you feel?"

(He knows I feel bad or he wouldn't be here.)

When the cold thing finally became warm, he took it away and started his poking and pinching routine, over my loud protest.

Where does it hurt?

Everywhere! I was ran over by a truck you know!

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Well he can talk.

Of course I can talk, it didn't run over my mouth you know. If it had, they would have called for Dr. Young, the Dentist.

"Is anything broken?" Dad ask.

I don't think.

(What kind of Dr. doesn't think?)

Dr. Ryan scratched around in his bag coming up with a small flashlight that had a little funnel on the end of it.

Well let's look down here, he said poking it down into my ear.

(You will have to look by yourself, I can't see around there, besides the truck ran over my legs and back. I wonder how far he can see with that thing.)

Nothing there.

(You know better than that. I couldn't think if there was nothing there.)

He turned my head over looking in the other ear.

Nothing there either.

(I'll bet his flashlight is burned out.)

Well let's look down here to see if there is any bleeding.

(Watch out where you are poking Doc. or you are going to ... Uh, huh, you found it didn't you?)

Well that back is real bruised up with those tire tracks running up it.

(He is going to fool around until he figures out that I was ran over by a truck.)

Dr. Ryan and my parents went into the kitchen to talk quietly.

(I'm lying here dying and they are in there visiting.)

After a long time Dad and Dr. Ryan came back with a two-by-twelve board that had a big hole sawed in the center of it. Rolling me over on my side, then back over onto the board, they tied me to it with some belts so I couldn't move.

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Dr. Ryan stood at the foot of the bed looking at me, and said, "Keep him still and I'll be back in a couple of days, unless you call me first, and don't let him have much water."

(That is great. Now I'm thirsty.)

During the long summer I laid on Mother's bed looking out the window while the wheat was being harvested by Uncle Olen with his tractor and pull type combine, it was even worse than the time I stepped on a nail with both feet and couldn't walk. At least R.E. could carry me outside to play once in a while.

While I watched the harvest, wishing I could be out there riding in the combine bin with R.E. and Don, or ride in the wagon loads of wheat being pulled to the granary with Pa's Ford tractor, my only bedside companion was the gray house cat called Hilda and sometimes Bob, the Coonhound would come up to the bedroom window placing his front feet on the side of the house looking in through the window to see if I was all right.

Lying there with the hot dry wind blowing through the open window into my face, I could close my eyes and dream a wonderful dream when "those healing hands" would set me free again to run down dusty cow trails with a hound at my side and the wind in my face.

Thank you Lord for allowing me to run again.

DUST