

# THE REEL STORY



BY BILL RENFRO

## THIS BOOK

THE STORIES TOLD IN THIS BOOK ARE TRUE ---- EXCEPT THOSE THAT I MADE UP.

THE STORIES ARE ABOUT A TIME LONG GONE IN THIS COUNTRY, A TIME LESS COMPLICATED , WHEN EVERYONE IN YOUR WORLD KNEW AND RESPECTED EACH OTHER .

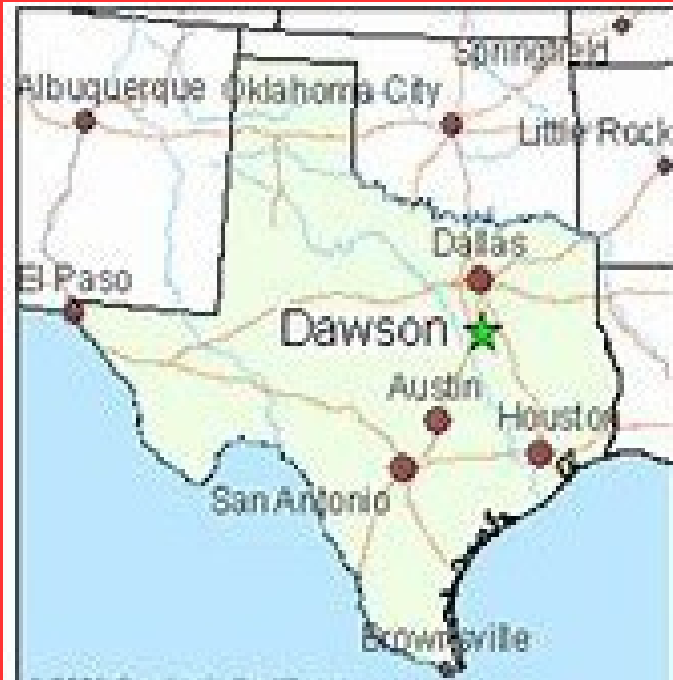
THE STORY IS ABOUT GROWING UP IN THE SMALL TOWN OF DAWSON, TEXAS .

“WHERE IS DAWSON ? “

“ I AM GLAD YOU ASKED ! “

“ DAWSON IS 18 MILES WEST OF CORSICANA ON HIGHWAY 31 TOWARDS WACO AND AUSTIN “.

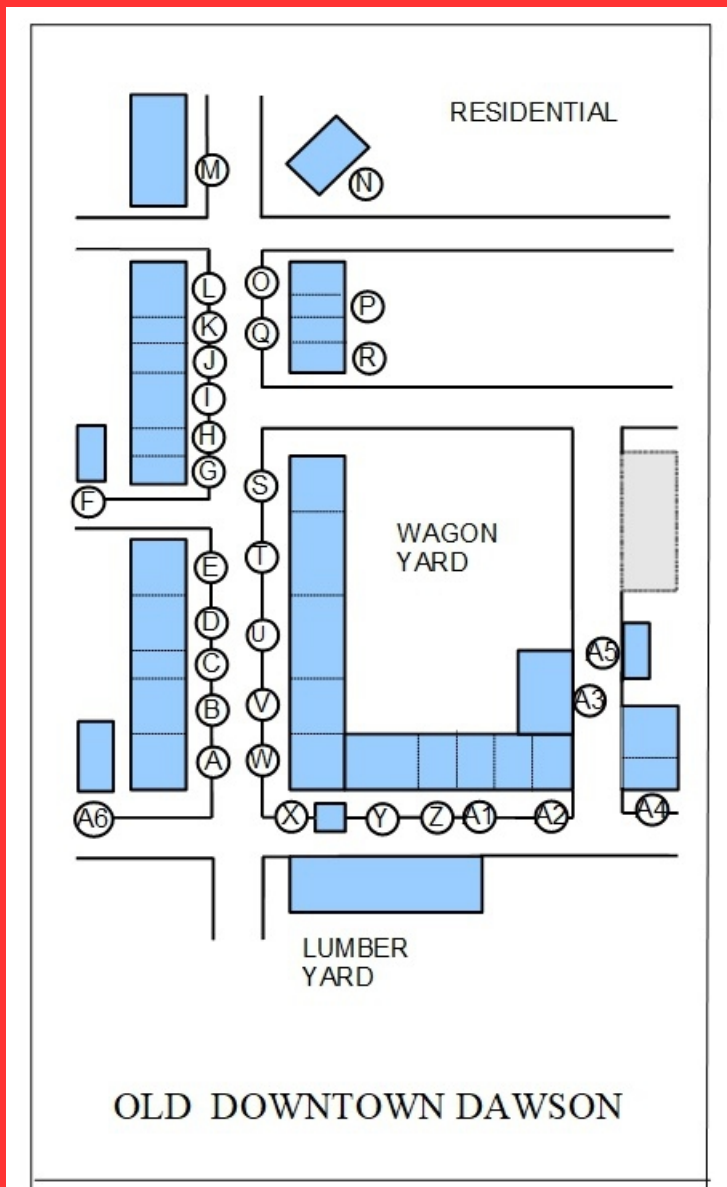
“ I HAVE A MAP TO SHOW WHERE THEY ARE LOCATED “.



“ THERE IT IS “.

## OLD DOWNTOWN DAWSON LEGEND

- A "BEASLEYS" CLOTHING STORE
- B "GARNER & SIMS" GROCERIES.
- C "FRANK TICKEL" BARBER SHOP
- D "MATHEWS" DRUG STORE
- E U S POST OFFICE
- F CITY JAIL HOUSE
- G "LANCASTER'S BARBER SHOP
- H "HORACE BERRY" HARNESS & SHOES
- I THE "RITZ" PICTURE SHOW
- J "SERVICE CLEANERS" DRY CLEANING
- K "THE SANDWICH SHOP"
- L "DOBBS" FUNERAL HOME
- M OLD GYMNASIUM
- N GAS STATION
- O "E. H. HAGLE" HARDWARE STORE
- P VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT
- Q GROCERY STORE
- R EMPTY BUILDING
- S THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK
- T "HAMPTONS" CLOTHING STORE
- U "LAWLERS" GROCERY STORE
- V GENERAL STORE
- W "IVY" GROCERY STORE
- X "PONDER'S" HAMBURGER PLACE
- Y DOCTOR'S OFFICE
- Z VACANT STORE
- A1 "THE WHITE FRONT" GROCERY STORE
- A2 "THE DAWSON HERALD" NEWSPAPER
- A3 "ROGERS AND ETTER" MECHANICS
- A4 "PRATER AND DAVIS" GAS STATION
- A5 POOL HALL
- A6 "C.M. LOWRIMORE" GAS STATION





## **THE PICTURE SHOW**

# REEL 1

**I** WAS AWAKENED BY THE AROMA OF THE COOKING OF A COUNTRY BREAKFAST THAT HAD DRIFTED FROM THE KITCHEN, ACROSS TO THE ROOM WHERE MY BROTHER AND I SLEPT.

**THIS** SMELL MEANT ONLY ONE THING -- THAT MON WAS COOKING OUR SPECIAL BACON OR HAM , OVER HARD EGGS , SOME OF MOM'S GREAT HOME MADE BISQUITS WITH PLENTY OF BUTTER AND SOME HOME MADE JELLY.

**I** JUMPED FROM THE BED, JERKED ON MY CLOTHES AND RUSHED TO THE KITCHEN.

“ I AM GLAD THAT YOU'R UP “  
SAID MOM.

“ I WAS JUST READY TO CALL YOU.  
DAD IS COMING FROM THE BARN  
ABOUT NOW , SO GET YOUR  
BROTHER UP WHILE I PUT THE  
THINGS ON THE TABLE “.

AS WE SAT AT THE TABLE AND ATE, WE WERE  
GIVEN THE PLANS FOR THE DAY. THIS WAS A  
SPECIAL DAY FOR COUNTRY FOLKS, BECAUSE  
THIS DAY WAS SATURDAY !!! . IT WAS  
SPECIAL BECAUSE THIS WAS THE DAY THAT  
MEANT THAT THE FARM WORK FOR THE  
WEEK WAS OVER AND WE NOW HAD TWO  
DAYS OF REST. ON SATURDAY, WE WENT TO  
TOWN, AND SUNDAY WE WENT TO CHURCH .



**THE** FIRST PART OF THE DAY IN TOWN WAS FOR MOM AND DAD TO GET OUR SUPPLIES THAT WE WOULD NEED FOR THE FOLLOWING WEEK. IT WAS ALSO A TIME TO SEE OLD FRIENDS THAT YOU HADN'T SEEN SINCE LAST WEEK. WHEN MY BROTHER AND I WERE SMALLER, WE HAD TO FOLLOW THEM AROUND, BUT AS WE GREW, WE WERE GIVEN A QUARTER OR SO THAT WE COULD SPEND FOR OURSELVES. THEN WE WOULD HEAD TO THE GROCERY STORE WHERE WE DID BUSINESS AND LOOK THROUGH THE GLASS FRONT OF THE CANDY DISPLAY . HERE WE HAD TO TAKE TIME TO MAKE A PROPER DECISION. THESE DAYS YOU COULD GET A LOT OF CANDY FOR A NICKLE. SOME TIMES WE WOULD EACH BUY DIFFERENT THINGS

SO THAT WE COULD TRADE WITH EACH OTHER AND SEEM TO HAVE MORE CANDY THAT WAY !.

**ON** THE DAYS THAT MOM AND DAD BOUGHT STEAK OR OTHER THINGS THAT WOULD NEED TO STAY COOL UNTIL WE HAD GONE TO THE MOVIES, WE WOULD DRIVE HOME TO PUT THESE THINGS IN THE REFRIGERATOR, AND AFTER WE HAD RESTED A WHILE WE WOULD DRIVE BACK TO TOWN IN TIME TO GO TO THE RITZ BEFORE THE LAST SHOW HAD STARTED.



## REEL 2

**EACH** WEEK THE RITZ STARTED ON MONDAY NIGHT WITH A NEW MOVIE THAT WOULD RUN THROUGH THE WEEK, AND WOULD START WITH NEW FILMS ON SATURDAY . THE MOVIES STARTED EARLY ON SATURDAYS WITH CARTOONS, SERIALS AND A WESTERN.

THE EARLY MOVIES WERE MADE FOR PARENTS TO USE AS A BABY SITTER. THEY COULD DROP THE KIDS OFF WHEN THE MOVIES STARTED AND PICK THEM UP AFTER THE THEATER CLOSED FOR A NOON BREAK.

FOR THE OLDER FOLKS THE RITZ STARTED THE NIGHT WITH THE SAME CARTOONS , SERIALS, AND DURING WW 2, A

NEWS FILM OF WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE WAR, SINCE DAWSON HAD MANY YOUNG MEN IN THE SERVICE, SOME WHO NEVER RETURNED; THEN CAME THE WESTERN PICTURE OF THE DAY, WHICH WAS RUN TWICE SO THAT SOME COULD HAVE A BREAK WHILE THE SECOND RAN . PEOPLE WERE ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE THEATER BETWEEN THE RUNS. ALL THAT WAS REQUIRED WAS TO HAVE MS. CONNER PLACE A MARK ON YOUR HAND THAT WOULD PROVE THAT YOU HAD PAID AND THEN YOU WERE ALLOWED BACK INSIDE. AFTER THE SECOND RUN OF THE WESTERN, THE MIDNIGHT MOVIE STARTED. IT WAS CALLED MIDNIGHT MOVIE BECAUSE IF YOU STAYED TO SEE IT, YOU WOULDN'T GET HOME UNTILL MIDNIGHT.

**THE** RITZ ALWAYS HAD THE LATEST MOVIES BECAUSE THE RITZ HAD BEEN IN BUSINESS SO LONG THAT HOLLYWOOD SENT THEM THE FIRST RUN MOVIES BEFORE MANY THEATERS IN MUCH LARGER TOWNS.

**I** REMEMBER THAT IN THE DAYS THAT HIGHWAY 31 RAN THRU DOWNTOWN DAWSON, THE GREYHOUND BUS WOULD STOP AND UNLOAD ALL THE BOXES OF REELS FOR MOVIES OF THE NEXT WEEK WHILE TAKING ON OR OFF PASSENGERS FROM THE DRUG STORE WHICH WAS THE DEPOT FOR GREYHOUND.



## REEL 3

**AT** THE TIME I WAS GROWING UP, DAWSON HAD A POPULATION OF JUST OVER 1,000 SOULS, BUT ON SATURDAY IT SEEMED TO GROW TO TWICE THAT MANY WHEN ALL THE SURROUNDING FARMERS AND FARM WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES FILLED THE STEETS AND SIDEWALKS.

**THERE** WERE TIMES THAT IT WAS HARD TO FIND A PLACE TO PARK OUR FORD MODEL A . THERE WAS HARDLY ENOUGH ROOM TO GET DOWN THE SIDEWALKS . FOR YEARS THE STORE OWNERS HAD BILLY LAWRENCE PUT A STAGE IN THE CENTER OF

THE STREET AND WOULD RUN A RAFFLE OF DIFFERENT THINGS THAT THE BUSINESSES HAD DONATED. WHEN YOU HAD BOUGHT THINGS ON SATURDAY YOU WOULD GET A RAFFLE TICKET THAT ALLOWED YOU TO TRY YOUR CHANCES TO RECEIVE THOSE FREE GOODS. THIS WAS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO DRAW A CROWD THAT I REMEMBER.

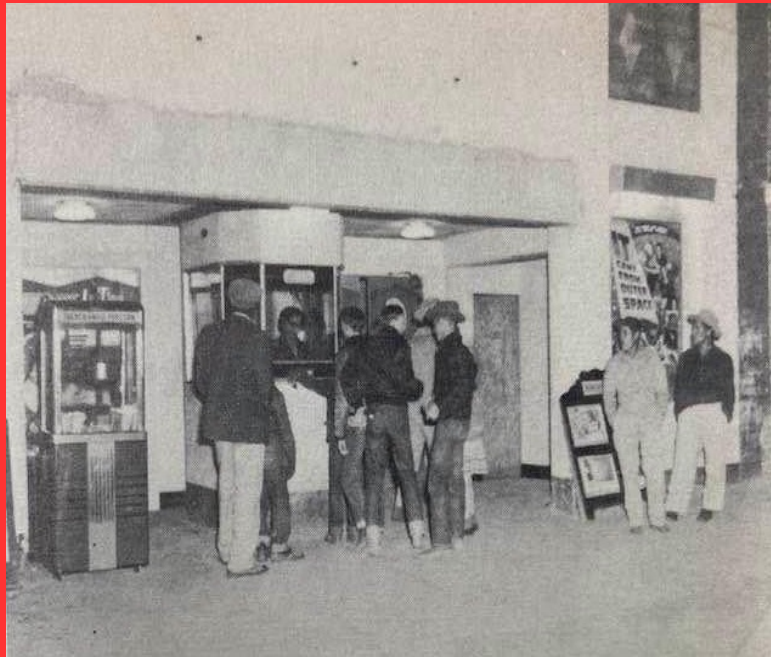
**AT** THIS TIME DAWSON HAD 4 GROCERY STORES, 2 DRYGOODS STORES, 2 BARBER SHOPS, A DRUGSTORE, A HARNESS / SHOE REPAIR SHOP , 2 DOCTORS , A POST OFFICE, A BANK , A HARDWARE STORE , 4 GAS STATIONS, 3 COTTON GINS, A DRYCLEANER, 4 WASHETERIAS , AND A NEWS PAPER. DAWSON WAS OUR NEW YORK CITY.



## REEL 4

**THE** RITZ THEATER WAS STARTED BY W. A. CONNER SOME TIME IN THE 1920'S . MR. CONNER HAD COME TO DAWSON TO BE THE AGENT OF THE COTTON BELT RAILROAD. HE NOT ONLY STARTED THE RITZ, HE OWNED THE CONNER DRYGOODS STORE. HE WAS APPOINTED TO BE THE POST MASTER BY THE U S PRESIDENT HERBERT HOOVER.

**HISTORY** OF THE RITZ SHOWS THAT IT WAS CLOSED NEAR THE END OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION BUT WAS REOPENED LATER AND THAT THERE MAY HAVE BEEN OTHER OWNERS, BUT AT THE TIME I WAS GROWING UP, IT WAS OWNED BY HARRY CONNER AND HIS WIFE.



**I** REMEMBER THAT HARRY CONNER HAD COME BACK FROM SERVING IN THE MILITARY, AND REMODELED THE RITZ AND REOPENED IT.

**THE** RITZ WAS RATHER SMALL FOR A MOVIE THEATER, BUT SEEMED JUST RIGHT FOR OUR LITTLE TOWN. THIS MAY ACCOUNT FOR IT BEING FILLED ON A SATURDAY NIGHT . I REMEMBER THAT THE ISLE RAN DOWN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM WITH SEATS ON EITHER SIDE. THE ISLE WAS CARPETED TO ABSORB SOUND. THERE WAS A LOBBY AREA AS YOU ENTERED THE THEATER. THIS AREA WAS FOR THE ENTRY AND EXIT FROM THE MOVIE AND WAS WHERE THE POPCORN MACHINE WAS LOCATED.

THE SEATS FROM THE BACK DOWN TO ABOUT HALF OF THE ROOM ALL HAD CUSHIONS. FROM THERE TO THE FRONT DID NOT. I THINK THAT THIS MEANT THAT MOST OF THESE SEATS WOULD BE FOR THE KIDS THAT LIKED TO SIT AS CLOSE TO THE SCREEN AS THEY COULD. THERE WAS A BALCONY AREA OVER THE ENTRY SECTION WHERE THE BLACK PEOPLE SAT. THE BALCONY AREA HAD AN ENTRY OUTSIDE WITH STAIRS THAT RAN UP TO THIS SPACE . THIS AREA ALSO CONTAINED THE PROJECTOR ROOM AND REEL STORAGE .

THE WALLS WERE COVERED WITH A COLORED MATERIAL TO PREVENT SOUND TRANSFER AND NOISE. THE SCREEN TOOK UP ABOUT HALF OF THE END WALL, WITH A DOOR THAT OPENED TO A STORAGE AREA BEHIND . THE THEATER WAS COOLED BY A

LARGE EVAPORATIVE COOLER OUT BACK WITH DUCTWORK THAT MOVED THE AIR TO THE INSIDE. THIS COOLER LOWERED THE TEMPERATURE DOWN ABOUT 20 DEGREES AND MADE THE THEATER THE COOLEST PLACE IN TOWN. AS YOU ENTERED THE THEATER, AFTER GIVING MS. CONNOR YOUR 25 CENTS YOU ENTERED IN FRONT OF THE POPCORN MACHINE, WHICH ALWAYS GOT MY LAST NICKLE. THE SOUND AND AROMA THAT CAME FROM THIS MACHINE FILLED ALL THE THEATER AND WAS ALMOST IRRESISTABLE. THERE WAS A PROBLEM WITH THE POPCORN HOWEVER, FOR THE BIG BOYS FOUND THAT AFTER YOU HAD EATEN YOUR POPCORN , YOU COULD HOLD THE PAPER BAG CLOSED AT THE TOP, BLOW DOWN INTO THE BAG, FILL IT WITH AIR, AND HIT THE BOTTOM REALLY

HARD. IT WOULD EXPLODE LIKE A FIRE CRACKER. THIS EXPLOSION WOULD RAISE MS. CONNER OUT OF HER SEAT AT THE FRONT AND SHE WOULD RUSH INSIDE AND WALK UP AND THE ISLE , LOOCKING LEFT AND RIGHT TO FIND THE PERP WHO HAD COMMITED THIS CRIME. SHE WAS A TEACHER AT SCHOOL AND KNEW MOST OF ALL THE KIDS AND PROBABLY KNEW WHO HAD DONE IT.

AFTER SOME TIME SHE SOLVED THAT PROBLEM BY BUYING NEW BAGS AND HAD SOME HOLES PUNCHED IN THEM. ADULTS JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO HAVE FUN !!



## REEL 5

**THE** RITZ WAS THE ONLY PLACE AROUND TOWN THAT A GUY COULD TAKE A DATE.

THE BACK AREA UNDER THE BALCONY WAS WHERE THE BIG GUYS AND THE ONES WITH GIRLFRIENDS SAT, WHICH WOULD BE BEHIND THE ADULTS SO THAT THEIR PARENTS COULD NOT SEE WHAT WAS GOING ON THERE. I KNOW FROM EXPERIENCE THAT THERE WAS A LOT OF HUGGING AND KISSING GOING ON BACK THERE, BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE I TOOK MY GIRLFRIEND , WHO TURNED OUT TO BE MY WIFE OF 70 YEARS. AT TIMES THERE WAS MORE NOISE FROM BACK THERE THAN FROM THE MOVIE, UNTIL SOMEONE WOULD WELL OUT **“SHUT UP“**.

DAWSON HAD A REAL CHARACTER THAT WE ALL LIKED AND WERE ALWAYS AMUSED BY. HE WAS A BLACK BOY, NAMED **ROBERT EARL** THIS WAS THE ONLY NAME WE KNEW , WE NEVER KNEW WHAT HIS LAST NAME WAS. HE WAS IN HIS LATE TWENTIES OR EARLY THIRTIES. ROBERT SEEMED TO BE SLIGHTLY BEHIND IN HIS THINKING BUT WE ALL LIKED HIM. HE WOULD CONSTANTLY WALK THE STREETS, VISITING WITH EVERYONE WHOM HE CAME INTO CONTACT . ONE OF THE THINGS THAT STOOD OUT ABOUT HIM, WAS HE ALWAYS WORE A PAIR OF BLACK GLOVES ,NO MATTER WHAT THE TEMPERATURE WAS, AND HE WAS CONSTANTLY RUBBING THOSE GLOVES HAND TO HAND. HE WAS A CHARACTER.



ON SATURDAY NIGHT HE WAS ALWAYS AT THE RITZ. ON THE FRONT ROW OF THE BALCONY. HE LOVED THE WESTERNS BEST, AS MOST OF US DID. WHEN HE SAW THE BAD MEN SLIPPING UP ON THE GOOD GUYS, HE WOULD START SAYING OUT LOUD, “UH-OO, UH-OO, UH-OO “ HE WANTED TO LET THE GOOD GUYS KNOW THAT THEY WERE ABOUT TO BE ATTACKED. HE WOULD SAY THIS UNTIL SOMEONE WOULD YELL OUT, “SHUT UP ROBERT EARL “. ALL OF THIS WAS WHAT MADE SATURDAYS AT THE RITZ SO MUCH FUN. I WISH I COULD RELIVE THOSE TIMES !!!

THE END



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