

Going to Town
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On rare occasions, our parents would decide they had to go to the city for shopping or other business. We only lived 16 miles from Duluth, but it represented a monumental event! It didn't happen often, so was regarded as a rare treat by us little ones. During WW II there was gasoline rationing, and that made a trip to town even rarer.

We started out by putting on our best clothes, which in the early days meant a clean shirt and a pair of bib overalls. Our hair got combed if we were going to visit someone, usually an uncle and aunt who lived in a shabby apartment next to the Granada Theatre. Sometimes, we'd get a haircut at the Granada barbershop by either Gus or Chris, the two barbers in residence. It was off the lobby of the Granada Theatre, and customers would come to the shop to buy candy or popcorn. A haircut cost just 50 cents in those days, which was big money. Sometimes people would try to sneak into the theatre through the barber shop; it never worked, the barbers, two ancient grey-haired guys, would chase them away. It made getting a haircut entertaining.

Our favorite treat was to receive 10 cents for the Saturday morning movie at the Lake Theatre, a run-down place that ran a double-feature (usually a cowboy story) and two short serials. If parents wanted to get rid of their kids for three or four hours, the Lake Theatre was just the thing. Usually the stars were Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tom Mix, and others of that genre. The set was always a desert somewhere in the west, a run-down town, lots of horses, six-guns, and the occasional Indian. There was always a bad guy and a well used saloon set that was used in innumerable films. There was always a good cowboy and a bad one who rode a black horse; the good cowboy always won after a long and complex set of shoot-out scenes from the back of horses. After three hours in the darkened theatre, we emerged into the sunshine half blinded and blinking in the bright sunlight.

Another popular movie house was the Lyceum, an old vaudeville theatre that outlived vaudeville and was converted to a third-rate B-movie format. It too showed double features on Saturday and was a mecca for little kids temporarily exiled from their families. It had once been a grand place, with a big organ and two balconies. If there were adults in the audience, the kids went up to the first balcony seating and cheered on their favorite stars.

Before Christmas, we went to town clutching a dollar or so that had been given for Christmas gifts for the family. Making a dollar stretch to buy three or four gifts was a difficult task, and usually meant visiting Kresge's or Woolworth's where we would spend an interminable amount of time deciding on appropriate gifts for brother, sister and parents. We spent endless periods conferring with brother or sister before deciding on a purchase. We could spend a half-day just looking for the proper gift for each. It had to cost less than a quarter or we couldn't afford it. We always went home swelled with pride over our wise choices for each family member.

Sometimes we would visit a Finnish family that lived on 8th street in Duluth. If the visit extended into the evening, us farm kids got introduced to some of those childhood games that require a sidewalk, like kick the can, hop-scotch and other city delights. Just being with other kids our own age was pure pleasure, and to be accepted in a group of city kids for play was heavenly indeed.

Just getting to town was an adventure. In the winter, the North Shore of Lake Superior was inhospitable and the temperature outside below zero. Our old jalopies usually had just a little heater located on the passenger side of the front seat. It turned out very little heat under the best of circumstances. On cold days the car started reluctantly. Our breath made a cloud, even inside the vehicle. The kids shivered in the back seat and complained all the way to town.

Getting back to the farm was always a letdown. Our adventure was over, and it was back to the daily routine of farm chores, school, and listening to the radio in the evening. We could only look forward to our next trip to town.