

TOP OF THE HILL

By Elsie J. [Titus] Martin

I never thought of myself as a nostalgic person until I took a little trip up the hill. That is, up the hill from where my parents lived for many years. At this point there is a small observation park where one may look up and down the Mississippi River and see much of Muscatine, Iowa. While sitting there my mind goes back to the time there was a radio tower for a small station located on this site. The call letters for this station were KTNT, said to have meant "Know The Naked Truth ". It was operated by a colorful character by the name of Norman Baker. He called himself a Doctor and claimed to have a cure for cancer and established a hospital in Muscatine and later a clinic in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. In 1940 he was convicted of using the mail to defraud, for advertising a cure for cancer and was sentenced to a four-year prison term. After his prison term he went to Mexico and broadcasted from a station there. He died September of 1958 in Miami, it is rumored he died aboard a three-story houseboat. The body was then brought back to Muscatine. Only 15 people attended the funeral services, his sister did, but not his two brothers. The reason I called him colorful was because of his dress habits. He wore white suits with purple shirts and red and purple ties. He also rode around in an orchid colored car when most cars then were black.

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Looking down at the marina, I see the many vessels docked there. Years ago there was no marina, just a lot of fishing boats tied up along the riverbank. Clammers used many of these small boats; they went out on the river to look for clam beds. The clams were harvested for the shell, used to make buttons. Some large and many small button factories sprang up all over the town. Circles cut out of the shells were ground down smooth and holes bored in them. A German immigrant who came to Muscatine in the early 1900's invented the button cutting machine. The meat of the clams was not wasted, it was fried, made into chowder and any other way people could think to prepare them. Muscatine at one time was known as the pearl button capital of the world. Little by little the supply of clams depleted down to nothing. There are still button factories here but the buttons are all cut out of plastics.

Although I was born in Muscatine, we lived in the small town of Wilton, for a few years. After moving back to Muscatine we first moved to the south end of town where I attended the old Garfield school. To get uptown, a distance of several miles, we took a shortcut, walking up the railroad track, [it was shorter and also forbidden]. At that time many trains went through the town. We later relocated to East Hill, and lived several places until we moved to Second Street Hill where my folks lived the rest of their days.

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The main street on East Hill is Park Avenue. Many businesses are located there. The beautiful Weed Park on the way out of town is a frequently visited place. The park has several shelters for picnickers and family gatherings, of which I have attended many. Other features are a swimming pool, tennis courts and a baseball diamond. There is still a shortage of rest rooms and as my generation grows older it is getting more difficult to climb those hills to locate one. The Greenwood cemetery is located on West Hill I am sure that we all probably have ancestors buried there.

Still at the overlook, I'm thinking back to my high school days. The last two years I worked at a sandwich shop to buy my books and clothing. Before I went home from school I would stop at the public library to do my homework. With so many brothers and sisters at home it could get a bit noisy. Once in a while I would stop at a local ice cream parlor for a cherry coke. After a YMCA Friday fun- night a Maid-Rite was great. A Maid -Rite, you ask? It is only the best loose meat sandwich ever made with mustard, pickle and onion. Accompanied with a root beer served in a frosty mug. Several years ago I got off the plane in Moline greeted with the news that all the Maid-Rites in Muscatine had closed. What? Not in the town where they had originated and spread all over the Midwestern States. So I had a Maid-Rite in Moline before my sister brought me to Muscatine. Several shops have reopened since then.

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I come back every summer for several months to visit friends and relatives. While I am here I try to meet with some of my classmates. Many of them have moved away as I have but still come home when they can.

I see the river front park where some of us children would pack our cheese or peanut butter sandwiches and go spend the day. By the time we ate those sandwiches they were pretty well beat up.

Carnivals always set up on the riverfront in the summer; one was setting up last summer on my way through town.

Some time during the summer a paddle wheel boat would come up the river and dock for a day or two. During the day it would take passengers up the river to Davenport. It docked there several hours while people went shopping before returning to Muscatine. In the evening it went down river, with live music for dancing, and returned about midnight. Everyone came back tired and happy, I know I did.

Mark Twain once stayed in a small house at the foot of the old bridge. This house has been preserved. The old bridge fell in; I think in the early fifties. A new one was built just below the hill. During the time it was being built cars were ferried across the river.

I decided that when I went down off the hill I would tour around the town. I wanted to see if some of the older homes still existed. Many of them still do and look well cared for.

One more look before leaving the hill. I realize the words "you can't go home again" are wrong. When I'm up here on the hill, I am home again.

