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Ike in Abilene

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ABILENE, KANSAS—It was a hot June day—hot even for Kansas—and the wide, clean streets of Abilene (pop., 6,000) were sizzling. The streets were empty except for a few kids who were putting up last-minute decorations on the post office. There were signs in every shop window and they all said the same thing: "Welcome Home, Ike."

Jonah Callahan's drugstore was the busiest place in town. So many people were drinking cokes that Jonah had run out of glasses. Back in a corner a bunch of men sat in their shirt sleeves chewing the fat.

"I hope it don't rain tomorrow," said Ed Graham, head of the parade committee, "and yet I hope it isn't too hot either."

"That's all it would have to do—rain," Sam Heller said. "Everything else has happened. The Chamber of Commerce ordered pictures of Ike and the damned Kansas City printers sent down 3,000 of them with Ike only having four stars."

"Dwight won't mind," Jonah Callahan said. "He was never one for ceremony."

The men at the table, all of whom had known Ike as a boy, started reminiscing. Phil Heath, the 74-year-old postmaster who had had a big hand in sending the young Eisenhower boy to West Point, told about the time Ike came in to see about going to the Academy.

"I was running the town paper then and one night after supper a tall boy dressed in a light gray suit came into the office. 'I'm Dwight Eisenhower,' he said. 'I want to go to West Point. Someone told me that you might be able to help me out.'

"Well, as it happened, Joe Bristow from Salina was our senator that year. Joe was a Progressive and so was I. In fact, some of you might re-

Ike cuts the cake for his family after a big day in Abilene. Beside him are his son John and his wife.



member, I was the only blasted Progressive in Abilene.

"I tried to disillusion young Eisenhower because I knew Joe had about 10 fellows up for the Academy appointment, but the boy wouldn't disillusion. He just let me rave on and on and when I finished, he grinned and said, 'I still want to go to West Point, Mr. Heath.'

"He was an ambitious kid and likable even if his father wasn't on my side politically, so I put his name down. I found out that he was a pretty smart student and a hard worker, so when Joe Bristow asked me which boy I thought should get the appointment I named young Eisenhower."

"The way I remember Dwight is down in the furnace room of the creamery," said Paul Hoffmann, whose father was a partner in the Belle Springs Creamery where Ike once worked. "He always had some kind of a book in his hands. I was about four years younger than Dwight and always thought it funny that a football player read books."

"Well, he didn't have the book with him at left tackle," recalled Orrin Snyder, an Abilene farmer who had coached the high school football team. "But he sure was the grinningest football player I ever seen. He grinned when he tackled, grinned when he got hit—he grinned all the time."

On the green lawn of 201 South 4th Street, Johnny Wilson, aged 6, was doing somersaults. "Ike lives here," said Johnny. "And Ike's coming home tonight and he's a five-star general."

"You'd better stop showing off and get off the Eisenhowers' lawn," said Mary Helen, Johnny's 9-year-old sister.

The Eisenhower home is a white, two-story frame house with a roomy porch. It is similar to many other Abilene homes. In the front living room there are a comfortable couch, two easy chairs, an old-fashioned bookcase and a Morris

Ike in Abilene

No tanks, planes or guns in this parade. Some of Abilene's farming machines pass in review instead.



chair. The furniture in this room, like most of that in the other rooms, is the same as in the days when the six Eisenhower boys were chasing each other around the house.

There are no best sellers or Book of the Month Club selections on the book shelves. Next to two fat volumes of the "Standard Book of Knowledge" stands a volume of Cowper's poems. Then come "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Faust," "The Essays of Marcus Aurelius" and Gunn's "New Family Physics or Home Book of Health." On the top shelf are three volumes of "The Library of Electrical Science" and six volumes entitled "A Treatise on Refrigeration and Icemaking Machinery." David Eisenhower and his son Dwight studied those books.

Beyond the living room there is a small, comfortable room where Ike's mother likes to sit and knit and where once the Eisenhower boys did their lessons. In one corner stands an old upright piano and on top of it are pictures of the six boys, several old song books and a family Bible presented to the Eisenhowers in 1885. The picture of Ike was taken when he was a one-star general. On the bottom of the picture the general had written: "To my parents with love and affection for their devoted love."

In the dining room was a table piled high with boxes and letters, most of them addressed: "General Eisenhower, Abilene, Kansas." Some were just addressed: "General Eisenhower, Kansas."

"There have been over 300 letters in the past two days," said Mrs. E. C. Tillotson, a neighbor who was looking after the house until Mrs. Eisenhower returned from her meeting with her son in Kansas City.

"This morning," Mrs. Tillotson said, "they sent a swanky car with an Army chauffeur here to take Mrs. Eisenhower to Kansas City. I was joking with her and I said, 'Ida, well, you're a big shot now.'

"No, I'm not. I'm just a boy's mother," she said."

The general's train was due to arrive in Abilene at 9:30 that night, but by 8 o'clock the station platform was crowded and the MPs had formed a human rope to keep the people back. At one end of the platform was the Abilene town band, in cowboy costumes. Two pretty young drum majorettes flipped their batons in practice twirls and one red-headed, freckle-faced bandsman rattled his drum impatiently.

By 9:20 the whole town had gathered at the station. There were a few minutes of waiting and then from somewhere near the edge of town a whistle was heard over the babble of the crowd and a newly painted locomotive rumbled in. There were eight cars and the people had a clear view of all of them but they couldn't see Ike.

"Where's Ike?" several voices called out. Then, out of a window in one of the rear cars, an officer's cap appeared above a grinning face. The whole crowd must have spotted the general at the same moment, for suddenly a loud yell went up and the band started playing, "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here" and the drum majorettes began prancing and twirling their batons.

As soon as Ike hit the platform two dozen MPs formed a cordon around him and made for the swanky car that was to take him to the hotel. But Ike spotted Orrin Snyder and Jonah Callahan and went over and shook their hands.

"You got a little thin, Ike," Orrin Snyder said.

"Can't say the same for you," said the ex-left tackle to his well-padded coach.

Maj. H. F. Strowig handed Ike a huge wooden key to the city and the MPs started again to escort the general to the car. But Ike spotted one of the pretty drum majorettes and gave her a kiss, and somehow little Johnny Wilson managed

Ike in Abilene

to slip through the MP cordon and tug at the five-star's coat tails.

"Wanna see me do a somersault, Ike?" Johnny Wilson asked. For answer Ike bent down and kissed the top of Johnny's head.

By now he had walked far past the official car and started down Buckeye Street. The MPs tried to usher him back to the car but the general didn't want to go. "Hell, this ain't London or New York," somebody yelled into the MP officer's ear. "This is Ike's home and he wants to go visiting."

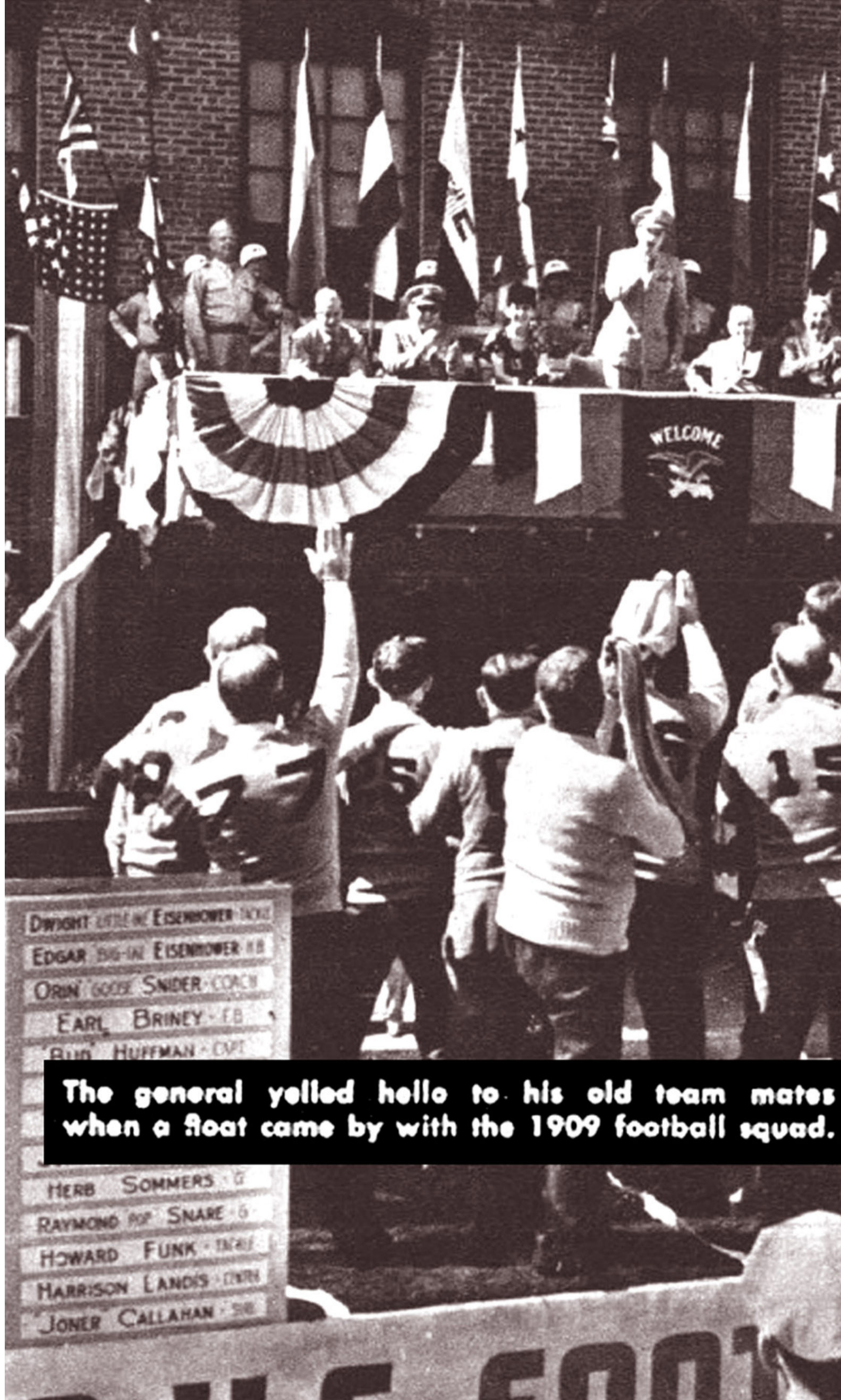
Ike went visiting. He walked down Buckeye, turned left on Second Street and then walked slowly back to the station. He kissed the girls, shook hands with everybody in sight and grinned from ear to ear. Then he went back to the train and they moved it down to a siding. Ike was in bed and asleep by 10.

At 10 the next morning the general climbed into a green, open car and started for the Lamer Hotel on Third Street. On the way he spotted T/Sgt. Walter Sapp, a fellow citizen of Abilene who had been a platoon leader with the 5th Division in France and Germany. "Climb in here, Walter," Ike said. "This is your day, too."

The sergeant got into the front seat and the Allied supreme commander made the ex-platoon leader stand up and take the bows.

The reviewing stand on the second floor of the Lamer Hotel was pretty different from the reviewing stands that Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower had been on in London, Paris, Washington and New York City. There wasn't any other brass except the general's aide, and most of the people on Third Street had known Ike all their lives.

As soon as the Eisenhower party was seated, a gun boomed and the parade began. It wasn't a military parade. It told the story of a barefoot boy's rise from fishing jaunts on nearby Mud Creek to command of the Allied expeditionary force that defeated Fascism in Western Europe. There were floats to show Ike's early school days, his high school football team, his years as a cadet



The general yelled hello to his old team mates when a float came by with the 1909 football squad.

at West Point and his latest military triumphs on the battlefields of Europe.

The parade told the story of Abilene, too—of the days when the town was the railhead for the Chisholm Trail, of the time when Wild Bill Hickok was sheriff. It ended up showing Abilene's agricultural contributions to this war.

Eisenhower reviewed this parade as he never had another. He clapped his hands, marked time to the music with his feet and saluted everybody in the parade but the prize bull that was led past. When the float with the members of the 1909 football team went by, he rose to his feet and there seemed to be a lump in his throat as he called out to his former teammates.

By noon the parade was over and the crowd moved out to Eisenhower Park—it was City Park originally, but got its new name last year—where the general made a short speech. For the first time the grin left his face.

"I am not a hero," he said. "I am merely a symbol of the heroes you sent across the sea. Take the soldiers to your heart as you have taken me."

After the speech, several ETO veterans with Purple Hearts climbed up on the platform and the general hugged the first one up and shook hands with the others.

When his car arrived back at the hotel, a pretty girl broke through the lines and started toward the general. "Lady," said a state trooper, "you can't see General Eisenhower now."

"I don't want to see Eisenhower," said the girl. "I want to see my husband."

Her husband was Sgt. Walter Sapp. She ran to

Ike in Abilene

him and they embraced and everybody, including the state trooper, laughed.

On the mezzanine of the Lamer Hotel the Eisenhower clan gathered for a reunion. There were 33 members of the family on hand. Ike sat at the center of the table.

"Buddy," he said to his brother Earl's young son, "move your seat closer to the table so you can get a good look at your food."

A waitress brought in a huge cake decorated with 48 little American flags. Ike cut the cake and handed the first piece to his son John. All tenseness was gone from the general's tanned face and his eyes were soft. "Well, folks," he said, "let's eat."

The Old Man was finally home.



The general had seen welcomes in Paris and London and Washington and New York, but he got the warmest reception of all when he hit his boyhood home town, little Abilene, Kansas.