

“SOUNDS GOOD TO ME”

A speech delivered to the Blayney Rotary Club
Wednesday evening, 28th August 1989

Calvin Coolidge, was President of the United States of America, from 1923-1929. He was once asked by a friend, “How long does it take you to prepare a fifteen minutes speech”? “Two hours”, he replied. “What about a half hour speech”? “One hour”, he said.

“And if you were scheduled to speak for an hour”?

“I’m ready right now”!! he blurted out before his friend could finish his question.

I’m not going to speak to you for an hour — and I am not going to try to sell you any books. — Nor do I intend to entertain you — I am not an actor. Though in my final year in Theological College, after conducting a Service of Worship under the supervision of the Deputy Principal, who, during an assessment in an adjoining hall afterward, began by saying “Don’t you think Victor is a bit of an actor”? And with one accord, the entire congregation present, shouted out, “No, don’t change him”! There is nothing wrong with being an actor. — It seems to be inborn in some people. However in our day one needs to be trained, for this gift to become effective. There were actors in the Bible, you know? The greatest of them all was Samson — he was the only one who ever brought the house down.

Actually, what I have to say, is to a degree, the result of some warm encouragement coming from a number of people who had listened to a talk I had given at a meeting. Different ones said to me afterward — “You ought to write a book on your experiences’

“BUT” — replied — “I am not a writer. One response to my apologetic, hit me with some force — “Tell it like it is”! It warmed my heart. I went home and began to write — screwing up paper — and writing — screwing up paper and writing again. On and on it went — but nothing seemed to happen as I thought it would. It wasn’t easy to tell it like it is. Yet I persevered — and then one day, I could almost hear myself say, “Hm! — Sounds Good to me”.

We DO use that expression at times — don’t we? Mostly, of course, when talking to ourself — when something captures our imagination or fancy — and a little voice within says — “Hm! — sounds good to me”!

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

a) The Blacksmith Shop:

I was visiting a small country village that was celebrating a Triennial Festival. The village was alive and active — with people crowding the streets and side walks. Some of the locals wore colonial costume — quite a contrast to contemporary country dress of the average visitor.

As with all such celebrations — stalls were set up along the footpaths — some out in the open — others under street awnings. I joined the rank-and-file — viewing the various displays of paintings — copper art — leather goods — pottery — knitware and even hunting cutlery.

I walked up one side of the street — and down the other side — crossing a bridge over the river where people sat on the grassy slopes below — some picnicking beneath the willows.

A hundred yards or so — up the road — an exhibition of early farming machinery in a vacant allotment, captured a lot of attention — I was attracted to the traction engine and the chaff cutting machinery — when my ears picked up a familiar sound — I turned and made straight for the blacksmith shop where a smithy, wielding a hammer, shaped a horse shoe on an anvil— a craft which began to die out before the beginning of World war II and had now leapt into the present to provide a rare treat for the young families gathered round.

The ring of the hammer bouncing on the anvil, sent my mind floating back to the time when I was just a kid — standing in front of the old blacksmith shop next to the home where I was born. A door opening at the front and one at the back, were the only source of light in the workshop area. But there were rays of sunlight shining through nail holes in the iron roof. They penetrated the floating dust and smoke and shone in bright spots on the earth floor.

My eyes were fixed on the smithy's strong muscular arm working a lever that operated the huge bellows, behind the forge. With each bend of the elbow blue and yellow flames shot up from the red hot coals. Then he poked a steel bar into the coals and sparks scattered and floated upward, snuffing out as they reached the roof — that excited me.

I watched the rhythmic action of the smithy's arm as he struck the white hot steel with a hammer — then bounced on the hard surface of the massive steel anvil. The thud of each blow, and the metallic ring when hammer and anvil met, fascinated me. It is perhaps no wonder that I became a clever sheet metal tradesman — especially using the hammer.

b) The Railway Yard:

Our home was nestled between the blacksmith shop and a paddock, where old farm machines stood rusting along our side fence. A huge chaff shed, used by swaggies during the Great Depression, formed part of our side boundary in the back yard down near the back lane. All country homes were situated on a large block that extended to a back lane, mostly used by the sanitary cart and the garbage man.

A split log railing fence, formed the boundary of the railway yard, just across the lane from our place, I could climb through the fence — but dad had to climb over it. Between this fence and a cinder embankment, a stretch of luscious green grass was a great play area for me. I used to shoot a granny smith apple through the grass, until the apple was soft and juicy — then, sit on a fence railing and eat it.

The area above the cinder embankment was like a plateau. It was flat — there was a gravel roadway — and beyond that, the various shunting tracks — the main railway line, and a loop-line. Beside the loop-line a huge concrete six bin wheat silo, stood majestically tall. Just down the line, opposite the goods shed, a second silo stood — a giant concrete monument to the rural industry of the district.

I loved — the shrill whistle of the shunting engine — the deep-throated blast from the goods engine — and the baritone pitch of the mail train, which greeted me as it passed beneath the overhead pedestrian bridge on which I used to stand — to become enveloped in smoke and steam.

I think, most of all, I loved the k-lonk – k-lonk of the D-57 and the Gareth engines as they passed through, pulling what seemed to me like a mile of trucks. This fascinating sound comes from the

slack in the slide bars when the piston reached the front end of the stroke and was about to return. k-lonk – k-lonk – k-lonk – k-lonk.

I used to sit on a fence post at the railway yard, watching the guard waving his arm and blowing his whistle— directing the shunting of railway trucks. This captivated my imagination, and I asked mum to buy me a whistle just like the one the guard used. She did — and from then on, sitting on my favourite post, I began mimicking each blast that came from the guards whistle — that is, until he ‘blew his top’ and shouted some profane words at me — naturally I didn’t blow my whistle there any more.

c) The Circus:

Like all kids — and adults —I looked forward each year to the arrival of Wirths’s Circus by train. It arrived over night — a line of railway trucks loaded with animal cages and circus equipment stood in front of the silos. The exciting part of this was — the use of an elephant to move the rolling stock. Responding to the voice of its trainer and the goading of a spike — it pushed the trucks with such ease along the track, to a siding, where the cages and equipment were off loaded and drawn by other elephants, round to the site where the marquee was to be erected.

Across the street from the circus site, stood the town Flour Mill. By lodging a bag of wheat with them, we would receive in return, a bag of pollard — a bag of bran — a calico sac of flour and one of wheatmeal porridge. An interesting feature about the flour mill, was the one o’clock whistle that blew from its tower each day. It was a reminder to the business houses, that it was time to shut shop and go home for lunch. In contrast — each Sunday, the ringing of church bells all over town, was a reminder to attend worship.

d) The Pealing of Bells:

The pealing of bells in a country town was very significant — not only as a reminder of the time of day or the time for worship — but there was the School bell — a calling us to fall in line in the quadrangle — or a reminder that it was play time — or lunch time. Then there was the bell sounding that school was over and it was time to go home — GREAT! — that is, if you weren’t kept in!

I remember one lunch time — there was a kid who pooped his pants. He sat on the edge of the verandah — a kaki liquid giving of an abominable smell — running down his legs. The kid was howling — and to make matters worse — other kids poked fun at him —“Kinky’s pooped his pants”! they yelled. It was humiliating for him. I knew he came from a family of poor circumstances — I had compassion on him and took him by the hand — “Come on, I’ll take you home”.

Then there were the fire bells that pealed whenever there was a fire. This brought people out of their beds — and after searching for the red glow in the sky — set off in their pyjamas, and bare footed, to the scene of the blaze.

Round about that same year, I well remember a special train visited the school. It was just like an ordinary steam train. It was green, with a bell clanging just like the American locomotives. The only difference was — this train ran on pneumatic tyres along the road — pulling a single carriage – it was called “The Trackless Train”. School children assembled on the footpath outside the school grounds and listened to the driver relate the history of his invention, and its travels. The strange part about all this is — I have not met anyone since that time — who ever remembers the Trackless Train.

Then there was the “Great White Train” that visited our town — stationed in the shunting yard opposite the wheat silos. It was open to the public — to visit and learn of about the scientific wonders of the late twenties. Next year this exhibit was followed by a visit from the “Better Farming Train” — displaying the latest farming methods and produce of the land.

e) The Mechanical Age:

Every country town responds to something exciting. The age of my youth was an era of new sights and sounds — from horses to motor cars. Then I remember hearing a little tiger moth plane flying over our town. I chased it for what seemed to be miles — this wonder in the sky — until it disappeared from sight. Tired, I had a long walk home.

Then there was the visit of Kingsford Smith’s Southern Cross — an enormous three-engined Fokker monoplane. It landed in a paddock on a farm about two miles out of town. My mates and I literally ran out to see this giant wonder of a modern age. Those who could afford it — payed 5/- for a fifteen minutes joy ride.

The T-model Ford and the Chevrolet car began to appear in our main street. Then when one day, a brand new car — a Woolsley — with a curved front parked in the main street, I thought the future had come into the present.

The horse and sulky were slowly giving way to motorised transport. I loved the sulky ride into town. We kept to the dust at the side of the road to miss all the corrugations. The journey wasn’t always pleasant, particularly in the summer when the nauseating smell of sweat from the heat of the horses back, floated back into our faces.

One day the steel tyre on the right wheel of the sulky gave signs of needing attention. On reaching town, we called at the old blacksmith shop. A few farmers were already standing round the anvil watching the smithy shape a piece of red hot steel into a horse shoe.

The ring of the hammer as it bounced on the anvil, awakened me to the present scene — the Triennial Festival blacksmith demonstration — aware that I was standing with other families watching a smithy forming of a horse shoe. The families had moved away and I was left standing — alone — in a dream — watching the smithy — listening to sounds that had carried me back to those happy childhood days.

“Hm! — sounds good to me”! I said to myself as I too began to walk away feeling fully satisfied.