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Western Oklahoma success

Oklahoma Charlie

By Ruth Tittle

The old man sat in his wheel chair staring out in the stormy night. The wind blew the rain drops hard against the window causing a loud roar, but in his mind he heard applause. "That was great, Fred" shouted Morty, the short stocky man who had opened and closed the curtain of the Washita County Community Theater ever since its beginning ten years before, in 1914.

"Well, thank you, Morty," Fred said, "Pretty good if I do say so myself. In fact I think I'll go out an' bow for 'em one more time."

Fred, enjoying the loud applause, was unaware of the tall slender stranger who had appeared in the wings. With his left foot propped against the wall, match stick in his mouth and hat pulled down over one eye, the stranger looked more like the gansters on the silver screen down at the theater than a vaudeville entertainer. "Hey kid, you're good, but you could be better," the stranger said to Fred, as he was returning from his glorious triumph.

"Oh yea, mister? Who do you think you are?" Did you hear that applause?" Fred asked.

"Yea, kid I did, but that doesn't change what I said. You need a partner," the stranger said as he stood up straight, pushing his hat to the back of his head, "and tonight is your lucky night because I'm in the market for one."

"Look man, I don't know what makes you think I'd want a partner. I'm doing okay by myself, thanks," Fred said.

"Tell me kid, have you ever been to Broadway? Let me buy you a cup of coffee and I'll tell you how to get there."

All the way to the diner Fred wondered if he was crazy for even considering the idea. That kind of thing doesn't happen to just anybody, much less a country boy.

As they sat there in the diner, the stranger told of experiences and tri-

umphs that he had lived and that Fred had only dreamed of. There were endless stories of towns and people; Fred could not believe it when he looked up at the clock above the counter. It seemed like only five minutes, but it had been two hours. He knew it would soon be closing time, and the waitress who had been waiting for them to leave voluntarily would soon be demanding it. He had listened intently and eagerly to the stranger's fantastic stories despite his first misgivings. He now found himself dreading to ask the question that a few minutes ago he would have asked enthusiastically. Before he knew it, the words had spilled out of his mouth, "If you know all these people and played all these places, then what are you doing here?"

"Well kid, I guess you could say some bad luck came my way and I decided to come home for a while."

"You mean to tell me you're from,"

Before Fred could get the words out, the patient waitress had lost her patience and was standing over them holding the check, "Look, gents, it's 12:35, and I got off five minutes ago, so would you mind takin' your party elsewhere?" She glared.

"Well, I guess we'd better call it a night. She does look a bit tired," the stranger observed. He stood up and walked over to the register and paid the check. He smiled at the waitress and pushed open the door.

The two men walked out onto the deserted street: they walked in silence to the corner. "Well it's been nice talking to you. I think I'll turn in," the stranger said, turning to walk away.

"Hey, wait a minute. I don't even know your name," Fred interrupted.

"Oh yea, I don't believe I did mention that. It's Charlie or they used to call me "Oklahoma Charlie." Fred was amazed he knew that name. He'd read about him in VARIETY. Before Fred could

recover from his surprise, he heard Charlie saying, "Get a good night's sleep, kid. I'll come by for breakfast and tell you my plan." He turned into the dark and was gone.

"Hey," Fred shouted after him, "You don't know where I live. And what plan? Plan for what?"

All the way home Fred wondered if he was dreaming or if he was crazy. By the time he had walked the five blocks to his upstairs apartment, he decided he wasn't dreaming and it wasn't him who was crazy — it had to be this Charlie guy. He told himself nobody leaves Broadway to come back here. Do they? He decided to put this out of his mind and get some sleep; tomorrow was a busy day.

It seemed to Fred he had just gone to sleep and was in the middle of a good dream, his favorite. He was doing an Al Jolson imitation for a packed house at the Adolfo theater on Broadway when he was startled by loud knocking at his door. "Hey, kid, get up. We got things to do." Fred realized it was Charlie yelling at the door. "Would you hurry up? It's cold out here."

Fred grabbed his tattered bathrobe and tumbled to the door. "How'd you find me? I didn't tell you where I lived," Fred mumbled as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Don't you know this is a small town? People know what your school marm does on her Sundays out of town, and you expect your whereabouts to be a secret. Look, I've got something on my mind besides town gossip. I want to talk to you about an opportunity we've got to make some money to get us on our way to New York," Charlie said as he walked through the door past Fred. "And I haven't got all day, so do you want to put some clothes on?"

"Look Charlie, I'm just an amateur performer. I have a job at the Thompson's Feed and Seed that pays the rent,

and they expect me to be at the store after a while. I can't run around with you."

"Oh, I realize that you'll have to go by and let them know and all that, but the Sullivan family circus has agreed to let us audition for them and we've not got very much time for me to teach you a routine," Charlie continued undaunted by Fred's objection.

"Are you kidding?" Fred squeaked. "You mean you want me to quit my job for an audition for a rinky dink circus job that we might not get and if we did, travel around Southwest Oklahoma and parts of Texas? That's your idea of preparing for Broadway? And what would you have to teach me that I don't already know to perform for some greasy circus travelers? What do they know about vaudeville?" Fred demanded.

"Nothing, kid, not a thing. They want something to draw a crowd, a little razzle dazzle. The Sullivans wouldn't know professionals if they came up and sat down beside 'em," Charlie answered. "True, it's not a traveling Broadway show, but it's a good way for you to gain some experience and make money at the same time; Besides, I've seen the competition and we can handle Billie Bob's musical spoons. So why don't we get on down to the store and get this chore over with?"

Fred tried to prepare something to say to Mr. Brundy, the manager, as he and Charlie walked to the store. He decided to just come out and tell him. Mr. Brundy took the news about as Fred had expected he would. "Are you crazy? No respectable man quits his job without proper notice," He yelled after Fred as he turned around towards the door. Fred was feeling a little sick inside and decided it would be best not to try to explain anything to Mr. Brundy. Charlie was standing in his old familiar pose, one leg bent behind him propped up against the post outside, chewing on his match stick waiting as calmly as if he were just relaxing and enjoying the sun. As the screen door shut behind him, Fred heard Mr. Brundy shout, "And don't come runnin' back here when this stupid business about makin' it big with some ol' has-been flops in your face, cause I won't take you back. Do you hear?"

Charlie began to talk as though everything had gone great. "Hey kid, I've got a new gimmick: parrots—talking parrots. What do you think, huh? We can train 'em to answer questions, and one can be the straight man and the other the comedian," Charlie exclaimed.

"Where are we going to get our hands on some parrots?" Fred grunted.

"Well, this friend of mine asked me if I'd take these two crates to his restaurant. He's got a couple of parrots and he's going to let me have them for my trouble," Charlie explained. "Why don't you ride with me over there? He's going to let me use his brand new Model T and we can drop by and pick up the birds when we're through. We'll have plenty of time to work them into an act for the audition tomorrow afternoon."

Fred looked as though he had received the final blow. "Tomorrow?" he gasped. "You mean we've got to train birds, put together an act, and be ready to perform by tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it. I've worked with birds in a couple of shows. There's nothing to it, and you're already good enough to impress the Sullivans," Charlie answered.

The ride to the restaurant was mostly silent. The Model T's clanking and rumbling kept there from being total quiet. Fred broke the silence as they pulled up in front of Franz's cafe. "What are we doing here?" Fred squawked. "This is the restaurant? Charlie, everybody knows this is a speakeasy. Oklahoma's dry. If we get caught here,"

"We're not doing anything illegal," Charlie interrupted. "My friend has assured me this is only seltzer water." Fred was not reassured. This dream was turning into a nightmare. What could go wrong next? No sooner had Charlie's smiling face disappeared behind the huge door than his question was answered. The sheriff's car whizzed past the Model T so quickly the officers didn't see the car parked in the shadow of the big oak tree. Fred tried to keep from going into a panic. "What do I do?" he said aloud. "I knew this would happen." He began to debate whether to try to drive away the car while the sheriff's men were inside. Charlie

would just have to get himself out of this mess. Fred was so deeply engrossed in his thoughts he didn't see the car door open. "Are you ready to go get those birds?" Charlie asked.

"What?" screamed Fred. "I didn't see you coming. I told you this would happen. What are we going to do now? We're going to jail. My life is over," Fred rambled.

"Here, here, calm down," Charlie chided. "You're forgetting, I'm from around here. This is no problem; they haven't spotted us yet. Get out and help me push the car down the lane. We'll cut through and come out on the old farm road and no one will ever know we were here."

Fred's heart was beating so fast he didn't think he would be able to move, much less push a car. When they had successfully slipped through the lane and were pattering down the old farm road, the sheriff's siren screamed. As the car roared around the corner, Fred's face took on a panic again. He was sure they had been discovered. When the car sped around them, Charlie could no longer hold his laughter. "You don't get around much do you?" Charlie laughed.

The next morning Fred was hoping it had all been a nightmare. He kept his eyes closed until he heard one of the parrots squawk in the kitchen "Beautiful morning, beautiful morning." The whole night began to come back to him, the speakeasy, the sheriff's car, and the old man with greasy overalls, who stood out on the front porch with two bird cages in his hands. Fred wasn't any more thrilled about it now than he was when Charlie came striding back to the car with a grin from ear to ear and full of anticipation.

Breakfast was the only thing Fred could think of that had gone right this morning. Charlie had promised him that five hours of practice would be enough for the Sullivans. They each carried a cage to the community hall where they could put together the birds and some music for an act. Charlie was the most talented man Fred could ever remember seeing. He had his parrot talking in no time and had spent the remainder of the morning playing the piano, violin, and mandolin, working them up a quick routine. Fred

had struggled all morning to teach his bird his lines, but the bird wouldn't say a thing. He tried everything Charlie suggested, but nothing, not a word. It was only thirty more minutes until time for the audition, and Charlie would be back from the drugstore any minute. He had gone to get some black shoe polish for their faces. Fred couldn't stand the frustration any longer. He called the bird every name he could think of and used language he had not used since his mother washed his mouth with homemade soap when he was seven years old. Charlie walked in just in time to hear his bird repeat everything Fred had called his muted bird. "Fred, oh no, what have you done?" Charlie gasped.

"I couldn't help myself," Fred answered.

"Well, yours won't say anything and mine says too much. I guess we're going to have to abandon the parrots. We can't use them in the act now." Charlie shrugged. "Let's get going." He continued, "It'll be time to start by the time we get over to the carnival grounds and the Sullivans may not be classy, but they're on time. We'll just have to rely on talent, not props."

It was the first thing that had gone without event in two days in Fred's life. The reason for this was probably that the only Sullivan brother that showed up to audition them was drunk and probably wouldn't have noticed any mistakes if he'd been sober. He was too busy guzzling down a beer and playing with the bleached blond on his lap. He glanced up periodically to say, "Yea, yea, that's fine." He didn't even notice when Charlie played the last note on the piano. Fred with his arms spread out thought he was going to collapse before he noticed they were through. The blond on his lap almost fell to the floor when he stood up. "Okay, you guys can have the job," he said biting his cigar, "The spoons didn't show up. We leave tomorrow at 7:00 a.m.; be here or we'll leave ya." He turned, grabbed his blond by the waist, and walked out of the tent. Charlie laughed until he shook. Can you believe it, kid?" Fred dropped down on both knees and began to laugh as hard as Charlie.

Everything Fred owned was outside in boxes when Charlie got there at 6:30 a.m. "Franz was glad to get his birds back," Charlie said as he walked up the steps. "He said he missed 'em at the cafe. He told me he hoped you didn't mind dodgin' the law the other night, but he'd would have rather parted with his birds than lose his place."

"No, why should I mind?" Fred answered sarcastically.

"We'd better get down to the grounds before the Sullivans think I stole their truck," Charlie said.

Everything from animals to clowns was loaded and rolling down the road in twenty minutes after Fred and Charlie got there. They reached the next town by morning and were unloaded at about the same speed as they had loaded.

After three months of loading and unloading at record speeds, doing two shows a day for three days and then on to the next town, Fred wasn't quite sure when Charlie had really taught him all the things he had promised to teach him that night at the diner. They worked together so smoothly now that everywhere they went crowds showed up to see them. They put everything back they had made for the three months they were on the road. Saving their money had paid off; by the time they had reached Amarillo in November, the cigar box finally contained bus fare to New York. Charlie had told him that things got very slow for the circus during the winter months and it would be the best time to try their luck.

Charlie didn't say much during the long bus ride. It was the first time since Fred had known him that he had seen Charlie quiet. He wondered if it was the bad luck that he had spoken of before that was on his mind. Charlie had never seemed to want to talk about it, and Fred thought it best to leave it alone. The sun was coming up over the high rises when the bus pulled into Manhattan station. Fred was awe struck. "What a place. It's better than pictures," Fred said.

"Come on, kid," Charlie chided, "before someone spots you as a tourist. Before we left Amarillo I wrote one of the only friends I had left in town that we were coming. He told me to give him

a call when we got here and he'd see if he could set up an audition for us."

"Well, go call him," Fred said.

The smile on Charlie's face as he walked from the phone booth was the first one Fred had seen in two days. "We go this afternoon at three," Charlie said. "Let's go find us a place to stay and leave off our things."

It was 2:25 p.m. when they got to the theater. Charlie had wanted to be early so they could go completely through one time before the producer of the show got there. The rehearsal went without flaw, but didn't seem to calm Charlie's nerves much. Fred couldn't believe it; Charlie was actually more nervous than he was. The lights went out in the auditorium, and Fred couldn't see who shouted "Okay fellas, let's see your act." Fred felt as though he and Charlie were being smiled down on; they had never done better. Charlie looked over at Fred and smiled his old familiar smile. He felt it too. The voice in the audience shouted "Okay, thanks. We'll let you know tomorrow."

"Why don't we go back to the hotel and wait it out?" Charlie sighed.

Fred tossed and turned. He couldn't relax and go to sleep. He looked over at the other bed; Charlie was so still he decided he was sleeping.

"Hey, Fred, are you asleep?" Charlie asked.

"No, I'm still up."

"I wanted to tell you why I came home. I didn't tell you before because I didn't think you knew me well enough to believe me; but it's the truth. Two years ago my partner became involved with some gangsters who take welching on gambling debts pretty seriously. He stole \$12,000 from our show's producers. When they arrested him, my name was ruined too. Everyone in town thought I knew about it, even though there was no evidence to make me a part of it. Nobody would hire me. It didn't take me long to run through my savings and when I was broke I didn't know where else to go but home to Washita. When I saw you there, you had more talent than I had ever seen and I knew you could give me the spark I needed to make it back. I just wanted you to know if we don't get the job tomorrow, it's not because of lack of talent. You'll

make it big someday, kid. You've got what it takes. Goodnight."

Fred thought it best not to say anything but goodnight in return. He knew Charlie well enough now to have no doubts about what he had told him. He knew Charlie was right; last August he probably would have had his doubts.

Fred was so tired he didn't appreciate the beautiful sunrise. He wished only that the shade was down to block the sunlight out, so he could drift back to sleep. "Okay sleepy head, you stay in bed for a few more winks. I'll go across the street to the coffee shop and wait for the phone call," Charlie said as he pulled down the shade. "But if we get the job you'll have to get up." Charlie teased. Fred appreciated the chance to go back to sleep. He hadn't realized how long Charlie had been gone, but it

was nearly eleven o'clock when he looked at his pocket watch. There surely must be some news by now, he thought. Fred hurried out of bed and into his clothes. He took the stairs two at a time and bounded out onto the sidewalk. Charlie was walking out of the coffee shop waving his arms and shouting across the street at Fred.

"We got it!"

Fred screamed at Charlie as he stepped down onto the street. The car came roaring around the corner going the wrong way down the street. Charlie never saw it coming. Fred rushed through the crowd to Charlie as the car sped away. "Hang on," Fred pleaded.

"You can make it without me," Charlie whispered. "It's just a little bad luck, and I always go home when I have bad luck."

The thunder clapped again and the old man was startled back to the present. He gazed out at the rain. It must have been the first time Charlie had crossed his mind in years. Charlie had opened the door for him that summer and changed his life. "Fred," one of the nurses called; "The reporter from TIME magazine telephoned. He was wondering if it would be okay to come by at 3:00 tomorrow afternoon to interview you for his article on the ten most famous individuals in show business and how they got their start."

"Sure," Fred said as he turned his chair around. "I'd like to tell somebody that story." ■

RUTH TITTLE of Rocky is a member of the SOSU Senior class. She will graduate with a B.S. in Education degree in December, 1988.

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