

# A MEMORY OF TREES

A SEQUEL TO

The View From South Emporia Street

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## PROLOGUE

The decade of the 1940s, the era in which this novel is set, was a tumultuous one. Only twenty one years after the Great War of 1914-1918, another conflict erupted in 1939, a truly global war encompassing the entire world. It came immediately on the heels of yet another global cataclysm, the Great Depression of the 1930s. After years of senseless slaughter, suffering, and destruction, the War ended in 1945 with a fearsome fireball heralding the dawn of the atomic age. Here in America, the nation's sacrifices and hard won victory were soon overtaken by another global struggle, the battle for the minds of men called the Cold War, and its depressing, demented nuclear arms race.

The young characters in this tale have grown up under the baleful shadow of World War Two and the burgeoning nuclear threat of total annihilation. They are representations of the sufferings and the joys of the human spirit as they meet this mournful era head on with their irrepressible feelings of hope and glory. They are figures of innocent optimism, of the idealism smugly espoused by their teachers and mentors there in the geographical center of America, which at the time is the world's safest sanctuary of sanity. With the intrepid energy of youth, they eagerly seek the American dream and their own few fleeting moments upon the world stage.

This coming of age story and its preceding novel *The View from South Emporia Street* portray a boy's life in a small Kansas town during the 1940s. Cimarron McNeill, an intelligent, talented, twelve year old from a dismally disadvantaged family, bucks the prevailing social order in his struggle to break free from his stultifying childhood. Most of Cimarron's classmates are from comfortable middle or upper class homes. Coming from one of the most destitute families in the county, Cimarron is considered an outsider by his acquaintances, so he chooses to shield himself from the slings and arrows of his childhood by being a self sufficient loner. He wants a different life. He is attracted to beauty of mind and body, of art and culture, though he's not yet sure of his goals.

As he enters the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Cimarron must overcome local prejudice and hostility in his pursuit of knowledge and maturity. His abilities and intellect help him but he is hindered by his family's dire circumstances and by his own clueless ignorance of what 'normal' life is like. He is considered *white trash* by all, partially due to the region's conservative philosophy which has a bias to blame the victim.

The setting is a Main Street USA town, a small community with unusual

wealth flowing from its prolific oil field, the largest in the country for a period early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also a prosperous agricultural village surrounded by fields of grain and cattle, and scenic rolling hills.

Story background: The McNeills are a hard working family of Depression era itinerants headed by Henry, an abusive alcoholic with only a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education. Henry has a few sterling qualities but his character flaws hold him back and hurt his wife and children. He and his spouse Vida, both from poor farming families of the American Southwest, meet and marry just before the Great Depression begins. All of their offspring except one are born in the Depression years. The family joins with the wretched odyssey of wandering millions moving across the land looking for work and a home. Their misfortunes of the 1930s are followed with hardships imposed by the War in the 1940s.

After losing his paltry flour mill job in Kingfisher Oklahoma, Henry scrambles for work to feed his brood of four children. In 1939, he moves the family to Eldora, near Wichita Kansas. He partners with his younger brother Owen who has a small painting and papering business there, a trade the brothers learned from their father. When the two can't get on, Henry stays and continues his craft while Owen moves on to greener pastures. After a 5<sup>th</sup> child is born to the McNeills just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Henry moves the family to a 'better' shack outside the city limits on South Emporia Street. It is the home where Cimarron grows to puberty and fulfills the meaning of his name, *wild and untamed*, in the secluded wilderness of the river valley hidden just beyond the high railroad embankment in front of his shanty.

Dogged by a loss of jobs due to war-time shortages and rationing of goods, Henry's work is further curtailed when a new water-based paint, Kem-Tone, and the new paint roller invention, put home decorating within easy reach of every husband and wife handyman team. Henry's health fails after the War, a result of his youthful dissipation. His damaged heart disables him, leaving the family even more penurious and vulnerable, and his prognosis is not at all good. To escape the claustrophobic conditions of the little shack, his oldest son Casey runs away at age 17 to join the Army Air Corps in early 1946. Ray, the next oldest son who becomes the surrogate breadwinner for the family, manages to finish high school in May 1949 but is anxious to leave and begin his own life. As Cimarron enters the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in September 1949, the family of six including two boys and two girls, is on the verge of collapse.

The story centers on Cimarron McNeill as he passes through the nine

months of his first Junior High term. Sim, as he is known by all, has grown up desperate for love and affection from his father, who for many reasons is incapable of giving it. Henry has no liking nor time for his 3<sup>rd</sup> and youngest son who marches to a different drum. He beats the boy regularly and mercilessly for the least of youthful transgressions. He understands nothing of Cimarron's hunger for attention, or his quest for intellectual stimulation and worldly experience. Nor has he any interest in Sim's singing talent, his elevated IQ, his love of baseball, or his precocious strength and paramount physical pulchritude. Henry ignores his son's appreciation of music, art, and Latin, of the finer things in life seldom seen by a boy of Cimarron's station. To Henry, they are a waste of time and will only distract the boy from his white trash destiny.

Sim's mother Vida, a harried housewife, loves her children in her own harsh way but she raises them with a cold, hard, unforgiving hand. Against the staggering burdens imposed by her husband and the family's straightened circumstances, she teaches them survival and what few social skills she has, but she demands absolute obedience and loyalty from them in return. She is not above playing them against each other for her own purposes, and using Henry's punitive nature to keep them in line and the cruel charade of family life from collapsing. Hoping to keep the boy in his white trash harness for his own good, Vida is especially strict with her independent youngest son Cimarron. However, he's having none of the 'snips and snails and puppydog tails' character stigma attached to boys. He prefers his own view of things, his ideas about life. As Henry taught him, he takes on the world head up with a do or die, win or lose attitude.

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