

## **Remembering the Gypsies**

By Gordon Youngman

I first remember the gypsies coming to town when I was four or five years old. In 1932 our family lived in the second house beyond what is now the Walworth Post Office on the Walworth-Marion Road. One day, when brother Billy and myself were playing on the front porch, we heard a lot of singing and music. We looked up the street to the west and saw a large group of people heading in our direction. This was very exciting for us, as there was not much going on in our little town. To say the least, we were very fascinated with all the clamor.

There must have been close to 30 or 40 people – men, women, and children – in the group. The women and children were dressed in very colorful clothing with equally colorful head scarves. Some of the men were on horseback and several men were driving old trucks. The women and older children were on foot. They were playing music, banging on pots and pans, singing to the tops of their voices and more or less dancing down the street.

About the time Billy and I were caught up in the action of everything, mother came out the door and pulled us inside the house. We could not understand what we had done wrong, as it was not uncommon for us to be in trouble. Mother explained to us that the people were gypsies and would steal anything they could put their hands on, including little white children. This scared the devil out of us, so we watched from inside of the house until they passed. We found out later that the group had set up camp on the big hill just west of Huntley Road in the town of Marion. Each family had their own campfire for cooking meals and a tent for sleeping. After their evening meal, they would gather and play their music and dance. People from town would walk or drive over to enjoy the show they put on. After it was about over, the gypsy children would pass among the crowd and take up a collection.

The following day they would leave and head for another town – traveling from town to town and state to state – finally ending up in the warmer states for the winter months. This became an annual event for a few years. When people in town heard them coming, they would rush outside and grab any brooms, tools, or other items of value and bring them inside. I never heard of any children being taken. I guess mother used that just to scare the be-gee-us out of Billy and myself.

My next encounter with the gypsies came many years later at the time my wife Katie and I operated a variety store in Walworth. In the late '50s or early '60s a group started coming around to the small towns. They traveled in a couple of cars and there were only women. About eight or ten would enter the store at one time and – while two or three would keep the clerks distracted – the rest circulated the store. This gave them a free hand to pick up what they wanted and out the door they would go. After the first time this happened, the merchants wised up and the next time they came to town some quick phone calls were made. As soon as possible the store doors would be locked until they left town. We even made calls to other towns alerting them that the gypsies were on the way.