



Test Version of Audio Story: Callie

When I was a kid, my dad was the local oil and gas deliveryman.

I spent a lot of time on that oil truck growing up. People think that in order to be a journalist, you must be witness to extraordinary events in history.

As a little boy on that oil truck, all I was witness to was ordinary people, living their everyday ordinary lives. And yet somehow, I was given the gift of seeing what was extraordinary about them.

Today, as a writer, those experiences are priceless.

My dad would, some days, pick me up after school and take me along, out on the winding back roads of rural Juniata County.

As I climbed up into the cab of that monstrous truck — like a seasoned professional — all the other kids just watched. Their eyeballs popping out of their heads, green with envy. It was a powerful feeling to sit up so high and gaze down at the only world I knew.

The big motor vibrated through every bone in my little body. As I clicked that seatbelt fast, I always had the same question, “Dad, are we going to Callie’s today?” When my dad said, “Yup!” — THAT, was a great day.

Old Callie Arnold and his wife owned a country store ... had gas pumps out front. ... Dad kept the tanks filled. Callie and his wife lived in the back of the store — one of my favorite places in the whole world ...

I had my share of troubles growing up. No one in little Juniata County had ever even heard of dyslexia — let alone what to do about it.

I forgot all my troubles when I was at Callie’s.

He was fun to be around. So endlessly entertaining.

I wasn’t the only kid that felt that way. Much of Callie’s success was that his place was just magical. It wasn’t the goods on the shelves or the merchandise on the racks. It was old Callie himself ... a storyteller.

My favorite thing about going to Callie’s was sitting down to eat. You went back into Callie’s home, sat at Callie’s kitchen table — their everyday kitchen table in their own home — and ordered what you wanted.

Mrs. Arnold always had a kettle of soup on, and she'd make you any kind of sandwich in the whole world. Always a smile on her face. You'd eat your food, and then Mrs. Arnold would send you to Callie to talk about the bill. There was no menu, no set prices.

My dad would say, "Hah, huh, Callie, now that really hit the spot. What do I owe ya?"

"No, Clair, I don't want your money, just get on out of here!"

"Now, Callie, here's two dollars"

"Two dollars? God would send me to the devil for stealing — it was just soup and sandwiches — and the boy didn't eat that much. Thirty-five cents would be more like it."

"Come on, Callie, I am going to lay a dollar down here."

"I'll just throw it in the fire if you do. Fifty cents would be okay."

Callie argued with folks all day long about price that way. I don't know how he ever made any money, but he did okay.

My dad and old Callie would finally arrive at a price, and we'd head off to our next stop, my pockets bulging with the candy that Callie would secretly slip me behind Dad's back.

Old Callie passed away when I was still a boy.

Sometimes, I get down around where his little store was. It's converted into a house now, but when I drive by, I can still hear Callie telling us stories ... see the twinkle in his eyes ... smell the kettle of soup on the stove ... hear the bell on the door.

You know, as long as kids like me can remember, characters like old Callie Arnold will never die.

Broadcasting from the Juniata Valley, I'm the American Storyteller.