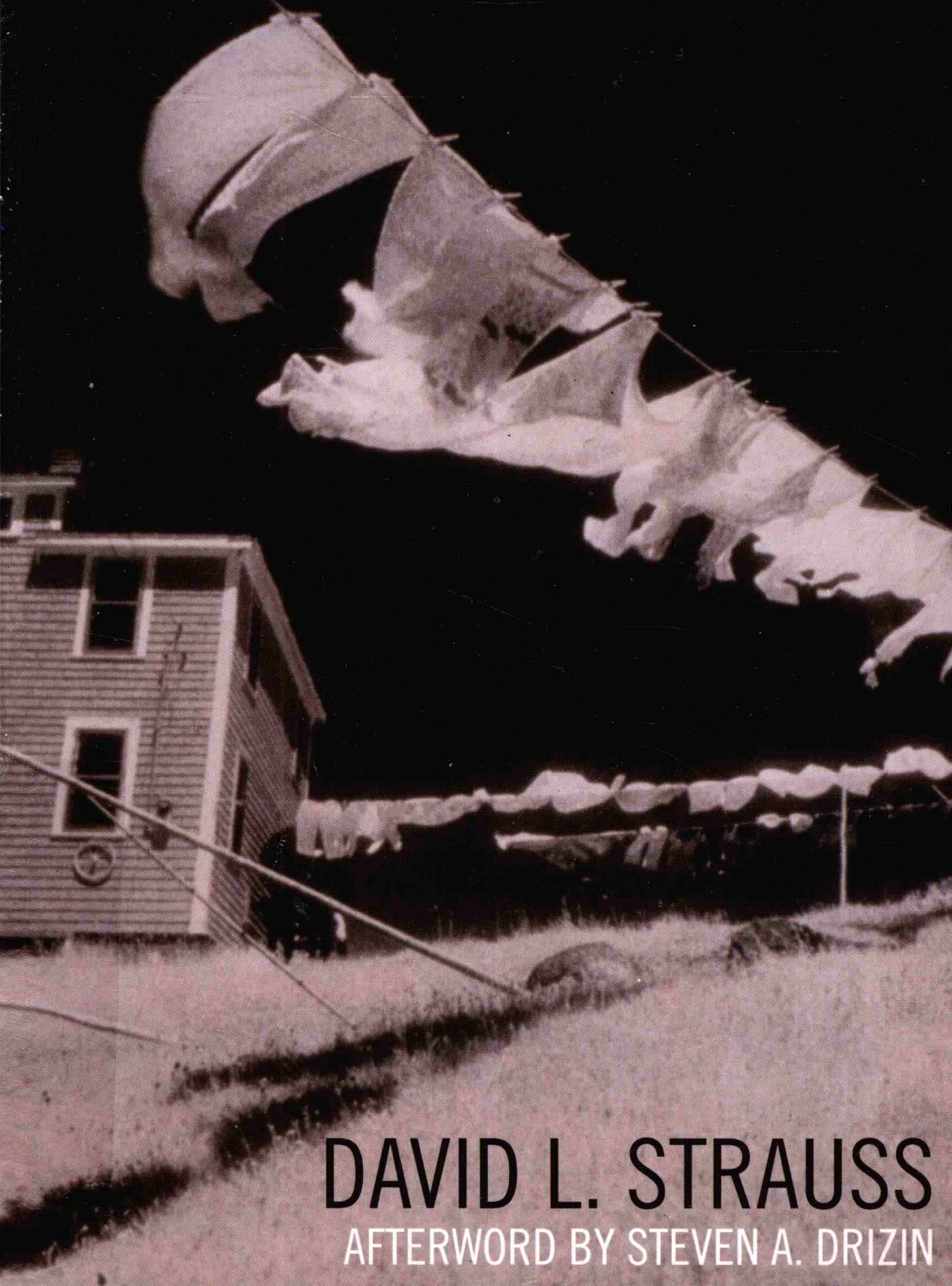


BARBAROUS SOULS

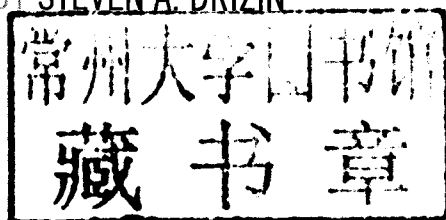


DAVID L. STRAUSS
AFTERWORD BY STEVEN A. DRIZIN

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NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Strauss, David L.

Barbarous souls / David L. Strauss ; afterword by Steven A. Drizin.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8101-2671-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Parker, Darrel F.—Trials, litigation, etc. 2. Trials (Murder)—Nebraska—Lancaster County. 3. Judicial error—Nebraska—Lancaster County. 4. Confession (Law)—Psychological aspects. I. Drizin, Steven A. II. Title.

KF224.P36S77 2010

364.152'3092—dc22

2010010409

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Barbarous Souls is written in a style that is popularly described as a nonfiction novel. My sources are the trial transcript, newspaper accounts of the day, and oral histories from Darrel Parker, Judge Thomas McManus, Virgil Falloon, and the late Stanley Cohen. All of the incidents actually occurred, although some of the conversations are conjectural and were added for the sake of the narrative.

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BARBAROUS SOULS

CHAPTER ONE

At the very edge of the broad and fertile great plains in the southeastern corner of Nebraska stands Lincoln, the sedate, red-bricked, and rigidly straitlaced state capital. Founded in 1867, Lincoln lies a little more than fifty miles from Omaha at a point south of the Platte River where the flat agricultural lands to the west have gradually turned into rolling hills that carry eastward, all the way to the Iowa border and the rugged bluffs of the Missouri River valley. Sprawled haphazardly in a large shallow bowl, the few whitewashed frame buildings that made up Lincoln at its inception once stood in stark contrast to the imposing horizontal landscape and were clearly visible for miles around. At a time when lush prairie grasses were the dominant feature in an otherwise barren tableau, the expansive and unimpeded vistas that spread beneath the dome of a broad and seemingly endless sky made the tiny city's existence seem even more tenuous than it really was. Trees were a rarity and existed almost entirely along creek banks and rivers in the form of cottonwoods, willows, and locusts. As testament to the scarcity of trees in Lincoln's early days, a giant lone elm stood sentinel near what would later become known as Haymarket Square. It was such a novelty that it served as the landmark and focal point for the early merchants and barterers who gathered to trade beneath its soothing shade. As settlers slowly populated the area, they began an arboreal tradition that became virtually self-perpetuating—planting a magnificent array of trees along their streets and alleyways and in their parks.

After the turn of the century, the city watched with eager anticipation as the ten-year construction of the new state capitol building progressed—a structure that would come to dominate the skyline and eventually overshadow what had previously been the town's tallest structures, the towering white grain elevators that skirted the city's perimeter. When the mighty building was at last complete and people could ascend to the dizzying heights of its forty-story observation level, they were immediately struck by the ocean of trees that undulated outward in windswept waves to the horizon in all directions—oak, ash, walnut, elm, maple, poplar, mulberry, spruce, locust, cedar, white pine, Scotch pine, birch, Austrian pine, and on and on. The soil was superb. Moisture was excellent. Lincoln and Lancaster County enjoyed the perfect climate to grow not only a host of crops but also an ever expanding plenitude of trees.

After World War II, Lincoln's population swelled to more than one hundred thousand people as soldiers returned in droves to enroll at the university, buy new automobiles, and purchase homes, all on the G.I. Bill. Many thought the times were golden. As Lincoln's first mass-produced suburbs expanded outward, mostly to the south and east, so did the attendant profusion of trees. It only followed that in 1954 the city's park department finally saw the need to hire its first full-time city forester.

A shy, studious, and athletic twenty-three-year-old Iowan, Darrel Parker was hired for the position of Lincoln city forester right out of college. He had been highly recommended for the job by Harold McNabb, his favorite professor at the widely acclaimed School of Forestry at Iowa State University. Raised in Lincoln himself, McNabb still had many connections there, enough that his glowing recommendation of Parker carried considerable weight.

Darrel had tenaciously worked his way to the very top of his class, and by the time he graduated he knew that the decision he'd made as a high school senior to go into forestry had been the right one. McNabb, for his part, knew that Darrel's diligence, self-discipline, and healthy work ethic would see him through any challenge. Of all his students, Parker was the man McNabb felt was best suited for the job in Lincoln. Yet, despite the attraction of the job, despite it being what

he termed “just the right thing at just the right time,” if Darrel could somehow have known what lay in store for him in Lincoln, he would have never left Iowa. But then one can never know such things.

Anchored solidly in the soil, like the trees he studied, Darrel had grown up on the family farm in the rich Corn Belt of western Iowa near Henderson, a small rural town of 207 staunchly resolute residents. About equidistant from Shenandoah and Council Bluffs, Henderson was, in a direct line, not much more than twenty miles east of the Missouri River. Darrel’s family had lived on the same farm his entire life. He knew nothing other than rock-ribbed midwestern country life, and as a boy he didn’t want to know anything else. The bounty of nature. The change of seasons—planting, harvesting. He was steeped in the tradition of farming and was boundlessly happy in his world.

His father, Lynn Parker, had maintained the hope that his boys—Darrel had an older brother, Dwight—would one day take over the farming duties. He’d even purchased a second farm with the idea that one day each son would have his own place. His dream was for naught. Dwight would never farm. For him the only anchor of rural life was around his leg. He felt that country life was much too circumscribed, too isolated from the rest of the world. Shortly after graduating from high school he moved to Wichita, Kansas, to work at the thriving Boeing airplane plant, where the primary aircraft being built was the B-47, the country’s first mass-produced jet-powered strategic bomber.

That left Darrel as the sole heir to carry on the family tradition, and he accepted the role willingly. As a child he eagerly shadowed his father around the farm. In the spring at planting time, he proudly rode on the tractor beside his father and marveled at the huge flock of gulls that always seemed to appear from nowhere to follow along behind the planter, rising and falling in the air like the raging white water of a mountain river as they gorged themselves on upturned insects and worms. At harvest time in the fall, the gulls mysteriously disappeared only to be replaced by dozens of red-tailed hawks that wheeled gracefully in tight circles high in the air, waiting to drop unseen onto the rabbits and mice that scurried up and down the rows in the corn picker’s wake.

Like any young boy, Darrel wanted to be just like his father. In his mind, as well as his father's, moving into his father's shoes was the natural order of things—a farm was gradually built up for the younger generation, who would then take over and repeat the cycle.

At the age of fifteen, Darrel took his first and only trip away from home, to the rugged mountains of Wyoming with the local 4-H youth group. It was his first experience of being “out there,” of coming up against the great American expanse that existed in all directions beyond Mills County, Iowa.

His dreams of farming, of an inherited life in agriculture, however, came long before his childhood asthma had developed to the point that it was aggravated by virtually all of the dusts and pollens, flora and fauna, that were omnipresent on the farm. By the time he'd reached high school he was made painfully aware of the fact, as much to the disappointment of his father as to himself, that his lifelong imaginings of continued life on the farm had vanished.

At the same time he had to divest himself of his childhood dreams, his life apart from the family farm had become ever more active and gave anyone who observed him an inkling of a life about to bloom and move in a new direction. He was an established fixture at church—at one point having gone for three years without missing a service. A recognized voice in the choir, he was often called upon to solo and also, aware of the considerable responsibility placed in his hands, solemnly taught Sunday school. His many years of activity in 4-H had prepared him for life at Henderson High School, where he excelled at basketball, participated in student government, and was the valedictorian of his senior class. Reverend Peter Trucano, pastor of Wesley Chapel Church, the Parkers' church, remembered Darrel as the most responsible member of his class: “He worked hard, was always on the fair side, avoided conflict, and was honest to a fault. He respected authority, and he respected his elders. He was a good boy, a model boy.”

By the time he graduated from high school Darrel had traveled out of the state only one time. With the prodding of his older brother, however, Darrel had become a young man ready to leave

the security of the rural island he'd known all his life. Based on his love of the outdoors and with the help and advice of his senior class teacher, he chose forestry as his vocation. They both thought it would allow him to continue working outside and at the same time nurture things as they grew. Iowa State University in Ames, a little more than a hundred miles away and renowned for its forestry program, was the logical choice.

When he first arrived on campus, Darrel was struck by the intimidating enormity of the university but calmed himself with the knowledge that his ethic of hard work and perseverance would carry him through. Along with one of his high school classmates he joined a fraternity, where he gradually overcame his innate shyness and became an officer—subsequently “meeting more people in my first year than I had known in my entire life in Henderson.”

When his fraternity brothers discovered that Darrel's major was forestry, he was constantly harassed and made the butt of jokes because of his middle name—Forest, not with two *r*'s but one. “You can't see the Forest for the trees . . . If a tree falls in the Forest . . .” He didn't mind the ribbing; it made him feel accepted, made him feel like one of the guys. He had reached out and found his place, knew that in spite of his homespun rural childhood he'd found his niche, had made the right choice and would surely succeed.

Along with his academic accomplishments Darrel's social life likewise sparkled. Early in his second year he accepted his first blind date, arranged on the spur of the moment by one of his older fraternity brothers. The evening of the date Darrel was nervous and unexpectedly anxious, exhibiting all the attendant predate jitters. Any apprehension he had quickly melted away when he was introduced to his date, Nancy Ellen Morrison of Des Moines. Enamored from the outset, Darrel uncharacteristically spoke up and asked for another date that very evening. And then another and another. Nancy's buoyant, outgoing personality, he felt, was the perfect antidote for his sober and retiring ways. Nancy was equally taken by Darrel, with his sharply hewn features, short brown hair, high forehead, and serene, yet deeply brilliant blue eyes. To her friends Nancy described Darrel's shyness and restrained demeanor as reflective of “a very mature personality.”

She was a year behind Darrel, but that made no difference to either of them. From their first date forward, they had become a pair. Neither of them dated anyone else. By his senior year, ready to take the next step out in the world, Darrel proposed marriage and Nancy readily accepted. They were married in Des Moines on March 20, 1954, by Reverend Duane Ferris—the newspaper quoted him as saying, “I’ve never wed a happier couple. They are deeply in love, and I’m sure their love will be just as strong in twenty years as it is today.”

Their delayed honeymoon came the following summer when they took a fun-filled one-week excursion to Nancy’s beloved Black Hills of South Dakota, a place where she’d worked the summer after her freshman year. Her souvenir of the trip was a foot-high ceramic doll of Smokey the Bear that Darrel purchased in the gift shop at Sylvan Lake Lodge. Upon her return she displayed the figure with girlish pride on her dresser, never for a moment considering that it might be too childish.

After graduation Darrel took a short-term summer job as an assistant with the School of Forestry as part of a student team conducting a tree survey throughout the state of Iowa, mapping the location, species, and phylum of the trees that populated the state from east to west and north to south.

When that job was complete, Professor McNabb informed Darrel of the opening for a forester in Lincoln, Nebraska. His application was promptly submitted, along with McNabb’s glowing recommendation, and he was quickly accepted to begin work on November 15, 1954. In Lincoln, Darrel rented a small, sparsely furnished basement apartment while Nancy finished school at Iowa State. They saw each other whenever possible on weekends and talked long and often on the telephone about how exciting it was going to be to set up house in Lincoln and be together again once Nancy graduated.

Darrel was enamored of his new position, and after his experiences at Iowa State he quickly learned to fit in with his new workmates. He was originally unsure of how he would be accepted as a young supervisor, but those under him liked him to a man, even though most of them were twenty or thirty years his senior. His likable demeanor, equanimity, and willingness to roll up his sleeves

and take part alongside his men in whatever job was undertaken made him an immediate success.

With Nancy still in Ames, Darrel made it a point to fill his spare time with innumerable activities outside of work. He was asked to join the junior chamber of commerce, where he resumed his musical interests as a member of the choir; he put on regular after-hours informational meetings for his men, covering every aspect of the care and maintenance of the city's trees; he traveled occasionally to forestry seminars held throughout the Midwest; and he began selectively shopping for inexpensive household items for their future residence. In his work he felt fulfilled. In fact, for the first time in his life he felt that he was truly master of his own ship.

When Nancy excitedly arrived from Iowa in the early summer of 1955, Darrel could no longer keep his secret from her. She expected that they would continue to live in the dank basement apartment, but Darrel surprised her with the news that they were going to get their own house in Antelope Park, a fringe benefit of Darrel's job. James Ager, head of the park department, was going to move an older frame house that dated from the 1930s out of a low-lying area in the park and onto a site near the city's dance pavilion and have it renovated for Darrel and Nancy. He told Darrel it would be just like Europe, where public park superintendents lived in keepers' lodges in the same parks they took care of. Darrel didn't know about that, but nonetheless he was excited about the prospect of having their own home and one that would be a convenient half mile from park headquarters.

The two were giddy at their prospects. They were so happy that at times they felt things were going almost too well, that something had to go wrong just to balance things out. But those feelings did not linger. Nearly every evening after work they would drive by the homesite to check on the latest progress. Their house would be the first and only home in Antelope Park. The only thing comparable was James Ager's house that sat near park headquarters, the zoo, and the garages in the administrative part of the park on the north side of A Street. Darrel liked the fact that their house would be isolated and said it would be as close as you could get in the city to living on a farm—"where your nearest neighbor was a mile or more away

and you're right next to nature." Only in this case nature would be the park rather than the green pastures, tree-lined windbreaks, and rolling cornfields of Iowa.

The largest part of Antelope Park, more than a hundred acres, spread out on the south side of A Street and ran between the Rock Island railroad tracks that bounded it on the west and Normal Boulevard and Antelope Creek to the east. Their home would sit on a slight rise two blocks east of the tracks and at the southeast corner of the dance pavilion parking lot. The pavilion, a large white framed affair, had tall arched windows on three sides and saw spotty use by various groups—the square dance and polka crowd used it in the fall and winter, and in the spring and summer the teenagers took it over with the latest craze, rock-and-roll music, and their weekend Keen Time dances. The homesite was bounded on three sides with a cluster of honey locusts that continued down the slope in the backyard to the creek. On the south side of the lot stood a tall, thick hedge that paralleled Sumner Street and ran east from the concrete wall of the massive pavilion entrance pylon to a point even with the back of the house.

After ground was broken, every step of the progress was noted by Nancy and hastily recorded on a calendar in their kitchen. The work never seemed to proceed fast enough to suit Darrel and Nancy, even though it never varied more than a few days from Ager's closely monitored construction schedule. On weekends they continued Darrel's habit of going to sales, where they carefully and frugally selected an eclectic assortment of furniture and appliances. They purchased an oak coffee table with only one small scratch on it, a corner chair for the living room with a matching footstool, and a pair of card tables for impromptu entertaining. A "like new" brown couch, upholstered with the glittery metallic looped fabric of the day, completed their living room ensemble. Finalizing their furnishings was another surprise presentation by Darrel—a bookcase and dining table that he built while Nancy was in Ames, constructing them bit by painstaking bit during his off hours in the shop at park headquarters.

The day they'd been anxiously awaiting came in late July, when the house was moved all at once onto the foundation and the final

phase of remodeling began in earnest. The modest house was a twenty-four by thirty-two, one of a myriad of standardized houses built across the country for decades. When you walked in the front door there was a living room to the right, a kitchen and dining room behind that, and to the left two bedrooms—one slightly larger than the other—and a bathroom. The exterior of the house was painted white, the storm window frames were painted black, and, in its only departure from the standard design, the attic had been enlarged with the addition of dormers built on either side of the gable roof, each with two double-hung windows. Seen from the front—the side that faced the pavilion parking lot, the house was perfectly symmetrical—three double-hung windows on the north side of the front door in their bedroom and three more to the south in the living room. The dormers were centered on the roof and the front door perfectly centered between them all. When the house was nearly complete at the end of September, Nancy purchased sheer white lace drapery material and made drapes to cover the pull-down shades in every room.

They glowed in their achievements. Darrel had a job that was beyond anything he'd ever imagined, and Nancy had just begun working as a dietician for Gooch's Flour Mills, where she and another lady, Opal Closner, created a diversity of recipes that always used Gooch's flour and noodles. After the recipes were successfully tested, they would be printed on the bags of Gooch's flour and noodles and sold throughout the Midwest. She had also begun demonstrating her cooking skills on the city's first televised cooking show presented live on KOLN-TV, Channel 10.

They felt independently wealthy with the house, two incomes, and two cars—Darrel's tan and white 1953 Chevy and Nancy's new white Chevy station wagon, given to her by Gooch's. "Not bad for two kids," said Darrel. That's how they felt about each other, like they were still in college, still kids. The things they had achieved in the adult world in such a short time had come so fast that they were still being digested, still had a bit of the unreal about them.

The house was ready as scheduled by early October, and on the thirteenth they moved in. Darrel borrowed one of the park's pickup trucks, and he and Warren Andrews, his cohort from work, moved

the few pieces of furniture they had stored in the park garage. By evening all of the drapes were mounted, all of the appliances moved in, all of the clothes hung in the closets. For their first night in the house Nancy cooked a full-course steak dinner, which they ate by candlelight and finished off with lemon meringue pie. When supper was over they washed the dishes together, laughingly toasted each other with glasses of 7-Up, and toured the house—each carrying a candle—in celebration of their youthful good fortune.

Once she'd settled in, Nancy eagerly began crafting decorations for Halloween, what she looked at as her first chance to entertain. When the day finally arrived, Nancy had stocked a huge supply of candy. Darrel observed, "We're so far from the other houses in the neighborhood, we'll be lucky if any kids come." The nearest house, the Seacrest mansion, was a block away on the south side of Summer. Sitting on more than two acres of land, the big house dominated the other homes in the area and reminded Darrel of pictures he'd seen of Mount Vernon with its tall white entrance columns going straight up two stories, right to the overhanging porch roof. Behind the columns a huge black entrance light was suspended above the portico and anchored from blowing in the wind by long swooping chains. The Seacrest family owned one of the two Lincoln newspapers, the *Lincoln Evening Journal*. Their house, however, would not be open to trick-or-treaters this year. It would be dark and empty for Halloween due to a lengthy remodeling job that had been going on since late summer.

On Halloween, Darrel came home early to help Nancy prepare for the evening. After lighting the candle in the pumpkin he'd carved, he placed it on the front porch step next to the black wrought iron railing. He turned on the outside lights and all the lights in the kitchen and living room. The brilliant illumination, he thought, would surely compensate for the isolation of their house and the ghostly effect it might otherwise impart if it was left unlit. As a result of their joint efforts they were visited by nine little tricksters who came to the door in a colorful if not very frightening array of homemade costumes. In their hands they clutched brown grocery sacks that were nearly as big as they were. Nancy laughed uncontrollably while generously dishing out the candy. Darrel sat on