

Gum-Dipped

A Daughter Remembers

Rubber Town



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*A Daughter Remembers
Rubber Town*



Joyce Dyer



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To Daniel

*To break so vast a Heart
Required a Blow as vast—
No Zephyr felled this Cedar straight—
'Twas undeserved Blast—*

—Emily Dickinson



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P R E F A C E



I sometimes wish I didn't need the smell of rubber, but I do.

Its smell ignites my memory. My father returns to me in that odor. When tires spin too fast on hot roads, I think of Tom Coyne, or when I smell steam on the flat rubber roof of our house after a summer rain.

When no one's looking, I run my hands over the tubes that feed gasoline into my car, over the handles of the Airdyne that I ride, over mousepads and the backs of rugs. I snap rows of rubber bands onto my arms, like bracelets, until they cut my wrists.

Over and over I dream of tires—huge tires with treads the shape of diamonds, or arrowheads—rolling fast down highways. Chasing me. I always wake up before I know if I escape.

In Akron rubber workers were known as *gummers*, and managers were sometimes said to be *gum-dipped*. The term came from the process of dipping strips of cloth in rubber until they were completely coated and uniform, and then adding the strips to tread for greater strength and flexibility. In the early years Firestone Gum-Dipped tires were the deluxe line—the very best.

This is one story of rubber, of both a gummer and a gum-dipped man, of a daughter who was as immersed in rubber as he was, of a family who thought for a long time that they were riding on the very best.

I have tried to be meticulous about my research not only because

I write nonfiction, but because I so strongly believe that if we understand the ordinary and the real, and marvel at *it*, we will see far more than we ever could if we made things up. I apologize for any errors Akron historians may find in these pages, because none were intended.

But the interpretation and speculation here are *mine*, and the scenes I include are the product of *my* memory only. I urge you to remember this as you read about Firestone Park and the rubber industry in the middle decades of the last century. What is important to one person may go unnoticed by another. My elaboration of some details over others is consistent with the effect they had on me, but I can't argue that others should have found them as memorable as I did.

It's history that you will read here, but sometimes very personal and impressionistic history. It's the story of Akron, of Firestone Park, of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, of my family, but always as it appears to me, and to *no one else*. I cannot help the curvature of my own eye. I've tried to see as much as I'm able at this point in my life, but I know I may have missed something that later will come clear to me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I've been educated by the people of Akron, Ohio, all my life. Certainly this book is no exception. Much of my research was interior, but much of it was not. Eudora Welty talks about the relationship of memory and discovery in her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*. "As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover," she writes. I want to thank many people for helping me make discoveries that in turn fired my memory, and then led to other discoveries I could never have anticipated. I must begin by thanking the excellent staff at the University of Akron Archives in the Polsky Building—John Miller, Stephen Paschen, Craig Holbert, and George Hodowanec. Meticulous and resourceful scholars of the region, they were always patient with my unending questions through the many months I worked with them.

Through them I met Jim Paulau, Akron's premier architectural historian; Sylvia Johnson, lifelong resident of Firestone Park and Director of Hower House; Earlene Harris, who introduced me to books by Firestone Park aficionados Lois Finley and Clarice Finley Lewis; Sarah and Stan Akers, true preservationists of Akron history; William Lewis, Director of the Buckingham Lyle Center; Daniel Nelson, labor historian at the University of Akron; and Claudia Burdge, Head of the City of Akron Department of Planning Library.

I would also like to thank many others for vital information about Akron or Summit County. They include Lyle Skinner, Coordinator

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I would especially like to thank members of my family who supported me throughout the writing of this book. They helped me bring things into sharper focus and sometimes told me stories I had not known. These wonderful people include Carol Zink, Tonya Santos, Wendell Scott, Marjorie Davis, Ralph E. Kane, Paul Steurer Jr., and Paul Steurer Sr.—who was known as the Heart of Goosetown to everyone on Grant Street, the street where he was born and recently died. I would also like to thank Audrey Calhoun, a relative on my husband's side who talked to me about polio, and Prudence Dyer, Richard Dyer, Davis Dyer, Janice McCormick, Bella McCormick Dyer, and Ricky McCormick Dyer for their tireless encouragement.

Although many Akron employees must go unnamed here, I want them to know I appreciate their help locating information. They work in the Akron Courthouse, the Harold K. Stubbs Justice Center, the Municipal Building, the Morley Health Center, the Ocasek Building, the Ohio Building, Bridgestone/Firestone, Akron church-

es and cemeteries, Akron bookstores, the Akron-Summit County Public Library, Akron law offices, Bierce Library, the Kent State University Library and Special Collections, the Akron Public Schools, and Akron museums.

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I extend great thanks to *Akron Beacon Journal* staff writers who have done a thorough and passionate job of documenting Akron's history since 1839. Due to their efforts, as well as the efforts of WPA workers who indexed *Beacon* issues from 1841 to 1939, the history of my own Akron family has been preserved and made available to me. Steve Love and David Giffels, authors of *Wheels of Fortune: The Story of Rubber in Akron*, deserve special mention for their careful documentation of the history of rubber in Akron, Ohio, and for their passion for this subject.

I want to thank another *Akron Beacon Journal* staff writer, Stephen Osborn Dyer, my son, for his enthusiasm for Akron and family history, and his excellent editorial sense. I also greatly appreciated the encouragement of Stephen's wife, Melissa McGowan Dyer.

Finally, I thank my husband, Daniel Osborn Dyer, for so generously sharing with me his ear for language and his loving heart.

It Was Moving Day . . .



Harvey Firestone looked a lot like Lincoln sitting there. That's what I thought when I was young, anyway. It didn't matter to me that Harvey's statue was bronze, not marble, or that he sat on a hill in south Akron rather than on the banks of the Potomac.

In my young eyes, the two men looked nearly the same. Harvey and Abe. Abe and Harvey.

I was staring at Harvey again, this time from a folding chair. It was August 3, 2000, the Centennial of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, and the fiftieth anniversary of the original Dedication of the Firestone statue. I had written a letter begging the Firestone Centennial Committee to invite me to the ceremony.

I told them that I belonged as much as anyone else on that twenty-five-acre hill in south Akron where Harvey sat. The hill marked the entrance to Firestone Park, the community Akron's rubber baron began building for his workers in 1916—and the place where I grew up decades later.

I explained that my mother's cousins and uncles had been blacksmiths and roofers, lab technicians and photographers at Firestone. Her father, August Haberkost, had worked for Firestone shortly after the company was founded in Akron on August 3, 1900 (the entire factory force numbered twenty-seven in 1903). My paternal grandfather, W. T. (William Thomas) Coyne, had traveled in 1923 from the anthracite coal mines in Pennsylvania to help Harvey keep his books and had retired thirty years later as comptroller of a Firestone subsidiary plant. T. W. (Thomas William) Coyne, my father, was a thirty-seven-year man who had spent

most of his life as a supervisor at the Xylos Rubber Company, Firestone's reclaim plant.

In many ways, I said, the history of the company and the history of my family were identical. The Coynes and Haberkosts who had spent their lives building Firestone tires were all dead now, so I just had to be on that high summit overlooking Harvey's empire to represent them.

The committee agreed and sent me a formal invitation, just like the ones executives received.

I spent that August night with people who talked only about Firestone, and it was all I talked about too. I never suspected that the company at that moment was coming unhinged, that in the next few days Bridgestone/Firestone would begin recalling 6.5 million tires, most of them on Ford Explorers, or that the federal government would soon link faulty Firestone tires to 203 deaths and more than 700 injuries. In May 2001, the Ford Motor Company would announce another recall and replace an additional 13 million Firestone Wilderness AT tires on its vehicles—at a cost of 3 billion dollars—a decision that would cause Firestone to sever a nearly century-old corporate and personal relationship with the world's second-largest automaker. Firestone would no longer sell tires to Ford, even though Ford's chairman, William Clay Ford Jr., was the grandson of Harvey S. Firestone Jr., and the unity of the two families had been solidly demonstrated when the Firestone homestead was dismantled in 1985 and moved to the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration would investigate Firestone and find it at fault. The wedge, the section of rubber where the tread meets the shoulder, had not been thick enough—a deadly design flaw. Firestone would be forced to call back 3.5 million more tires.

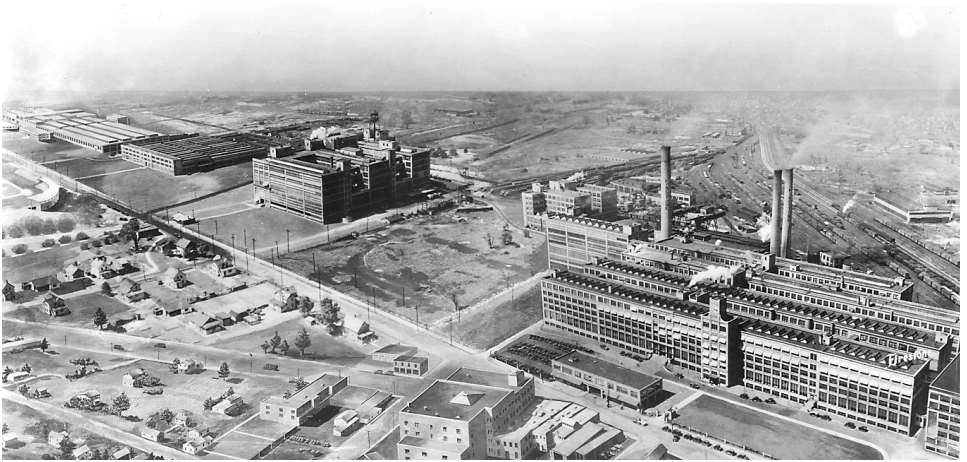
I suspected nothing about the imminent crisis that night, though since my father's death ten years before I'd found out secrets that should have led me to suspect. For decades my father had been blind too, refusing to see what Firestone would do to him one day.

There I sat, his daughter, staring at the truth, but not able to see it.

I guess a part of me still wanted to believe in Harvey the way I used to, wanted to turn the clock back and become, once more, the daughter of a man who so long ago had signed over his heart, and then his soul, to the company he loved.

For years and years that faith sustained him.

It sustained me too. When I was young, every time I saw the statue or touched a tire, every time I swung on Harvey's swings in Harvey's park or watched a circus the great man brought to entertain us, I pledged my allegiance to Harvey S. Firestone. I thanked God—who looked an awful lot like Harvey in my mind—for the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company.



The Firestone Tire & Rubber Company factory complex

CHAPTER 1



My dad reached out the window of our Hudson Hornet and tapped the ash from his Camel. His finger struck the paper fast, as if it were made of pure nerve, not bone.

We were driving down Main Street in the fall of 1952. It was moving day and I was five years old and we had just bought a little Tudor house in Firestone Park with ivy and purple clematis that crept up the sides.

The Tom Coynes would never move again. I would leave, but they would stay and finish out their lives there.

To get to Firestone Park from our old neighborhood of Goosetown, my father could have driven south on Grant Street or Brown, but he took Main Street instead—Harvey’s road, the road that ran parallel to the factories. In my father’s mind, South Main was the road to everything he cared about, and he wasn’t going to drive down any other.

We drove past the Firestone Bank. That was *always* our bank, and now it held our new mortgage. After we crossed the Harvey S. Firestone Memorial Bridge and approached the mile-long factory complex, my dad began to ask me to name the buildings as they came into view, just the way he did on less momentous trips.

“Clubhouse!” I screamed, as our car wobbled over railroad tracks.

My father smiled, then snapped his head toward the building

and away from the road, a habit that always made my mother nervous. I thought it was funny—it made my dad look like a cartoon—and I usually laughed.

Then my father told me to look up.

“Look at *that!*” he said, pointing with his right arm, his white sleeves rolled to the elbow, the way they always were when he wasn’t working at the plant. I saw the huge red neon Firestone sign glowing on the flat roof of Plant 1.

We slowed down when we came to Emerling Street, between those two main plants. It was a sacred road to my dad. Every morning he would climb in his car, drive down Main Street, and turn onto Emerling—the street that dead-ended right at the Xylos Rubber Company, where my father worked. He would wait for the attendant at the gatehouse to nod and say, “Mornin’, Mr. Coyne!” and then greet the guard, smile widely, wheel his car into the parking space reserved *just* for him—because he was a foreman now and had a piece of pavement all his own.

Beyond Emerling was Plant 2 and the Firestone Stadium. And on the east side of Main Street, right across the street from all of this, was Harvey’s hill—the hill that marked the entrance to Firestone Park. My father turned onto Firestone Boulevard and stopped the car.

He’d spotted Harvey first.

Dedicated in 1950, the statue of Harvey Firestone was just two years old when we arrived. A huge field of green dotted with wildflowers spread from the corner all the way to the bronze figure that was gleaming in morning light at the top of the knob.

“Mmm, mmm!” my father said, smacking his lips the same way he did when he ate a steak.

Seated on a huge throne, Harvey seemed to be watching each car as it turned into his kingdom.



Xylos Rubber Company, 1934 (Courtesy of Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc.)

I had seen it before, but somehow that day it was larger and brighter than I'd remembered it. How could I resist a thing like that statue when I was five years old? There was nothing like it in all of Goosetown, where swings and slides, a merry-go-round and teeter-totters were all we had to play on in Thornton Park.

There were statues downtown that I had seen before I saw Harvey, but none of them amazed me the way Harvey did. There were two stone lions at the foot of the courthouse stairs, and two other stone figures (one with a sword and one sort of thinking) near the doors. In the park by the courthouse was a bronze of Charles

Goodyear in a bow tie and a coat with tails. In front of the Akron Armory stood a pretty exciting metal statue of a WWI soldier in full uniform, grenade in one hand and rifle in the other. And of course in Washington, D.C., there was Lincoln, Harvey's statue look-alike, but we saw him only on vacations.

To me Harvey Firestone was better than a lion or a soldier or even Lincoln himself. He was a *king* up there on the top of his hill, in the midst of meadow and forest with birds singing everywhere. It was Harvey who reigned where I was moving, who built our Tudor house, who cut our curved streets and bought fancy little streetlights that glowed into our bedroom windows, who loved my father, and therefore must love me. Harvey was mine.

We'd just studied heaven in Sunday school the summer before our move, and I thought about it all the time. I was sure this was heaven we were driving toward that autumn day, sure that Firestone Park would have golden streets and children in glory robes biking in the air. All the bikes would be golden, even the spokes, and kids would peel across the sky ringing golden bells set on golden handlebars and singing the Firestone jingle like angels, singing it more joyfully than even Harvey's singers on the radio, or my own father sang it in the shower before he dressed for work, or I did when I skipped to school. The words would just fly from their lips, as natural as breath. "Wherever wheels are rolling" (the voices would begin), "No matter what the load" (the bike angels would trill, wings fluttering and halos spinning as their voices rose to true angel height), "The name that's known is Firestone, Where the rubber meets the road!"

Tires seldom met the road in my fantasy, I admit, spinning like that in the air on bikes driven by angels. But they were still always *tires*—black things with tread—true to the spirit of the jingle. Even in



*Harvey S. Firestone statue (Photograph by Russ Vitale, 2000.
Courtesy of Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc.)*

a fantasy as colorful as mine, I never turned the tires to gold, *never*, because even then I knew that rubber was greater than gold, and there was no way heaven could improve on it. Rubber had brought us here. We were made of water and bones and minerals, like other people, but we were made of rubber too. Latex flowed through our veins and kept us alive.

Fifty years before our move, Harvey Sr. lifted his small son in the air and let him throw the switch that sent into motion a mill, a washer, and two boilers in an abandoned building on Sweitzer and Miller Avenues. His first factory. At that same moment, Harvey's unborn workers—in Akron, West Virginia, or Pennsylvania, like my dad—felt the current that would one day bring them all to life.