

The 16-part "Dreams of a Barefoot Boy" originally appeared in the 2017 Kansas Newspapers in Education. Have fun reading stories, answering questions, and completing activities while learning about Dwight Eisenhower's childhood.



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"Dreams of a Barefoot Boy"

Chapter 9: SMALL TOWN VALUES



"Because no man is really a man who has lost out of himself all of the boy, I want to speak first of the dreams of a barefoot boy...Because today that dream of mine of 45 years or more ago has been realized beyond the wildest stretches of my own imagination, I come here, first, to thank you, to say the proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene."

Dwight D. Eisenhower June 22, 1945

Like many Midwestern towns founded in the late nineteenth century, Abilene, Kansas was founded by Americans with strong beliefs in the values of democracy, equality, and hard work to achieve the American dream. They shared a sense of belonging to the community that included helping one another in times of need.

According to Dwight, Abilene families were self-sustaining: "we grew our corn and we grew our meat, we grew our vegetables, and the local mills ground the flour and we didn't have much connection with the outside world." In the daily life of a young boy that was probably true, but Abilene did consider itself part of the wider world. It had six newspapers, a creamery, a telephone company, two business colleges, three factories, and the C. W. Parker Amusement Company that made merry-go-rounds and had a circus and a skating rink.

Dwight grew up literally on the "wrong side of the tracks," but claimed that he never knew that his family was considered poor. While there were professionals in town, like bankers, doctors and lawyers, the physical labor of farmers, as well as teachers and ministers was equally respected and needed.

Feeding, clothing, and housing six boys took all of Mr. Eisenhower's income, but they never wanted for anything, especially in love and family support. Well-worn clothes were handed down from one brother to the next. And while Dwight may have gone without shoes during the summer, that didn't stop him from dreaming of a brighter future.

Being self-sufficient didn't only apply to growing your own food. It meant working hard for what you wanted, even if it seemed beyond reach. Mrs. Eisenhower encouraged her sons to set goals and then work to achieve them. Whether it was growing and selling vegetables or working after school and summer jobs, the boys learned from an early age how to earn money for the things they wanted. As they got older, their goals became bigger but that didn't stop them from figuring out ways to achieve them.

In his book, *At Ease: Stories I Tell My Friends*, Dwight recalled that he was interested in the dramatic events of history: military battles and their leaders. He later recognized that it was ordinary people who achieved great things. Average people, through work, zeal and persistence, had transformed America in the course of his lifetime from its frontier days to the space age. And while Dwight Eisenhower remained

humble throughout his life, he was one of those people instrumental in that transformation thanks to the small town values he learned in Abilene. It's no wonder he later said, "The proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What were some of the small town values Dwight Eisenhower learned as a child growing up in Abilene?
2. List some of the businesses in Abilene during Dwight's childhood.
3. Why do you think there were so many newspapers in Abilene?
4. How did the Eisenhower boys earn money to buy the things they wanted?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Compare your community today with Abilene during Dwight's childhood. How are things the same or different?
2. The C.W. Parker Carousel in Abilene is a National Historic Landmark today. Why do we preserve these places?