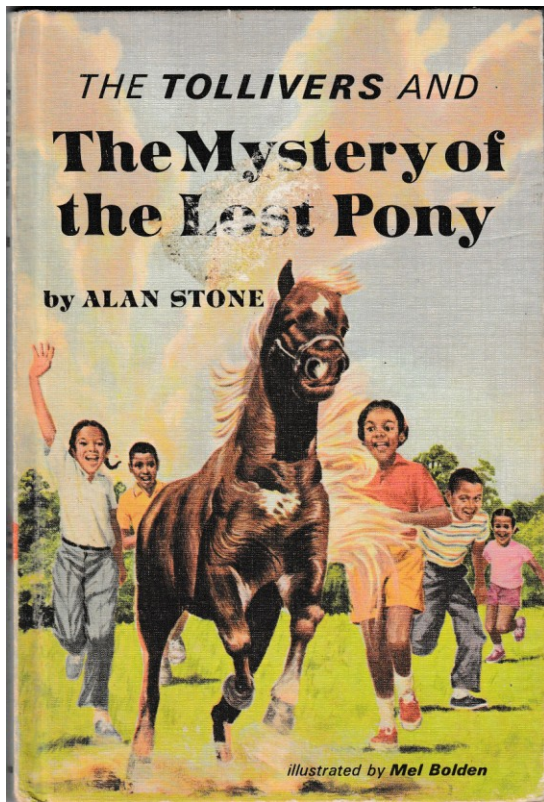


Small Towns in Series Books

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*The Tollivers were a happy family. They lived in a comfortable house located on the corner of Ivy and Howe Streets in the South Hills section of Claremont, a small town on the east coast. The children loved their town because they could row on the river, swim in the ocean, and go on picnics in the state park nearby. Scott Tolliver, their father, owned a drugstore downtown, one of the most popular in Claremont. It still had a soda fountain, which produced the thickest, most delicious, awful-awfuls for miles around. (Chapter One, "The Speed King", 1967, *The Mystery of the Lost Pony*)*



The quotation comes from the first chapter of the first book in the three-volume series about the Tollivers, published in the late 1960s. The series made only a minuscule blip in the world of series books, but it's not bad. Of the many passages I tried to find that express what it means to live in a small town, I think this was the best. In 1967, it was already verging onto nostalgia. That's why the line reads, "It still had a soda fountain" instead of merely "It had a soda fountain."

There is something about small towns whose attraction is almost painfully wonderful. Small towns are a staple for many vintage series, and provide the necessary setting for the mysteries and adventures that are depicted. In a small town, children and teenagers can get around easily and safely. The "greater world" is excluded.

My parents moved our family to Northridge, California in April 1953. I was four and a half. I didn't know it then, of course, but Northridge was what we would later call a "small town". (If the name "Northridge" is familiar to anyone, it would probably be because Northridge was the epicenter of a big earthquake in 1994, now known popularly as the "Northridge Quake".) Northridge's "downtown", two miles west of our neighborhood, was its center of commerce. It had a picturesque train station, a small grocery store named "Allen's Market", a tack and feed store, and a drug store with a soda fountain. My elementary

school was a large, two-story stone building built in 1912 with a lot of separate buildings around it, built later. The television show, “The Beverley Hillbillies” was advertised as being twenty miles northwest of Los Angeles—and that’s precisely where we lived.

The name “Northridge” fits the genre; nothing with a population of half a million could be called “Northridge”. I could play all day outside with no one looking out for me, and by age ten I was allowed to ride my bike the two miles from my house to the main street. My best friend Ned and I could buy tall Cokes for ten cents at the pharmacy, with optional cherry, vanilla, or chocolate flavoring squirted in if we liked. We were happily innocent in many ways, and it made for a childhood of great joy and simple wonder in the world. It was the era in which I bought Hardy Boys books and others in dust jacket for one dollar.

There was an incinerator in the back yard of our new house; you could burn your trash in it before people began to worry about smog/air pollution. I think the word “smog” was a conjunction of “smoke” and “fog”, coined about that time. There was a built-in clothesline, too. I remember my mother going out there regularly with a clothes caddy of some kind, a large, cloth baglike container on wheels that could fold up like a campfire chair.

Two thirds of a century later, I live in a true small town in southern Illinois. Its population is about 7,500, though the city limits sign says 8,000. And we are surrounded, fifty miles or more in every direction, by other small towns, with populations from the low hundreds to the low thousands. The largest is about 15,000. Fields of corn and soy, and here and there small woods, separate the towns and villages. There are four seasons here, with a few inches of snow several times in winter, and hot swimming weather in the summer. It was here that I finally understood the frequent descriptions in series books of a car running off the road “into the ditch”; streets where I grew up had curbs, but many country roads here are bordered by ditches.

It’s a true small town, but it’s not all food for pleasant nostalgia. There are no top quality restaurants within sixty miles, very few attractions, no major shops that would interest most people. I have had three excellent doctors or dentists, but overall the medical care is slipshod, as I learned to my regret. It’s a tradeoff. But these are things that most children wouldn’t notice or care about.

A dude named Bill Bryson wrote a novel called *The Lost Continent*, published in 1989. It’s about a drive he took through 38 states over a three-month period, looking for the ideal American small town. “In this timeless place,” he wrote, “Bing Crosby would be the priest, Jimmy Stewart mayor, Fred MacMurray the high school principal, Henry Fonda a Quaker farmer. Walter Brennan would run the gas station, a boyish Mickey Rooney would deliver groceries, and somewhere, at an open window, Deanna Durbin would sing.” Unfortunately the book has a smug, cynical attitude, besmirches the towns and people Bryson visits, and quickly disenchant the reader who had wanted to read about what the book had touted. I put it down after only a couple of chapters. But the idea

was worthy, and the description above is almost worth the price I paid for the volume.

A good number of the vintage juvenile books that I have collected took such a world for granted. The criminal element more often than not came from “outside”. Teens and preteens could spend nearly all day doing their detective work, but needed parental approval to do it, and that was given only after their chores were done. That world, even if today it is mostly the product of nostalgia, was heart-warmingly attractive. And it is generously served up in a good dozen or more of the series on my shelves. It was a different world from today’s in so many ways.

Here are some suitable quotations that will probably stir the nostalgia in the hearts of most readers of this magazine. In chronological order:



"I'm afraid that's bad medicine," said Whiskers.

The Scranton High Chums and Scranton. *A number of well-grown lads were perched in all sorts of grotesque attitudes along the top rail of the campus fence. That fence... had stood there, repaired at stated and frequent intervals, for at least two score of years. Hundreds and hundreds of Scranton lads, long since grown to manhood, and many of them gone forth to take their appointed places in the busy marts of the world, kept a warm corner in their hearts for sacred memories of that dear old fence.* (Chapter One, “A Fence With a History”, 1919, *The Chums of Scranton High*)

The Hardy Boys and Bayport. *The Hardy family lived in Bayport, a city of about fifty thousand inhabitants, located on Barmet Bay, three miles in from the Atlantic, and here the Hardy boys attended high school and dreamed of the days when they,*

too, should be detectives like their father. (Chapter One, “The Speed Demon”, 1927, *The Tower Treasure*)

Ted Wilford and Forestdale.

Old Goldie had seemed so much a part of the town, something that had always been there and always will be there. (Chapter One, “Old Goldie’s Mine”, 1951, *The Secret of Thunder Mountain*)

The Carson Street Detectives and Carson.

We started out for Stony Creek, intending to fish in that big hole just above the bridge on Line Road. As we got outside the city limits a farmer in a jeep offered us a ride. (Chapter Two, “Burnt Hill”, 1952, *The Mystery of Burnt Hill*)

The Mill Creek Irregulars and Sac Prairie, Wisconsin.

*We crossed the railroad tracks and the road beyond, and plunged into the Freethinkers' park, which occupied a whole block of Sac Prairie on the far side. Even with the moon shining, it was dark along the path that wound to the southeast corner of the park. (Chapter One, "Tending the Moon", 1958, *The Moon Tenders*)*

Brains Benton and Crestwood.

*I got my bike from the shed and headed for the street. What my mother had meant by me rounding up customers had to do with my newspaper route. The Crestwood Daily Ledger had its yearly drive on for new subscribers... I was neck and neck with a kid in the south end of town... (Chapter One, "The Mysterious Message", 1959, *The Case of the Missing Message*)*

The Mad Scientists Club and Mammoth Falls.

*Dinky Poore didn't really mean to start the story about the huge sea monster in Strawberry Lake. He was only telling a fib because he had to have an excuse for getting home late for supper. So he told his folks he'd been running around the lake trying to get a close look at a huge-snakelike thing he'd seen in the water... The town was excited about the possibility that there was a real, live sea monster in Strawberry Lake. ("The Strange Sea Monster of Strawberry Lake", 1961, *The Mad Scientists' Club*)*

There are, of course, many others. I will just do a quick drive-by of the deeply satisfying small town settings of the Jack McGurk, Alvin Fernald, and Spotlight Club series, all excellent and easy to find, although aimed at readers younger than the older classic books most of us collect. Many girls' series featured the delightful small towns in which Penny Nichols, Mary Louise Gay, Judy Bolton, Penny Parker, and others lived and had their adventures.

I wonder how much of the nostalgia I feel when I read vintage series books is the result of selective and sifted memories—still, I do think that there is much truth to the longing for what "Andy of Mayberry" represented. Small towns were where everyone knew everyone else and most people were kind, crime was almost non-existent, and people were hard-working and mostly honest. Children were safe. Teachers were strict but loving.

Sigh. Those were the days. Now that I've finished writing this article, I have to go out and get an "awful-awful", which I take to be a chocolate malt. But the place that had a soda fountain around here is now a vacant lot; I'll have to go to Dairy Queen. Sigh.

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