

# **A Day in the Life of a Middletown Man**

*Emily Kimbrough District*

by Austin Glidden  
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7:00 am

On the morning of Friday, September 24<sup>th</sup> 1920, the autumn sun rose past the horizon, shining bright atop the houses that collectively made the neighborhood surrounding East Main Street. From Washington to Charles St and Hackley to Monroe the houses stood like two-story castles, casting shadows westward from the early sun. The streets were still and quiet when the houses came alive as the men and women got ready for work, and the kids got ready for school. Kitchens began to fill with the smell of delicious homemade meals as the wives prepared breakfast, and packed lunched for their loved ones. This day was just like any other day, but at 814 E. Main St, the Smith house was filled with the very special aroma of a very special breakfast.

Thomas and Eleanor owned a small prairie home where they lived with their two children, Johnny and Evelyn. The Smith family was an average, everyday working-class family in the heart of the Kimbrough District, in Muncie, IN. They had a nice house they could barely afford, a decent car they would sell their souls to keep, and some of the luxuries that people of their status possessed. But most importantly, they were happy. They constantly fought to keep up with the latest trends and sacrificed certain everyday luxuries like driving the car to work or having anything other than oatmeal for breakfast to keep new electronics and appliances like Eleanor's beloved Laundry Queen Electric Washing Machine, or Evelyn's favorite Victor V phonograph, or Johnny's standard 1918 radio unit; anything to uphold their middle class status. Although this may appear to be materialistic, back in the 20s it was just how one lived in this community. The Smiths, namely Thomas, were proud of one thing most of all, their 1918 Studebaker Light Six. That car held up to "four folks at once," as Thomas liked to brag, and was a beautiful tone of white with black trim.

The Smith house was quiet this morning, only the sound of Eleanor frying some ham and beating some eggs. After Thomas woke up he brushed his teeth, put on his work clothes, put a comb through his hair, and entered the kitchen to eat his breakfast and read the Muncie Mourning Star.

“Hey honey, listen to this,” Thomas said with interest, “did you know that Nome, Alaska is farther west than Hawaii?” Eleanor nodded negatively. “It says right here in the *Odd Facts* section.” Thomas loved trivia. He always looked forward to things like that in the newspaper. He flipped through the paper some more.

Eleanor spoke up, her back to Thomas, bowl of eggs and beater in hand, “Have you got to the part where those Beemer brothers got two to fourteen years?”

Muncie, being a busy but small town, kept her entertained by its small scandals or local tragedies, things she liked to talk about with Thomas or her friends from church. The morning paper would keep her chatting all week.

“I haven’t yet, mother. I’ll let you know when I do,” said Thomas half interested.

If there was one thing Eleanor loved more than gossip, it was getting a good deal on anything she could wear. “Ya know, Bath-Paris has a sale on hats today. Less than \$7...”

“Yeah, to start, I reckon,” Thomas said with a chuckle, “Before you know it we’re spending twelve.”

“The kids need new shoes for school, too,” she said passively, “They never got any before fall started. We could get some for Johnny for only...”

“A \$1.49, and Evelyn a pair for \$1.98. I’m reading the Sam Gold add now...”

“Do we get shoes!?” Evelyn exclaimed as she entered the room.

“We can’t afford it today, sweetheart, but we’ll save up for the next sale, okay?”

Evelyn hung her head but nodded affirmatively and sat down in front of a plate being loaded with ham and eggs. Johnny followed close behind and sat down across the table.

“Kids, tell your father happy birthday,” Eleanor said serving Johnny his portion.

“Happy birthday daddy!” they said in unison.

Thomas smiled at them widely, and ruffled Johnny’s hair. He took the last gulp of milk and put the newspaper down. He got up, gathered his things for work and gave the kids a hug.

“I’ll be home a little later than normal this evenin’. I’m going to run over to Martin Flaherty’s house before I come home.”

Eleanor’s eyes spun around at him with concern.

“Don’t worry about me mother, I’ll be fine.” He approached her and gave her a meaningful kiss and a slight grin. “We’re just gonna talk some things over.”

Eleanor knew he wasn’t being completely truthful. Since the prohibition laws were passed over a year prior, Thomas had been going to Martin’s house regularly to “talk some things over.” The odd thing is their discussions sure smelled a lot like whiskey.

Thomas stepped out the door and began walking to the streetcar stop. He had on his dark blue overalls, tan work boots, and was carrying his lunch box and an extra jacket in case it was cooler outside on his way home. Thomas was not a small man. He was about 6’2”, 210lbs, and carried himself like he had a million bucks. His father was a carriage maker and taught Thomas everything he needed to know to follow in his footsteps, preparing him for a good, comfortable life, but after the mass production of the automobile carriage makers were becoming less and less relevant. Thomas’s high school diploma and trade skills landed him a job at the local Chevy plant on the south side of Muncie. And although this would lead many men into a depressed, cynical world view – seeing as how men with this level of experience usually had a white-collar

job, or their own business – Thomas’s father always taught him to live the life he wanted to *have*, not the one he was *given*. So despite his current lifestyle, Thomas lived as if he was one of the wealthy.

On Thomas’s route to the streetcar he always admired the neighborhood houses. He usually walked a block North over to Washington St. to walk passed the nice houses. His father taught him various things about architecture. It was this attention to detail that made his father such a great carriage maker. Thomas loved the styles of the houses on Washington St. Most of them were large, two story Queen Annes or Second Empire homes. The architecture meant everything to Thomas. He dreamt of one day living at 616 E. Washington St. The house was elegant and beautiful, the kind of house in which dreams came true. Thomas would stop for a minute or two to gaze longingly and daydream of Evelyn and Johnny playing in the yard while Eleanor knitted on the porch.

Eleanor worked as a maid for a member of the Ball family. She made good money for her profession, enough to pay for the groceries, give in the offering on Sundays at church, and save a little for “a rainy day,” as she liked to put it, but Thomas wanted her to be able to stay home. He wanted to live like the people on Washington St, but it just wasn’t possible at this point in time.

He continued down the road daydreaming of owning the 1920 Franklin Car sedan outside the house down the street. It was a deep shade of red with black trim and a tan soft top. He quickly found himself at the intersection of Washington and Madison. The streets were coming alive now with people walking all directions, the trolley crossing through town in the distance, and the wealthy being driven in their nice, expensive cars to places Thomas only wished he knew. He progressed a few blocks and hopped on the streetcar that would take him down Walnut and close to work.

Once Thomas exited the trolley, he could see Shed Town to the south in the distance. Shed Town was a place for the lower class workers and their families to live in, what looked like, shacks. Thomas remembered some of his co-workers talking about how these families couldn't buy Christmas presents for their kids, or afford to buy a turkey for Thanksgiving. Some of them couldn't even afford heat in the winter and resorted to alternative sources to keep warm, like open fires and layers upon layers of blankets and clothing.

Many less fortunate men were walking in the same direction to the same factory. They were far more weathered and carried a gloomy disposition. Although he felt very blessed to have what he had – a car, a house, even ham and eggs for breakfast – he empathized with these men, seeing their hardship displayed on their faces. Thomas walked with the men, treating them as peers, as they entered the property gates and into the large factory labeled “Chevrolet.”

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5:00 pm

The bell sounded to alert the workers that their shift was over. The factory thinned out as hundreds of men walked out of the factory at half the pace they entered. Everyone was exhausted but happy that the work day was over. Most were excited to get back to their family, but Thomas had other plans.

Thomas walked out of the factory, accompanied by Martin Flaherty. They headed toward Martin's car which was parked in a near empty parking lot; most working-class factory workers, like Thomas, didn't drive to work. But Martin flaunted his money. Eleanor didn't like Martin too much because he brewed Whiskey in his garage and sold it to workers that couldn't afford, or weren't allowed into, the high-brow speakeasies.

“Well, happy birthday Thomas.”

Thomas nodded his gratitude.

“I have several fellas comin’ over tonight. Heck, they’re prolly there waitin’ fer me right now.”

Before prohibition, Thomas liked to get the occasional drink at the local workman’s bar near the plant. But it hadn’t been open for years. Martin offered him a free bottle of whisky as a birthday gift, something Thomas had a hard time turning down. He was far from an alcoholic, but he certainly enjoyed the taste of “the devil’s drink” as he liked to call it.

Martin lived a few blocks south of Thomas on Charles Street. The houses were less impressive on that side of East Charles, but still beautiful in comparison to Shed Town. They drove up to his house, which was white with a grey roof. The front door was somewhat hidden by a large bush that had not been maintained. As they approached the front door, there were two men sitting on the porch. One was tall and lanky, wearing denim overalls and a dirty cap. The other was short and plump, and carried an odor of cigarettes and gasoline. They all followed Martin through the door and into the foyer.

“Lay yer cash down on the table there,” Martin nodded at the end table next to the entrance, “and take a seat in the living room. I’ll bring ya yer drink there.”

The two men and Thomas walked into the living room and took a seat, all three men on opposite ends of the room. Martin walked in with three bottles of home-brewed whiskey.

“Here’s yer birthday gift,” Martin said to Thomas as he handed him his drink. He handed out the other drinks and said “You boys stay here as long as you like,” as he went into the other room to go about his business.

Thomas hesitantly opened the bottle and took a sip. It was very strong. He didn’t know if that was because it had been so long since he had tasted it, or if Martin had made it extra potent.

The tall lanky gentlemen sat quietly, continuously sipping from his bottle. The shorter plump man was already half finished with his. He was obviously drinking with a purpose, Thomas thought.

It was strangely quiet for such circumstances. Thomas was used to bars when people would talk in unnecessarily loud voices. But Martin's house was morose, simply put. It was dimly lit and quiet; one could hear a pin drop.

Thomas was surprised as he admired the décor in the house; for Martin, it was strangely traditional and modern. He could tell Martin lived beyond his means, thanks to his underground whiskey sales no doubt. The foyer was full of paintings that Thomas couldn't make heads or tails of, but thought were beautiful nonetheless. He mostly admired the wooden framework around them--it reminded him of something his father would have made when he was younger. The wood floors were worn but still semi-elegant. The living room contained white walls, a large knee-high coffee table, and a set of furniture worn by the countless whiskey lovers that drank themselves into a drunken haze. There was a couch near the foyer entrance which the shorter plump man was using. It had an assortment of flower patterns covering the beige background color. There was a mismatched love seat near the entrance to the kitchen, across from the couch, where the tall, lanky fellow sat quietly drinking still. The design of the love seat was similar to the couch in color and pattern, but was obviously different in its details and style. And then there was a chair that matched the love seat, and Thomas observed from its comfortable cushions. Okay, so Martin's house wasn't anything Eleanor would approve of, but Thomas was surprised that with a personality like Martin's, the house was in much better shape than he had ever imagined.



Thomas knew he had to either finish his bottle or throw it away because Eleanor wouldn't let him bring it in the house. The sun was starting to set; in late September, the nights seemed to get ever shorter. Thomas stood up, handed the rest of his bottle to the shorter plump man (seeing that he obviously enjoyed the Devil's drink) and said his goodbyes and thank-yous to Martin and his guests. On his way home he felt wonderful. As he walked north through the neighborhood his mind drifted to what he thought about every morning, but this evening he had an extra pep in his step and optimism in his dreams. He found the biggest house on his way home and thought of every way he could make it a perfect place for his family once he could afford it. He thought about hanging a family swing on the porch so he could sit and admire the nearby houses while Eleanor knitted something beautiful.

Thomas thought this until his house came into view and he realized that instead of wishing for something bigger, something newer, something he could be more proud of, that he should be happy that they have a home at all. He remembered the Shed Town families and how some of them didn't even have heat for the coming winter. He thought about Martin and how when he comes home he has no one there to greet him but strangers who want nothing more than to silently sit in his living room and forget their troubles. Thomas thought about the people who couldn't go to the movies or drive themselves to the grocery store. He realized he was lucky, and that he had more than a lot people in the city of Muncie.

Thomas entered his house to a big "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" from his family. Johnny and Evelyn ran over and hugged each leg as Eleanor calmly walked over with a smile and hugged him. He looked at his simple, plain house with the utmost pride. There were no presents or cake, no decorations or guests, just the Smith family together to cap off a good day.

THE END

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