From Out of Nowhere

Who was the stranger who appeared to aid two stranded young mothers on a wartime trip?

By Ida Schwerzel, Clearwater, Florida

IN MARCH 1943, I decided to take my 3-month-old son, Brian, to visit his dad, Harold, who was stationed at Camp Hood, Texas, so they could get to know each other better.

I made a large carry-on bag with compartments for baby supplies, including bottles of boiled water, pabulum, evaporated milk, juice, baby oil, diapers, powder and changes of clothing.

We left Penn Station in New York City. The train was crowded with passengers and hot; there were no air conditioners, only ceiling fans and open windows for ventilation.

It was a long trip, but all went well until we reached Oklahoma, where severe rainstorms had flooded the tracks. In places, they were completely submerged.

We did a lot of praying. The conductors would walk on either side of the train with a probing pole, testing the tracks, and shout to the engineer to move ever so slowly ahead.

The passengers had consumed all available water and paper towels, and I had run out of clean baby bottles. All I had left were caked with dried milk. My diaper supply was also exhausted.

The engineer was helpful; he tied the dirty bottles upside down on strings and let the steam from the engine clean them. The young servicemen even removed their undershirts to be used as diapers for my son.

The train finally arrived in Belton, Texas at 3 a.m., in a dark, deserted area. We were 18 hours overdue. Another passenger with a 9-month-old child and my son and I were dropped off in the middle of nowhere, and the train took off.

My husband had waited as long as he could and returned to the base, which was an hour away. He had left the address of the rooming house where I was supposed to go tacked in a note on the station's bulletin board.

We were two very frightened women with crying babies and no transportation.

We were sitting forlornly on a dilapidated bench when we were approached by an old, toothless, grinning man who asked, with quite a drawl, "Where would you youngins like to go?"

I hesitated and was very uneasy, as was the other woman. I turned my back to the man, made the sign of the cross and prayed, "God, please watch over us."

I then handed the man the written address. He helped us into his rickety old truck and drove us to what was going to be our home.

I turned to thank our benefactor and offer to pay him.

He had disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared!

His truck never made any noise when he approached us or when he left.

He had to be our guardian angel.