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# *Gum-Dipped*

*A Daughter Remembers  
Rubber Town*



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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.

*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.*

## 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