

*“Dad paid me \$3.00 a week to work. In retrospect, I think he was giving me \$3.00 a week to learn how to work.”*

In the summer, Dad opened the store at daybreak, and it was quiet and dim as the first rays of dawn touched our world. On my way out to the gas pumps, I would usually grab a strawberry soda pop and a bag of peanuts, and pour the peanuts into the bottle and shake it up a little. That was my fuel. It would keep me going for hours. Sometimes I would lean against the front of the trading post, absorbed in the peach-colored dawn sky — daydreaming, munching on peanuts and sipping strawberry pop. Dad paid me \$3.00 a week to work. In retrospect, I think he was giving me \$3.00 a week to learn *how* to work.

I headed over to check the amount of gasoline in the glass receptacles at the top of the gravity-fed pumps. To be prepared for business, I pumped each one up to ten gallons. Then I tucked my shirt into my jeans and smoothed down my hair and stared down the highway looking for cars.

The long stretch of road cut an asphalt pathway through our borderline corner of Arizona. When travelers stopped, they were always curious about the vast landscape, the Navajo Indians and their hogans — the homes they lived in — and they continually asked about the snakes crossing the road. Sometimes they would run over them. “Those are rattlesnakes,” I would tell them. “Rattlers.”

As I stared onto the pavement looking for rattlesnakes, a clever moneymaking idea popped into my head. I ran into the house and grabbed the rattle out of my baby brother Denny’s crib, then snapped up an empty moccasin box from the back of the store. Quickly, I lettered a small sign: *SEE REAL BABY RATTLER — 10 CENTS*. I cut a flap in the top of the box, bent it back, then folded it back down again to create a peephole. I doubled the sign over and set it on the corner of the box. Then I placed the box in an obvious spot by the gas pumps, where I waited for customers.

Soon, travelers showed up to buy gas and wander into the store. And I began pocketing dimes. Most of the tourists got a kick out of it, especially kids watching their dad peer into the box — poised to jump back — then see an ordinary baby rattle.

It took a few hours for my dad to find out that people were paying me 10 cents to peek into a box and see my brother’s baby rattle instead of a snake. He marched out of the store and headed over to me and put an end to my fake snake scheme. He was embarrassed that I was trying to trick people. I thought I was being clever, and I did make some extra money. But I realized he was right. I promised him I wouldn’t trick a customer again. I never did.

By the time I put the rattle back in Denny’s crib, my mother knew the story and she gave me a disapproving look, but when she turned away I could see her eyes crinkle up the way they did when she laughed.

Soon I began getting more jobs in the trading post. While I stocked shelves in the store, I paid attention to how my dad handled people. He made customers feel comfortable, and he was a fine judge of character. He had good instincts about people. I also enjoyed watching tourists shop; I was interested in what they would purchase. I realized people liked to buy what they *wanted*, much more than they liked to buy what they *needed*. Besides, being a tourist was fun, like having a license to buy salt and pepper shakers, kids’ headdresses, rubber tomahawks, postcards. The bigger and better sales, though, were Indian jewelry or Navajo rugs. Buyers were

serious about those lasting purchases. And the locale couldn't help but inspire them to buy quality mementos of their trip.

Sometimes I would wander through the trading post trying to imagine how good it would feel to take in a couple of hundred dollars a day like Dad did. I learned quickly that that wasn't profit. And Dad had to put every cent back into inventory, to build stock and, hopefully, to fill the store with more merchandise.