

Chapter 10

A Bleak Landscape

If I were to pick one thing that typifies West Texas, I would choose the mesquite tree. Its deep roots often reach the water in the sub-soil though it can survive on little water because its leaves are small and retain moisture. The seed can wait for years to germinate and need to be scarified by animals to enable sprouting. The plant then emerges from the cow-chip which offers food for growth. Because the leaves are so bitter, insects and animals do not eat them, and the branches are protected by inch-long, rigid thorns. No trunk or branch of a mesquite tree is straight, and none is ever damaged by wind or ice storms, nor do they ever bud and bloom before the last freeze of winter. When the tree is cut down, the stump sprouts new growth. The buffalo and other animals that spread the seed thrived on the slightly sweet mesquite bean pod. The Indians ground the pods for food. Because there were no native evergreen plants around Rochester, the winter landscape was bleak and uninviting. I suppose we could say the mesquite tree had its own gizzard stones that led the tree adapt to its windswept landscape and raw weather.

In a similar manner, the settlers who grubbed the trees and replaced them with farms adapted like the trees. They could quip that everything in West Texas had stickers, thorns, or horns, or it stung or bit and only a barbed wire fence separated it from the North Pole. But they saw the good in the land and the new society formed there and judged them to be worth all the negative costs. They felt the freedom of a new society, loved the freshness of virgin soil, enjoyed the sunshine in untouched nature, and relished the calm beauty of early mornings and the painted sunsets and verdant fields. The barefooted walk behind the plow in fresh-turned soil created a bond with the earth and nature – and the God of nature.

The newly exposed breast of nature was ravaged, however, by drought and wind during the Dust Bowl years of my young life. Investors in the early 1900s saw a great prospect for changing the area from cattle to cotton. They built the Kansas City-Mexico-Orient railroad to enable cotton shipment. Though it fell short of the original plans, it was connected with railroads to the west coast. Most of the cotton of the area was exported through Long Beach, California to ports in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. As I was pulling bolls I had no idea that the fruit of my labors was going to the Orient. That railroad came in 1906 and the town was moved to it. The town of Rochester, now dwindled to about 400 people, celebrates its hundredth anniversary this year. But the last rail shipment of cotton was in 1994 and the rails have already been taken up! More diversified crops are being grown now. Still, last season, Haskell County produced 87,000 bales (about 43,500,000 pounds) of cotton, but it is hauled by trucks. Better conservation measures are being used now. The sixty acres belonging to Emily, Lois, and me are being returned to nature. But in my youth the shallow plowing by teams loosened the sand for blowing. And it blew!

There were two kinds of sandstorms. On hot days we might see clouds forming in the northwest as a cool front would be coming in. As it came closer, we could see a great bank of red dust rolling in. As it struck, by the time we could get the teams to the barn from the field, the visibility could be down to a hundred yards, or even less. The winds of those fronts were not usually destructive and they soon subsided, sometimes with the sky being cleared by refreshing rain. Ah, the clean and refreshing smell of a summer rain!

Other sandstorms intensified as the day heated. They would prevail until dusk, and this might be repeated several days in succession. Young plants in the fields could be stung and destroyed by the sand. Shifting sand could even cover small plants. Drought and wind worked as a destructive team against the farmer and his land. Even the bed on which we slept

in the old farm house was not spared. I have seen sand cover areas of the linoleum in the house so that its design and color were almost hidden. We would shake it off, sweep it out, and wait for the next one. No, this was not an every-day occurrence for we had many beautiful days. Sometimes sand would drift across a road. A car can travel on wet sand but bog in dry sand. One day our school bus bogged in a drift across the road and we boys got out and helped push it through.

Fortunately, we never had a total crop failure but we suffered income failure. There was always more cotton to harvest than Dad and we five kids could handle, so we usually had cousins for Erath County to come out and make a little extra cash pulling bolls for thirty-five cents per hundred pounds. We enjoyed having them as that was the only time we saw them. Dad never shared info about family finances with us kids, but I am confident that in some of those years our income was no more than \$500.00. Instead of living in despair, we learned that the best things of life are not bought by money. The rugged mesquite taught us that in the bleak landscape there was still some sweetness in the old mesquite bean.

Looking across the winter landscape with no green thing in sight was similar to the bleak landscape of opportunity for us teenagers. What course offered hope of a better way of life than we had? The only “professionals” that we knew were the few doctors, the few preachers, and a wider field of school teachers, and nobody was thriving in those professions. All five of us siblings intended to go on to college, but none of us had been led to believe that there was a much wider landscape. My boyhood thoughts turned in favor of preaching and teaching out of idealism rather than hope of enrichment.

As Emily was graduating from high school, I was entering as a freshman in 1933 and George was a senior. I always liked school and did not find it too much of a challenge. My grades suffered because of so many absences. In algebra, I learned to follow the examples to work the problems but the teacher did not know enough to explain the meaning and value

of algebra; so it was never of any value to me. A little business education could have served me much better. I was never in the “in crowd” of the popular ones, no doubt, due to my being straight-laced, but I learned to gain attention by making better grades and the use of humor, much of which was self-deprecating humor. And on the school-ground, I could gather a scrub volleyball team and rally them to beat the football boys. There was an annual “County Meet” of competition between the schools. I did play third base on a sort of scrub, uncoached, and no-win softball team. And I competed in the discus throw. At the meet, the coach told me no one was entered to toss the shot-put and suggested that I enter. For a skinny broomstick as I was, that was ludicrous, but I entered. I was successful in making every other competitor feel better about his throws.

The attitude of students generally was that they were in competition with the teachers. So any method that would improve their grades was used with little thought of being dishonest or unethical. I never cheated for grades, but I must confess that I helped many other kids with theirs, even writing themes for them. A girl was valedictorian of our graduating class and I was salutatorian with the highest grade among the boys, but it was not even a 90 grade average. We boys were not exactly Ivy League prospects, but most rose above the prospects of the moment.

Because of my slow (retarded!) social development, my social landscape was rather bleak also. All the time that we were on the farm, Bud and I played with the three Goode boys across the road from us, but we had no such associations with the boys from town. Our social life was school and church. Neither of us was confident enough to date girls. Were we interested in the girls? Only when awake. For the junior-senior banquet, I almost made myself sick summoning courage that I did not have in order to ask the prettiest girl in school for a date. She accepted! It consisted of transporting her about two blocks to and from the banquet and sitting by her there. That was my only date in high school. Now, in retrospect, I can say I was

waiting for a still unknown girl in southeast Texas who was just graduating into high school.

Emily was headed for ACC in 1933. None of us had been to Abilene, a distant sixty miles away, with a population of about 30,000 people. Bud and I were given charge of that expedition to take her in our Model A Ford. We left home about daylight on Sunday morning arriving before anyone was in circulation. Chambers Hall, where she was to live, was locked. Mom had known then President James F. Cox in Erath County and instructed us to call on him for any help. So we roused him and he unlocked the room for her. Bud and I got back home in plenty of time to take the family to church. We made a second journey for her at the end of the school year.

Bud graduated in 1934 but had no money for college. Neither was Emily able to go the second year, but at mid-semester in 1935, she and Fay L. Wilson, the boy from Tipton, Oklahoma whom she had met at ACC, were married. They had no resources, so agreement was made for Fay to help with our farm while they lived in our slightly remodeled car shed. Then Emily became pregnant and was pitifully sick the entire time. Not having been around an expectant mother before, I had no idea of the misery some women bear through pregnancy. Her year at college had given her the new-fangled idea that there should be doctor check-ups and delivery should be in a hospital. So, at the one-doctor and one-nurse hospital in Knox City, Kay Leon Wilson was born – the first person I knew to be born in a hospital. The next year they moved into a farm shack where Fay worked almost from sun-to-sun for \$18.00 per month.

Of course, Mom was pleased with her first grandson. Kay would be a new generation to share her singing “The Birdies’ Ball.” She sang it for us siblings and our kids, and we have continued it two more generations. We did not know who wrote the song, nor have we ever heard it outside our family. This year, however, I have learned that it was written by Septimus Winner (1827-1902) using the pseudonym “Apsley

Street,” but still with no music. Mom’s version below differs slightly from the original.

Spring has come said the Nightingale,
I mean to give my birds a ball.
Birdies one and birdies all,
Who will come to my Birdies’ Ball?

Tra,la,la,la, Tra,la,la,la, Tra,la,la,la,la. (Repeated after each stanza)

Soon they came from bush and tree,
Singing sweet their songs of glee.
Each one fresh from his cozy nest,
Each one dressed in his Sunday best.

The Wren and the Cuckoo danced for life,
The Yellow bird danced with the Red bird’s wife.
The sober old Owl and the bashful Jay,
Wished each other a very good day.

They danced all day till the sun was low,
Till the mother birds prepared to go.
Each and all both great and small,
They all flew home from the Birdies’ Ball.

Bud’s college fund was like a mesquite seed that refused to sprout for three years. Otis Gatewood, the ACC “preacher-boy” coming on weekends, was urging Bud to start to college. When Bud told him he had no money, Otis handed him a dime, saying, “George, that is as much as I had when I started.” As my graduation time was approaching, he and I and Fay were making definite plans to start in the fall of 1937.

I had no money either! We had a few dollars, perhaps \$30.00 each. We each were offered the customary 40% discount for ministerial students by the college. Dad had about

four acres of cane to be bundled and was about to hire a man with a binder to do it. Bargaining for the job, we used an improvised sled with a (dangerously) protruding sharpened saw blade pulled by a mule. Bud rode the sled grabbing the cut stalks while I piloted the mule – with frequent hangups. The cane was about six feet tall and it was the heat of August, hot as an oven in the midst of the cane with its irritating chaff. After cutting it, we then tied and shocked the bundles. It was the hardest \$12.00 we ever earned. But \$6.00 was half the price of my matriculation fee, the only entrance fee we paid. In a government program using farmers' teams and manual labor, clay was dug from our dry tank and spread over the almost impassible sandy road south of our farm. Bud and I were hired about a week and we made a fabulous \$2.40 per day. Tuition then was \$5.00 per hour, so with our discounts, we paid \$45.00 per semester for fifteen hours tuition. No church paid the way for a preacher trainee then, and I question the wisdom of it now.

Life was about to change as we planned to leave the bleak landscape of the Depression and Dust Bowl farm for greener pastures in Abilene Christian College. Would we have the grit in our gizzards to deal with the uncertainties before us?
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(Cecil Hook; April 2006)