

Chapter 7

Around the House

As I explained at the outset of this series, these memoirs are being recorded mainly to give any descendents who may be interested a glimpse of how life was for one of their ancestors. I make no claim of being a figure in whose biography you would be interested. A number of you, however, have identified with my experiences and have shared a commonality of influential grit in your gizzards. You encourage me to continue, so I will do so, making no claim that my family experiences were heroic or adventurous.

Dad did no housework though he never sat in leisure while we kids did it. He was always busy with outside work. Mom was off-and-on in her participation because of her health problems. So we siblings did most of the general housework. I began drying the dishes when I had to stand in a chair to do it. Our only cabinet and counter space was a piece of furniture called a cabinet. Its work space was about 24" x 36" and it held all our dishes, and had a flour bin and a pull-out dough board. There George would wash the dishes in a dishpan after heating the water on the cook stove. The wood-burning range was replaced by an inefficient kerosene stove. We had a few white dish towels which we used when company came, but worn-out clothing was used ordinarily to dry the dishes and also as dish rags. Our water was "hard," that is, mineralized. Wonderful detergents not having been invented, much of our home-made lye soap was used in getting the water into a lathering condition. Scum would build up quickly in our pan for hand washing, and dishes were not left as sparkling as we would have liked.

Having no such cleansers as Ajax, we used our own unlimited supply of cleanser – sand! Dampened sand would remove scum, the soot from smoked lamp chimneys, and other resistant stains and stubborn incrustations. We would clean and

polish such items in the plowed field just a few feet from our back door. When a chicken might get in the house and leave its droppings, or one of us vomited on the linoleum or pine floor, or something was spilled, dry sand was poured over it and then swept into the ash scoop. (No dog or cat was allowed in the house even momentarily.) To stop the bleeding and help to form a scab on a scrape or minor cut, I would pour dry sand over it. Dirt is not necessarily dirty!

Having no sink or back porch, in order to brush our teeth we had to step outside to rinse the toothpaste from our mouths. I do not remember Dad ever having a toothbrush or brushing his teeth. Some of the older women dipped snuff. They would make a “toothbrush” by stripping the bark off a twig and softly shredding the end with their teeth, then dipping it into their snuff box and then into the mouth.

As we shared all work on the farm, Bud and I began to share in the cooking though Emily, the oldest and the most diminutive, was CEO of the kitchen when Mom was sick. At times Bud and I would bedevil her in spite of the fact that she had sharp aim with her foot in kicking our shins. He and I would often make up guessing games while we were doing kitchen work. Elda and Lois were still too young for such work, but their turn came later.

Younger ones were assigned the task of churning using the crock churn with a dasher made of a broom handle. When the butter formed, one with washed hands would remove it from the churn, work the whey out of it, and mold it into a mound styled with hand prints. None of us particularly liked buttermilk, but it was preferred for making biscuits and cornbread. Then if any was unused, it was fed to the chickens.

None of the girls milked the cows until Bud and I left home. After being washed, milk buckets were hung outside on the wall and the crocks were set on the ground in the open air and sunlight. In preparation for milking, we would go by the pump near the cow lot and rinse the buckets of any dust or accumulation. A cow lot is not exactly an antiseptic setting. As

we milked, the cows sometimes pawed up trash or switched their tails sending other than milk into the bucket. A fly might land in the foam. Effort would be made to scoop these elements out by hand with the foam. Taking the milk to the kitchen, we would strain it through loosely woven cloth. That is how clean country milk was! Yes, I know how detestably filthy cow lot manure may seem to you of the city or younger generation. Though it was in no way appetizing, it was not all that germ-filled. Composting manure produces methane gas and ammonia. I have never seen house-fly maggots in a cow lot. There must be a fumigating effect during composting. We did not all die from using milk without pasteurization. When it is on sale, I sometimes buy two gallons just for me.

Speaking of flies – they were inescapable, ever-present, and plentiful. Our three-room house had four outside doors! Usually, two of them were nailed shut to help keep out flies, but the screens could not keep them out. There were no effective insect sprays. Some made fly traps which helped a little and there was sticky fly-paper which was futile. Some arsenic fly bait was available. People often kept a fly swatter in their hands as they sat at leisure or visited. Especially when preparing a meal for company, several of us would get dish cloths and drive the flies toward the door as Elda or Pud would open and close the door at the right times. With us, a table cloth was used more to cover the dishes on the table than to use under them where oil cloth served that purpose. Some women would prepare the Sunday meal and cover it with a table cloth before leaving for church.

After I was preaching, I had a meal with some good farm people who had no screens. I broke open a biscuit and there was a fly in the middle of it. Without the others seeing it, I just pinched the middle, dropped it to the floor, and ate my biscuit. It had been sterilized in baking! The table was loaded and a cake with white icing was at the corner of the table close to my plate. Flies swarmed the cake. I would fan them off between bites as I ate but it was to no avail. After I quit

fanning, the flies soon covered it. Nobody refused to eat the cake. And we all survived. Speaking of similar situations, I once heard Homer Hailey comment that he liked watermelons when visiting like that for no flies could get in the melon.

At church the vessels of the communion would be covered by a white linen embroidered table cloth to keep the flies off. Years later in another congregation, an elder complained when they got new communion trays with matching covers and left off the table cloth – they were leaving the Lord’s body up there on the table naked!

Until we were a bit older and received pocket combs as Christmas presents, the family had only one comb – a large, coarse comb which was kept on the dresser in our bedroom. That old dresser had a bigger mirror than the other one in the house. Often I would stand before it flexing my muscles to appraise my (lack of) developing physique. It was always deflating for, though I ate heartily cramming the richest of foods, I was always a skinny bean pole. Some esteem was regained later when I learned that the mirror was defective causing me to look much thinner than I was. Also, in the mind of an insecure teenager, my two front tusks protruded like those of a bull elephant.

On the farm we had to can much of our food, especially peas, green beans, peaches, and corn. The common quip was that “you eat what you can and then can what you can’t eat.” For a family of seven, much canning was in half-gallon jars. When each item was ready, we would take a day or more from farm work to can. We would sit in the shade of the house, moving as the shade moved, shelling peas or peeling peaches, the drudgery being relieved somewhat by our interactions of fun. No radio or phonograph. We never discussed religion though we would talk of church people and happenings. Sometimes a batch of peas would be picked after the day of work in the field, shelled in the evening, and left to be processed in the pressure cooker the next day. Pud, about ten years old, would be left to watch the pressure cooker! Due to

the fragility of glass jars then, sometimes jars would break in the cooker and our labor and the food would be for nothing.

One day in August 1934, while we were shelling peas, one of us returned from the mailbox reporting on the plane crash in Alaska that took the life of Will Rogers and Wiley Post. We still had no radio but, though not having seen him, we knew of Will Rogers because he came to the Cowboy Reunion in Stamford each year.

The canned food would be stored in the storm cellar out of danger of freezing. Like a prairie dog dives into its hole for refuge, all farm people made similar use of the cellar as storm fronts moved in. Approaching storms appear much more threatening at night than in the daylight, so most of our retreats to the cellar were when we were awakened by Dad's call for us to get up and go to the cellar. In the dark we would hastily put on necessary clothes, grab a lamp, and make a frantic dash. After the storm passed, the old single-walled box house was always left standing and we would welcome our beds again. When lightning could be seen in the northwest at bedtime, Bud or I were sometimes assigned to stay up and watch until the cloud passed us by or demanded another dive into the cellar. I can vividly remember the earthy smell of the dugout and our groggy sleepiness as we waited out each storm.

"Laundering" was not in our vocabulary, but we siblings did all the washing of clothes. During school year, it had to be done on Saturday or not at all if the weather did not permit it. The woodpile and wash pot were close to the well near the barn. The curbed well had two-inch piping with a six-foot pump handle and a cypress sucker rod to be operated by manpower. As we carried the water to the pot and heated it, a spoon full of lye was stirred into it to "break" the water. A scum of the minerals would rise to the top and be skimmed off. Then we could add our lye soap and transfer it to the tub with the washboard. Then came the laborious task of rubbing the water-soaked items until they were clean of spots and stains and rinsing them in clear water. Always looking for easier methods,

Bud and I made our own. We would take off our shoes and tramp a whole running together. Wringing the sudsy water then the rinse water out of bed sheets was too big a job for one boy, so Bud and I worked as a team on that. The only bleaching for white clothes was by boiling in sudsy water. In order to help remaining dinginess, sometimes blue liquid was added to the rinse water. Don't ask me what bluing was! Faultless starch came in powder form, so it had to be mixed with hot water first then poured into the rinse water for clothes to be starched. Next we hung the one clothesline full and then we used the barbed wire fence in front of the house for the rest. At times the wind would be blowing and stirring up dust. On hot days, the first running might be dry by the time the second running was ready to be hung out. Using the left-over soapy water, Bud and I would often scour the pine floor partly covered with linoleum in the kitchen sweeping the water out the back door or through a gap in the floor near the wall.

An eye had to be kept on the cows on wash-days for they loved cotton clothing. One evening all of the girls ribbed stockings were washed and hung out on the barbed-wire fence in front of the house and no one remembered to watch. When someone thought to do so, it was almost too late. One cow had eaten nearly all of their stockings. Once the cotton gloves I used when pulling bolls were protruding from my back pocket as I was milking. Before I knew what was happening, the cow I was milking had swung her head around, had licked the gloves out of my pocket, and was swallowing them.

Static sheets with all sorts of nice perfumes are used now in our dryers, but none of the fragrances can capture the fresh smell of clothes dried out in the sun. Often on sunny days we would put cotton mattresses outside in the sun for a day of freshening. They were solid cotton as innerspring mattresses were unknown and, instead of box springs, bedsprings were bare iron coils.

In the summertime Bud and I would move our iron bedstead outside in the open air. At about 1500 feet altitude our

air was light and cool at night and the skies were usually clear. I wonder how many people living in the city have ever seen a clear sky away from any artificial light. It never ceased to be a magnificent sight bringing wonder and awe. We had not heard of the August night when the shooting stars are so spectacular, so we were truly amazed to experience one unannounced, and we could see some meteorites most any night. The mockingbirds would sing into the evening and the scissor-tails would wake us by their crowing routines in the morning. At night the dogs would answer one another across the farms and rove about, then our dog would return to check Bud and me out. When I took Lea to Rochester in the summer for the first time, having told her previously of our sleeping outside, I had trouble persuading her to give it a try. After the first experience, however, each summer that we went back, she was always quick to suggest getting our bed ready out under the stars. The winds of the worst of sandstorms usually laid at the close of day so that it could be “a beautiful evening, calm and free.” We would shake the sand off the bed and enjoy it.

I saw a more convincing testimony of a Creator while lying in bed looking into the sky than I saw from reading the Bible. *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge”* (Psa. 19:1-2 NIV). The most unenlightened since creation could discern that *“his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”* (Rom. 1:20). Living so intimately with nature and musing on and coping with its various elements were gizzard stones helping to make me what I am today socially, spiritually, and even physically. []

(Cecil Hook: February 2006)