

## Chapter 8

### Around the House – Upper Teen Years

In the last issue, I told what fun ☺ we teenagers had washing clothes; now comes the joy of ironing! We began ironing our own clothes as younger teenagers. Even though Lea did most of the ironing during our life together, I usually cared for my own dress shirts and pants through the years, and even to this day. Before we had electric steam irons, we sprinkled the clothes ahead of time. There was a clip-on handle for use on two irons which were heated on the wood stove or oil stove of the kitchen. The padded board rested on the backs of two chairs. Much caution was necessary lest we scorch the clothing or smear it with soot or an unclean iron. So the testing and cleaning was done as each reheated iron was used. To press wool pants, a dampened cloth was spread over the garment to prevent damage of the fabric. My pair of Sunday pants was carefully laid between the two mattresses on our bed where it could retain its creases, such as they were. Clothing was sewn with cotton thread. Fellows who filled out the seat of their pants, while doing strenuous activity, might hear a rip as the seam of their pants split. They would make a hasty exit to escape the laughter.

The first freezes of the winter signaled hog-killing time. Butchering was no picnic, especially for the weak-willed and those of delicate appetite. After a blow to the hog's head, the jugular vein was cut so the animal could bleed. In order to make the hair slip, the hog had to be scalded. Usually we covered the body with tow-sacks and poured scalding water on it. After the hair was scraped off, a slit was made above the ankles of the back feet and a single-tree was hooked under the tendons, and by it the animal was hoisted above ground by rope over a tree branch. Dad always did the odious disemboweling task while we caught the entrails in a tub. It was my fate always

to be assigned the detestable job of stripping all the fat from the intestines and other innards to be rendered for lard. Parts like the liver and ribs which could not be cured were often shared with neighbors. Dad salted down the hams and other larger parts for curing. Most of the remainder, including the tenderloin (We never heard of pork chops until “Li’l Abner.”), was cut up and ground for sausage in our little hand-cranked grinder. This required much “elbow-grease.” Mom and Dad usually hassled over the amounts of the various seasonings. After grinding we then stuffed them into tubes about three inches in diameter made of worn-out clothing and hung them outside in the shade until they were all eaten.

Jimmy Dean, of Plainview, Texas, has seasoned sausages like them, but no one can match the flavor of those home-made sausages aged in the open air. Much fat was left on the meat for we fattened hogs in those times to produce more lard. The major pieces of fat were cut up and rendered in the iron wash pot down at the barn. In both pork and beef, fat adds much to the flavor, so we ate much fat, sometime sopping the extra fat with our biscuit or stirring molasses into it and sopping it. They had not invented cholesterol back then, and we needed the extra energy to burn due to our vigorous life and our poorly heated houses. People with heated houses, warm clothes, and sedentary lifestyle cannot afford to continue to eat like we did then.

You probably have eaten mince-meat pie. Did it have meat in it? Not likely. But a part of hog-killing time was the making of mince-meat. The head of the hog was boiled and the fatty and cartilage type flesh was picked in minced pieces from the bone. Into it were mixed dried apples, raisins, syrup, sugar, spices, and perhaps other ingredients. Because of the excess fat in it, it could be kept for some time without refrigeration. When made into half-moon pies, the fat made the crust rich and flakey -- a real delicacy. There were times when Dad used the head meat to make congealed souse and the liver to make congealed

“liver pudding” in keeping with his German heritage. We kids were not too “hog-wild” over those two porky productions.

After the cut up fat pieces of pork were rendered, the remains were the “cracklins” which could be kept indefinitely. With them we made cracklin’ bread, a kind of hot-water corn bread which was greasy by today’s standards. We ground our cracklings for more even mixing in the corn meal. A food so tasty could hardly be expected to be in today’s recommended diet.

Because beef could not be cured like pork, we seldom used beef. But a few times we did kill a yearling in the colder part of winter. We would hang the dressed carcass on the north wall of the house out of reach of dogs and cut off of it as we needed. It might freeze and thaw many times but that only made it more tender and flavorful like Kansas City aged beef. It was quite unlike the water-saturated beef we buy in the markets today. I have known people who had meat to thaw when their freezer failed who were so afraid to eat the meat that they would discard it. We violated all sorts of modern rules about meat, eggs, and milk without dying of salmonella, E.coli, or any other such feared maladies. Ground beef was unknown in our house except for coarsely ground meat for making chili. It contained enough tallow to make block chili which could be kept a long time without refrigeration. Most of our meat was eaten fried.

Home cured ham and sausage were great, but laying nostalgia to rest, I prefer to get my meat from the supermarket! We wasted nothing for “waste makes want.” All waste fat was used in making our lye soap. Regardless of the menu before us, there was always recognition that it was a blessing from God as we offered thanks for each meal.

When we had good rains, water drained off the cow lot, horse lot, chicken yard, and pig pen into the surface tank about a hundred few feet away. According to current medical advice, George and I should have died as teenagers of every sort of virus, bacteria, and microbe because we spent so much time playing in that muddy water. Bud and I enjoyed giving Eldie

and Pud boat rides in the shallows in wash tubs. And our half-grown turkey seemed pleased for a tub ride when tadpoles were plentiful within pecking reach.

In summer sometimes Bud and I would take a preliminary bath and shampoo in the tank and then finish it off at the pump. A three-room house with seven residents did not offer much privacy for bathing, so Bud and I would set tubs with water in the wagon or on the hen house to warm during the day and then take our baths in the wagon after dark. Even in our crowded conditions, privacy for the changing of clothes was rigidly respected.

A “car shed” had been built about a hundred feet from the house. A garage was where cars were taken for repair but a car shed was where it was kept. In time a floor was put in the single-walled shack with corrugated iron roof. For a time it became the bedroom for Bud and me. I did not own a Bible, but someone’s large family Bible was in the shack. By kerosene lamplight, I read it through for my first time. Even with our limited space, we had extra kin to spend summers with us at times.

Boys don’t just sit around unoccupied. As soon as we completed our assignments, Bud and I were ready to play, and playing catch required the least preparation and equipment. Countless hours were spent playing catch and batting fly balls in front of the house. We never owned a genuine baseball or glove but we made our own, such as they were. We would unravel knitted glove tops and worn-out socks and stockings and wind the string into balls. Bud cut a leather cover from the sides of worn-out work shoes and we had our baseball. Because we had only cotton string or thread with which to sew it, the ball could not withstand much batting without needing repair. We did have one baseball bat, but some kid broke it right away. We made our own tops and yo-yos. We never had skates or bicycles. They would have been of no value on a sandy land farm. To this day, I have not learned to skate or ride a bicycle. Many years later, Lea and I joked that the only thing we had in

common when we married was that neither of us could skate or ride a bicycle.

Even through our upper teen years, we and neighbor boys continued to play marbles using the square ring with nine large crockery marbles with two sets of partners in competition. It was a good game requiring strategy and shooting skills. Our family also made wickets and small mallets for playing miniature croquet using those marbles. For Mom to play we had to make her mallet of a broom handle so she did not have to stoop. In another game, using smaller marbles as taws, two or three boys would dig four three-inch holes about two feet apart for a game of “rolly holy” where the winner made a round trip of the holes without being hit and sent back to taw line. I can remember when men would pitch silver dollars, but that game deflated into pitching metal washers. We pitched horseshoes also – the real things – worn out shoes of different sizes and shapes.

Preachers denounced card playing along with movies, radio, magazines (especially True Story magazines), and whatever else was popular at the time. So Mom did not allow card playing for it had the appearance of evil and would put a kid on the slippery slope to becoming a gambler. Ironically, her parents spent one summer with us and Grandpa taught Bud and me to play Hearts out under the hackberry trees. I don't know if she ever knew that. She would not allow us to own dominoes but, if others brought them when they visited, we could play, or play at other people's houses. In later years she allowed us to own a set, and eventually she became so daring as to play dominoes with Dad.

No music was taught in school; we had no radio or phonograph, and in church we had no instrumental music. So our family was exposed to very little music. A few times in summers a “medicine show” would offer vaudeville type entertainment for several nights. It would be two or three persons with a light truck whose tail gate served as a small stage. They would sing, do skits, and sell medicine. They

always drew a crowd and had good sales of a magic formula that would cure what ails you. Without entertainment, sometimes a man with a pickup truck load of apples or bananas would park downtown and draw a crowd to sell his wares. One fellow had a load of socks. In his ballyhoo in drawing a crowd, he was tossing men pairs of free socks. I was standing close to his truck and held up my hands for a pair of socks. He started to toss a pair to me but held back, saying, "You are not a man." "But I have a man's foot," I shot back. He tossed me a pair which turned out to be no big prize. You might expect seconds or imperfects, but these were total rejects, one sock being so small that I could not possibly put it on my foot. As to musical training, the church did sponsor two or three "singing schools" in which we were taught to read shaped notes, sing different parts, and beat time. Sunday afternoon singings were common and even allowed for an occasional solo or quartet.

Dad was the last to accept any innovation like a radio or tractor. We kids pled for a radio for "everybody else had them." One day in 1936 we were thrilled when we came home from school to learn that he had taken a cow to Haskell and traded it to a dealer for a new radio! About the third day, the battery was drained. Dad reluctantly had the 6-volt battery recharged. That did not last long, but we did not have to prod him further. He ordered a wind-charger by mail. Soon it came – in a jillion pieces of nuts, bolts, and parts. Dad was devoid of any mechanical aptitude. I never saw him so much as remove a spark plug from a car. So he asked me to miss school the next day so Bud and I could assemble it. Using our tool set consisting of a pair of pliers, a screw-driver, and a monkey wrench, we put it together. Then we attached it on the ridge of the roof over the kitchen where a chimney had been removed and let the brake chain hang into the kitchen. An antennae wire stretched out twenty yards to a fence post. Our world would never be the same!

It was a miracle to hear programs from Fort Worth and Dallas and as far away as Chicago and across the Mexican

border; however, we did not sit around listening all the time. It was turned off during work time. When weather was bad, there was lots of static and too much static was created by the wind-charger to listen while it ran. Due to Mom's nerve problems, it was turned off early in the evening. Having a radio helped us to have the correct time which our only timepiece, a cheap Big Ben alarm clock, failed to do.

In those early days of radio the popular programs were not very sophisticated for we were not ready for sophistication. The singing was mostly Western, ballads, hill-billy, blues, hobo songs, and religious songs. Yodeling was popular. At prime time at noon we could hear Bewley's Chuck Wagon Gang, the Stamps Quartet, and W. Lee O'Daniel's "Light Crust Doughboys." The whole nation tuned in to hear "Lum and Abner," "Amos and Andy," and comedy programs by such men as Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, and Fred Allen. It was said, in exaggeration, that when those programs were on, a person in a city in summer could walk down the sidewalk in residential neighborhoods and not miss a word. In those days before air-conditioning, everyone kept their windows and doors open.

In early evening you could listen to "*Little Orphan Annie*" and "*Dick Tracy*." Afternoon soap operas had their beginnings with such as "*Ma Perkins*" and "*Stella Dallas*." Benny Goodman was just starting his big band but we preferred country music. Many of those programs came from WBAP in Fort Worth and a companion station WFAA in Dallas. Their broadcasts would switch from one station to the other. When it switched from Dallas to Fort Worth, it was always signaled by a cow-bell. Even our little town of Rochester formed a hill-billy band that played for a while on Sunday afternoons from KRBC in Abilene.

Preachers were in their hey-day enabled by radio. Preachers from various churches proclaimed their doctrinal positions colored by their own attitudes and personalities so that I could hear one for only a few seconds and usually guess what church he was with. Amiee Semple McPherson was the

flamboyant, sensational preacher of the day out of Los Angeles promoting her Foursquare Gospel Church. It was beyond any dream of mine to think I might ever preach by means of radio.

That grit in my gizzard seventy years ago still affects and defines me. Many of you, though not quite as ancient as I am, experienced similar circumstances. Though we did not all respond alike and to any degree of excellence, in general our generation learned self-reliance and creativity in using what was at hand. Patience and determination were learned by doing boring and seemingly fruitless tasks – in doing what had to be done even when it meant overriding sensibilities and seemed callous. Our grit promoted a sense of gratitude for what we had and a measuring of all conduct by an objective standard of conscience. []

(Cecil Hook; March 2006)