

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 1

“The Gizzard”

High on the list of the many odious tasks for a teenager on the farm was the preparation of a chicken for a meal. I seemed to have gotten more than my share of those assignments. I do not mean re-heating of the cooked bird in a microwave oven. It involved catching the particular chicken, pulling its head off and watching it hop and flop “like a chicken with its head chopped off” until its blood was drained and it stopped moving. Then it was dangled in a bucket of scalding water so as to loosen the feathers for picking. That nauseating smell remains with me today. After picking the feathers (saving the softer feathers for pillows), the bird was rotated over a flame to singe the pin-feathers that remained. That repulsive odor was attractive to neither man nor beast. Next in order was the removing of the entrails and cutting the rubbery carcass into pieces for frying. Under the neck just outside the pulley-bone was the craw and just inside was the gizzard.

The gizzard, being different in texture was not a favorite piece of the fried chicken – except for some girls who had heard that it helped the growth of their breasts. Curiously, in cutting into the gizzard, I would find small pebbles, or “grit.” As you know, fowls have no teeth; hence, the country expression, “scarce as a hen’s teeth.” As the chicken rustled about the farm it picked up all sorts of available food which went into the craw for storage. Later it passed gradually into the gizzard where the pebbles acted as grindstones to pulverize the grain and other food so it could be digested and assimilated. So what went into the makeup of the chicken depended greatly on the effectiveness of the grit.

Being many years after the Great Depression and Dust Bowl time of my teenage years, few of you have probably ever killed and dressed a chicken. If today you had to kill and butcher your fowls or animals, I suspect that the number of vegetarians would multiply rapidly. You might never have heard of gizzard stones and your acquaintance with gizzards may be limited to giblet gravy. The whole chicken which includes the gizzard that you buy in the market was raised on a chicken farm and fed pulverized food which required no grit in the gizzard. So, even fowls and animals have changed. As far as I know, there was no gravel in Haskell County where our farm was. Any gravel had to be hauled in. I recall early in childhood of our further breaking into bits a broken churn or crockery utensil to provide gizzard-stones for the chickens.

Already, you can see why I have chosen the particular title as I intend to review things affecting my life. Such things may make you and me react differently and hold different perspectives in life. All of us have various kinds of pebbles in our gizzard that affect how we assimilate the fiber of character. As we grow older we are able to understand better why we are what we are and why others have developed differently.

Our children and grandchildren seldom come to us and ask us to tell them about our earlier days. But fifty years after we are gone, they will wonder why they did not! So I am intending to devote more than one issue to some of the story of my life especially for my own family. My life has not been all that exciting or illustrious, so you may delete these installments on sight as you wish. Having not the energy to write these and my regular mailouts at the same time, I plan to intersperse them. If you find them helpful in

“seeing where I am coming from” or in better understanding yourself, then I will have accomplished more than just advertising myself. This won’t be heavy stuff; I may be just trying to justify my self-centeredness!

There is quite a pile of gizzard stones involved in masticating our intake. The country, century, society, and culture in which we live enter our makeup. There is a mix from our ancestors, parents, sibling, and associates. Race, appearance, size, health, intelligence, religious climate, and education are involved in this pulverizing for proper assimilation. Mental, social, and emotional health figure in it – whether you are more left-brained and logical or right-brained and subjective. Since I am no psychologist, you may revise this list and disregard my implications. If I make a fool of myself, I will try to laugh with you.

My grandfather, Frederick George Hook, left his family in Switzerland as a youth and came to America in 1855. It is appalling as to how little information has been preserved about his immigration. One story is that, at that time, Switzerland conscripted men for an army which they then “rented” to other countries and that he and a brother wanted no part of it; so they came to America. In Palestine, Texas he married Emily Marks whose family had emerged from France and Germany. They died in my early childhood. My father, Solomon Slaughter Hook, born in 1886, was the sixth of their seven children. He received that name from a prominent citizen in Stephenville, Texas where he was born. Sol’s father was a farmer and stone mason and he wanted Sol to be a mason also with him but Dad preferred to farm. Grandpa Hook taught classes in the Baptist church for many years.

My Dad married Lora Dean Moore, born in 1895, the oldest of eleven children of George W. and Emily McAlister Moore in 1913. Their ancestors were a mixture of English, Irish, Scottish, and Cherokee. When Mom’s father married, he was illiterate with rough edges, but her Mom, whose family was of our Movement, taught him to read using the Bible as a textbook. He was a restless sort who moved his family many times. He took leadership roles in the Church of Christ.

All these assimilated into the American culture. Although Dad was a first-generation American, I never heard him speak one word in German. Looking back, I can recognize the different sources of genes displayed in Dad and Mom. That assimilation was characteristic of the melding of American people. But now diversity is being sponsored which may become as problematic as the two cultures in Canada and other countries have become.

The boy, Sol, attended a one-room school taught by his oldest brother, Charley. As a teacher he was such a strict disciplinarian that many kids quit school rather than submit to one of his lickings. When Charley promised Dad a licking, he quit school in the lower grades. Dad was a quiet, unemotional person who liked the solitude that farm life gave. I never heard him curse, express himself in anger, tell an off-color joke, use vulgar language, or tell a lie. He drank no liquor. He was so stoic that I often stated that he would die standing up if that were possible. Though he often played with his five kids, there was never a verbal expression of love to any of us. I never saw him kiss my mother. Though he was a faithful disciple, his timidity never allowed him to speak out in piety, lecture anyone, or pray publicly. The only prayers I ever heard him utter were short memorized offerings of thanks at meals which Mom coerced him into doing.

It was a custom to invite the preacher home for dinner (lunch for you Yankees and other foreigners). In church Dad always sat at the back, and often being the first one to shake hands with the preacher on the way out, we had many preachers in our home! That greatly influenced us children, as I will address later. I suppose it was due to his Germanic culture that he was a rather rigid disciplinarian with us kids. He worked very hard on the farm and expected us to do the same. In spite of his lack of expressed affection and his inheriting such a name, there are six boys wearing the name of Sol in honor of him. The kids all loved him because he did not push himself on them but instead helped them feed the chickens, ride the tractor, and do such things that city kids enjoy so much on a farm.

Mom, on the other hand, was from an emotional family that had some damaging internal problems. She had more education but the often misguided and inconsistent strictures of her religion were very guilt-inducing and did nothing to help Mom's emotional instability. Due to one of her scruples, she never cut her hair in her 81 years. She was our conscience. In our early years she would teach us scriptures and pray with us at bedtime. As years progressed, due to bad health and growing emotional disorders, she abandoned such things and became chronically ill. We kids found her more approachable than Dad, so we went to her first to negotiate with him for us. Family life had to be built around her. She would verbally express her love to us children but it was interpreted by us as such an effort to gain our affection that we did not offer much affection in return.

In spite of poverty and what might be thought of as a lack of nurturing and some dysfunctional aspects, our home was a haven. None of us became rebellious and disrespectful. Dad was a quiet, stabilizing factor. So was the cohesiveness of us five siblings. Doing all sorts of house-work together, working in the fields together, playing together, and eating three meals each day (except school days) together helped to mold us in our own secure society which is what a home should be. We all had the same grit in our gizzards that made for bonding.

The older we have grown, the more we siblings can see the lasting influence of that home on various aspects of our lives. We see the vital roles of father, mother, and siblings. Whether by choice or fate, the home that lacks these three elements is deprived of vitally important grinding stones of character.

When my father died Nov. 4, 1974 I wrote this brief tribute: "In his 88 years Dad lived one day for each 22 days since Jesus was on earth. He probably lived contemporary with half of all mankind and in the greatest era of freedom and achievement. A first generation American, he held strong ideals of family life, discipline, morality, and independence. Loving the soil, he chose to be a farmer. He cleared land with his own hands. He lived the quiet, simple life with great patience and hard work. Dad was a faithful disciple for sixty years. Although his modesty never permitted him to sermonize or express his inner thoughts, the strength of his character inspired confidence and respect. He competed with no man. Profanity, vulgarity, and resentful expressions about others were never heard from his lips for they were opposite to his nature. He had trouble with no one because others would have been ashamed to take advantage of his simple honesty and trust. He was not a great leader in any area of human endeavor. But he lived at peace with God and self and lived honorably before his family and fellowman. And that is greatness."

With this introduction to my family, I will stop for now and hope you may continue with me in later issues. []

(Cecil Hook: November 2005)