

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 3

On The First Farm

The farmland of the rolling plains of West Texas was being settled rapidly in the early 1900s. Around the town of Rochester, established in 1906 when a railroad was laid, a family soon occupied most every 100 or 160 acres. Most of the houses we cheaply built and were never painted. Ours consisted of two 14' x 14' rooms and a smaller lean-to room on the back. It was a boxed house of twelve inch boards with a stripping over the joints but with no studding. A heavier kind of plain wall-paper was tacked to the walls. The floors were unfinished pine.

Piped water, indoor toilets, and electricity had to wait for years. Water was kept in the kitchen in a water bucket with a drinking dipper in it for all users. A wash pan and lye soap were kept beside it for washing of hands. Some families had a cedar water bucket which enhanced the taste, and some used gourds for dippers. At public functions, like when a carnival came to town, a galvanized watering trough for cattle was borrowed from the hardware store; water and a block of ice were put in it, and tin cups were hung around the rim for common usage by all. Germs must not have found their way to Rochester! Or, due to the sharing of germs, maybe we developed immunity. There was no "big brother government" to protect us from ourselves!

My earliest memory seems to have been when I was about four years old. A man was digging a well near our barn. When it was about four feet deep, he lifted me down into it for a thrill that lingers in my memory. I recall the hand-made windlass the men used to lift the diggings out of the well and the pulley, rope, and bucket by which water was drawn after it was completed. As it turned out, the water was so "gyppy" that it was unfit to drink. The mules and cattle would drink it only when the surface water dried up.

At the ages of about ten and eight, Bud and I sometimes carried water from a windmill about 300 yards from the house in eight-pound lard buckets, sloshing much of it out on the way. (Armour buckets were straight sided; Swift's Jewel buckets were beveled.) One day, as we trudged along, Bud asked me if I knew how to get rid of an onion without eating it or throwing it away. His solution was to just keep peeling off the layers. The profundity of that nine-year-old impressed his younger brother. You could preach a sermon from that, couldn't you?

Bud and I slept in the same bed in the lean-to room. I slept with him on through college! We never knew anything about private bedrooms and separate beds! One night I created a fuss with Bud because he had a pillow and I did not. After he finally gave in and let me use it, I decided that I did not like a pillow after all. And for most of my life I have not used a pillow. Also, I have learned that many of the things we think we want fail to satisfy after we have exercised ourselves in getting them.

Emily, Bud, and I stood at the table while eating. I am not sure that we had more than the two cane-bottomed chairs. Our fare was limited for there were no fruit trees on those new farms. At rare times Daddy would buy a lug of dried apples or prunes, or fresh apples from a truck in season. At times when we had no syrup, jelly, or preserves for our

buttered biscuits, we would boil plain sugar for a substitute. And we often made preserves of watermelon rinds flavoring them with lemon or cinnamon. Sometimes Mamma would make vinegar cobblers when no fruit was available. We never saw an orange or nuts except at Christmas, and we got colorful hard candy then also.

In such limited space, there were not many places in which our parents could hide the things they bought for our Christmas stockings (our real stockings, not decorative ones). We kids could always find the Christmas cache because we could smell the apples, but we pretended our ignorance of it – like we do about so many social matters. Dad would get us some firecrackers and sparklers at ten cents per package. Bud and I would get a single shot cap pistol, or if we still had the one from the year before, we only got some new caps for it. Maybe we would also get a sponge rubber ball, a top, or some other such little toy. It was exciting. We did not know that we were “deprived”! We never thought of ourselves as being victims. The world owed us nothing. We enjoyed what we had. We improvised using things like spools and tin cans for toys.

I cannot recall ever having believed in Santa Claus or not knowing where babies came from. There were always too many older kids around to reveal such secrets. Once there was a discussion among the young ones as to whether it was more desirable to be a boy or a girl. The objection to each gender was that girls had to have babies and boys had to fight in war. WWI was still fresh in people’s minds and conversations.

In our home anything that hinted of sexuality was unmentionable. Suggestive language, mention of private body parts or functions, and vulgarity were strictly censored. Being a forbidden word, “bull” became a steer. No cursing was ever heard, nor were by-words permitted. Pregnancy was an unknown word. Expectancy was not announced; babies just came or the doctor brought them. I remember the pretense under which Dad would haul a cow or sow away and bring her back home again. We kids knew he was taking her to a boyfriend, but the breeding of animals was never mentioned. Even the castration of calves was done while Bud and I were at school. Different grit in our gizzards, would you agree?

In the fall and winter great flocks of ducks would swarm to the shallow area lakes. When the family wanted ducks to eat, Daddy would hide in the bushes along the shore and wait for a pot-shot to get two or three with one cartridge. Bud or I would wade out into the biting cold water to retrieve the ducks. We saved their soft feathers for making pillows. Dad’s old 12-gauge shotgun, oiled only by pouring coal oil down the barrel, would kick so hard that it sometimes bruised his cheek. One older teenager, Jack Walker, borrowed it. Crouched by the lake, he turned and fired at ducks on a flight approach. The recoil kicked him over into the frigid water.

We always loved and gave names to the cattle and mules and even to the pets we chose among the chickens. Setting hens were a menace to a kid. Children always had the chore of gathering the eggs from the nests each day and we sometimes even watched as a hen laid her egg. At times we hatched chickens in an incubator warmed by kerosene in the storm cellar. We helped in turning the eggs twice daily. There were frequent fatalities among the chicks and I conducted the burial for many of them. One of them met its doom when its innards suddenly became “outards” due to my accidentally stepping on it. Bud and I were the disposers of the many eggs that did not hatch. I am convinced that their smell would have nauseated a buzzard.

Some years we would put a turkey egg in a setting hen's nest. The hatched turkey would follow the mother hen, even a bantam hen, until it was many times her size. One nice turkey looked very promising for our Christmas dinner. But hearing a commotion one day and looking out toward the pig pen, we saw the turkey flouncing and flopping around on the ground. It had poked its head through the cracks in the pig pen eating their food one time too many. A hog had taken his share of Christmas turkey early, biting its head off! So we ate our Christmas treat early also.

While playing alone sliding down the cellar door, I felt a painful grab in my left leg. I tried to stand but fell down. I had caught a large splinter in the muscle which required a trip to the doctor. I still remember the word "peroxide" which he gave to cleanse the wound, and I still have the scar.

At times mosquitoes were really bad and our ill-fitting screens could not keep them out. There were no effective sprays for mosquitoes or flies, and we probably could not have afforded them if they were available. When babies slept alone, netting was spread over their cribs. Sometimes a fire would be built in the direction of the breeze and cow chips were put on the fire to create smoke in order to discourage the pests.

All kids need a wagon, and Dad had to improvise to provide one for us. He made one, cutting the wheels from a 2" x 12" board with a key saw. He would play games with us. Once he surprised us with a set of nine brown glazed crockery marbles. These "ring marbles" were one and one-quarter inches in diameter and were used in a playing field about three feet square scratched in the dirt. I still have most of those marbles whose color and glaze have long since been worn away because of years of use. Kids today know nothing of the competitive game. Because of lawns, they have no place to play marbles. Our yards were kept free of grass and weeds then. Playing children kept the vegetation worn down, and the knees of our overalls testified to the cause. A new pair of overalls soon had patched knees.

There were only two books in our house then – one Bible and a Sears-Roebuck Catalog. We children often paged through the catalog and were permitted to make cutouts of some of the pages as we "played dolls." The previous year's edition was valuable for the toilet. Only the females used the outhouse and we never saw a roll of toilet tissue. At times Dad got the Sunday edition of the Fort Worth Stat-Telegram. The funny paper with "Maggie and Jiggs," "Mutt and Jeff," and "Gasoline Alley," and others were a delight for us kids.

Since our first Model T Ford did not come until 1922, the wagon was our means of transportation until I was nearly five. The rural mail was delivered in a hack, a light mule-drawn enclosed vehicle. When the roads were graded, it was by a separate grader pulled by a caterpillar tractor. Flat tires were common, and they were repaired where they happened. Because of the magneto and coil electrical system rather than a battery, cars would hardly start in damp weather or run if it was raining. They were started, often very stubbornly, by hand cranking. The crank was known to kick, even breaking an arm. The cars had curtains that could be snapped on in bad weather. They had small celluloid windows sewn in and a flap which the driver could raise in order to spit his chewing tobacco. And you thought cup-holders were a clever invention! The gasoline tank was under the driver's seat. One night a fellow struck a match to see if he had any gas. Sure enough, he did!

Because Bud had a bad bout with typhoid fever, we kids were introduced to the trauma of vaccination, and I still have the scar on my left arm. The doctor, carrying his mysterious medicine bag, treated most of his patients in their own homes under the care of the family. A family member or neighbor “sat up” all night with the very ill patient.

Harvey Castleberry, a friend of the family was visiting us. Some hounds jumped a jackrabbit a long way across the field and went in full chase. On hearing their baying as they pursued their prey, I thought the sound was from the scared rabbit. I yelled out, “Listen to that rabbit bawling!” The laughter that followed was a terrible embarrassment for a six-year old. Harvey never let me forget, as through the years, when he would see me, he would always ask, “Cecil, have you heard any more rabbits bawling?”

Starting to school was no problem for me for Emily and Bud were ahead of me. And the New Mid school started in October and I was eight years old in November. The two-room school was two miles from home and three miles east of Rochester. Two women teachers presided over two rooms of awe-stricken country kids in six grades. In the first grade the double desks allowed for two students. Sometimes a misbehaving boy was made to sit in the same desk with a girl as punishment! By listening to the recitations of the other classes, I learned most of the first three grades in my first year. We walked to school when weather permitted carrying our lunches consisting of biscuits stuffed with whatever was available in a syrup bucket. The teacher’s lunch consisted of a common country meal of corn bread which she crumbled into milk and ate at her throne/desk.

It was a law of the kingdom among all the parents that, when a kid got a licking in school, he got another when he got home, no questions asked. The teacher was always right. One day while in the first grade I removed a wad of chewing gum from under my seat, threw it, and hit Baylor Walker, my best friend, on the back of his neck. He took it to the teacher and squealed on me. I got a few licks with a ruler. Surely, neither of my siblings would tattle on me, but somehow the news seemed to have reached home by the time I did. I preferred the teacher’s style over Mamma’s. Mamma lashed both with the razor strop and the tongue!

Horrible tales about mad (rabid) dogs were prevalent. Ol’ Ted was our black, curly haired dog. A stray collie took up residence with us also. He loved us and we loved him. One day at dusk when Joe and Millie Hollis were visiting and we were eating ice cream in the yard, someone saw the collie in a seizure and yelled, “That dog’s going mad! He’s having a fit!” Uncle Joe jumped up, grabbed the axe with which the ice had been crushed, and dispatched the dog with one blow. Then there was such fear that Ol’ Ted was infected that they killed him also. That was a crushing blow for us children, and we were not allowed to have another dog for several years.

The big red ant of West Texas is almost indestructible, though the horned frog thrived on them. Because of its painful sting, you did not fool around with them. When Lois (“Pud” we called her for she was Mamma’s little Puddin’ Pie!) was a toddler in diapers, she wandered into the ants’ territory and was stung by several. She quickly became limpid. There was a frenzied dash in the old Model T to get her to Dr. Howell. She would have survived anyway, but the doctor made himself seem helpful by giving some kind of purple potion to apply to the stung areas.

One Sunday we had dinner with the Carey Kidwells. Since fires in the stoves had to be started each morning, it was common to have a tomato can of kerosene sitting under the

stove. Surely enough, Pud found it and drank it. Or, at least, we thought she did. Another frantic dash to the doctor. Such scares greatly impressed us children.

Marvelous innovations began to come. Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Maggie Newberry, neighbors but no kin, bought a Gram-o-phone. With wonder we listened to those spool recordings about “*Uncle Josh,*” and songs like “*The Blue River Train*” and “*Hand Me Down My Walking Cane.*” They also had a viewer of stereoscopic pictures of WWI scenes – 3D pictures. Then the Tibbets got a radio. We were invited over one Saturday night to listen. I think it was a barn dance or old fiddlers’ contest out of Chicago, but there was so much static that I could understand none of it.

No black person lived in our community, and I had never seen one. A neighbor had several young black men from East Texas to help with the cotton picking. I looked with awe upon them even at the distance. They were housed in a one-room shack with a pile of picked cotton for a bed. We could hear their laughter after dark as they splashed in the cattle watering trough. One day Daddy took a load of cotton to the gin and it was dark before he returned. In the dark at a distance from the house we heard someone call “hello!” It was one of the men asking if he could buy some eggs from us. Mamma was so frightened that she denied having any eggs and sent him away empty-handed. Ordinarily, she would have given the eggs without charge. Now we cringe in recalling such an incident, but it was some of the grit in our gizzards.

Who can know how these ten years on our first farm influenced my life and continue to be a part of my subconscious being? Whether for good or bad, all these incidents that I have reviewed were grinding stones in fitting these experiences into my life and character. You can see how you and I might have had many things in common and also many things that gave us different perspectives in life. []

(Cecil Hook: December 2005)