

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 4

On The New Farm

In case you might have forgotten, time moves at an agonizingly slow pace during the pre-teen and teenage years. Many gizzard stones were at work as nine years dragged by on our new farm. Crops had been good; so we bought 100 acres of land three miles southeast of Rochester in 1928, two miles closer to town. At that time there was a giggly little five-year-old Holladay girl playing with kittens and making mud pies far away in a place called Daisetta near Beaumont. I was unaware of her and the oil-field town and, as a ten-year-old, would have given her no attention if she had lived on the next farm. But the currents of life were flowing.

The farm was not the best for it was irregular with hummocks of reddish sand. The house was toward the middle in about four acres of mesquite trees with a dug and curbed well near the barn and a surface tank and several large hackberry trees nearby. Toward the road were about eight acres of mesquite, bear grass (yucca), various types of cactus, ground squirrels, horned frogs, and mockingbirds. The unpainted single-walled house consisted of three 14' x 14' rooms. For some unexplained reason, the ceiling of the room we chose for the kitchen was only six feet high. That called for adjustment for Dad who was 6' tall and for Bud and me as we later grew to 6'3" and 6'. Mom and Dad slept in the front room/living room with the wood stove while Bud and I and Emily, Elda, and Pud slept in the other room in two beds. The next year Dad bought a two-door 1928 Model A Ford. No doubt, Dad had intentions to build a better house but unforeseen problems loomed ahead – oversized gizzard stones for everyone.

With the stock market crash, the bottom fell out of the economy without warning. Banks closed and businesses failed leaving millions without money and jobs. Soon adding to the bleakness of the Great Depression was the onset of drought causing the Dust Bowl in the Plains States and Southwest for years. It was an era of unbelievable sand storms. The goal of that generation was not for enrichment, but for survival.

Too, Mom began to have unsteadiness of her nerves as she developed a toxic goiter – an inflamed and overactive thyroid – even bringing on some hysterical outbursts. We knew little about such disorders then. The doctor in the one-doctor hospital (we called it a sanitarium) in Knox City removed her thyroid gland completely. Though she did not become totally dysfunctional, she continued in emotional instability which also brought on organic disorders and reinforced her feelings of spiritual guilt and social inadequacy.

City dwellers who lost their jobs became destitute, but a great part of our population still lived on farms. The self-sufficiency of the farm allowed for survival. We raised our own pork, beef, chickens, fruit, and vegetables. This included a row of watermelons and cantaloupes, some peanuts, and more than a garden-sized space of black-eyed peas. They were our salvation. As one fellow stated it, he more than “liked” them; he “loved” them because they saved his life! There was a yarn about the doctor testing an ailing farmer’s blood and finding it to be 80% pea soup. I still find fresh black-eyed peas, cooked with bacon drippings, and cornbread hard to beat. Add fresh tomatoes, okra, and cantaloupe from the garden and you have a royal feast. While cotton was the “money crop,” though providing little in those dry years with low prices, we raised corn for consumption of

family and livestock. Maize was grown for the mules, pigs, and chickens. Sudan grass provided summer grazing for the cows and a haystack of bundled Red Top cane helped the cows through the winter. Milk from as many as four cows at the time was a great part of our diet, and eggs added much. Sometimes we even had surplus milk to feed the chickens!

Such a system of self-sufficiency seems idealistic today, but let me assure you that it was all labor intensive. It demanded constant labor of the whole family. How could one even go for overnight trips to kinfolks? Cows had to be milked morning and evening and animals and chickens had to be fed and protected? There were no eight-hour shifts or holidays on the farm.

The budget for a family of seven must have been overwhelming. Let's see. Car payment, car insurance, health insurance, life insurance, house insurance, utilities, water, garbage, sewerage, telephone, cable, internet, fast foods, eating out, vacations, haircuts, beauty salon, laundry, dry cleaners, driver's license, income tax, social security withholdings, sales taxes, and movies – grand annual total: \$0.00! We did not even know we needed many things for we had no radio or television to advertise all those things which we cannot afford to live without! And, actually, I think we were about as happy then as people are today.

Most of our grocery purchases were for flour, sugar, meal, oatmeal, coffee, cocoa, and other such staples which we could not grow. Mom made all the dresses for Emily, Elda, Pud, and herself. She would see a dress pictured in Sears' catalog which she liked and make her own pattern like it. At the beginning of the elementary school year, I got two pairs of the cheapest denim overalls, blue shirts, thin socks, and a pair of shoes. Frank's Dry Goods store was not exactly a Neiman-Marcus, so we took the nearest thing to our own sizes in clothing and shoes. Bud and I would also get some new long-handled underwear if those of the last winter were threadbare. In the summer he and I wore no underwear or shoes on the farm. We had Sunday clothes and we wore those same clothes every Sunday. Our worn-out Sunday coats were worn to school. On returning home from school, we immediately changed into our work clothes which were the worn-out school clothes of the year before. At times Bud would out grow some article of clothing before it was worn out; so I inherited it. My clothing bill for a year was probably ten or fifteen dollars.

Could such people be happy? Happiness is not determined by possessions. As quickly as work assignments were completed, we kids were playing. We made our toys and created our own games. People had no radios so they sang as they worked. We knew few songs except those sung at church. Some times Bud and I would work side by side in silence; some mornings we might converse for hours, but at other times we would sing from memory every song we used in church. Women sang doing housework, and many men went about whistling. Some church songs were "religious blues" like "*Farther Along*," but more were songs of hope and heaven. Now it is unsophisticated to sing of heaven or of preparedness to meet God.

Leaving the New Mid school, we now went to Rochester. Each of the seven grades of "grammar school" had a room with a shielded coal stove and twenty-five or thirty desks and students. I do not recall having one of our parents usher us into a new classroom or consult with a teacher. I liked Miss Parker and the room full of second grade kids when I started there in February. Unlike in my previous school, we sang. Some were church

songs and some were Stephen Foster songs like “My Old Kentucky Home,” and “Old Black Joe.” Foster’s songs were popular then. We sang them touched by the feelings they expressed. As the day’s school dismissed, Miss Parker would say “goodbye” to us individually as we passed her, and she even hugged some of the kids. I was not used to such. Most of the time, Dad took us to school, picking up kids along the way until our little Model A was packed and boys rode the running boards as we chugged along. Sometimes when Dad was working in the field, we walked the three miles home.

Teachers urged us to take baths! Kids were embarrassed as teachers would ask each one when he or she bathed last. Some never bathed in winter. We did well to fire up the kitchen wood range, heat water, and bring in the washtub for a bath once a month. In really cold weather, we wore the same clothes more than a week because the weather did not allow for washing. I can still smell the boys’ feet in the hot weather when we all crowded up the narrow stairway. Teachers surely must have had a high tolerance level to listen to all the sniffing and snuffing of runny noses in the classroom. No boys had handkerchiefs, and tissues were still unknown. So, there were some slimy shirt sleeves! Two partitioned pit toilets for the grammar school and high school were on opposite sides of the playground separating the schools. They were not exactly sanitized! But there was one good smell in school that many of you older ones can remember. Oil-soaked cedar sawdust was sprinkled on the wooden floors to absorb the dust as the janitor swept each day. That cedar aroma lingered.

For sports at recess, there were two see-saws and two swings for the younger ones. The boys had one out-seamed softball and a bat. When they wore out we were left to creativity. For one game, we crushed a can into such a shape that it could roll erratically to use as a sort of hockey puck, and we played “tin-can shinny.” All the boys divided into two sides in unorganized competition, each with his improvised stick, to knock the can across the goal line. I suppose it was called “shinny” because of the many bruised and skinned shins. Boys brought marbles and played “keeps” – gambling! Mom would have had a fit if Bud and I played keeps even with the clay pee-wee marbles. The high school started the season with only one softball, bat, basketball, and volley-ball. With play on a dirt schoolyard, they did not last long. The school had no gymnasium, football field, band, nurses, or counselors. No music was taught. The eleven-grade system had no lunch room. Two buses added in 1936 ran two routes each. At times, the school was unable to meet its meager payroll so that teachers were paid partially in “script,” a sort of promissory note.

Unfortunately, school started about the time the cotton was ready for picking. (Actually, we quit “picking cotton” about 1929 and started “pulling bolls” as improved gins were able to separate the burrs.) We would start to school and attend only on rainy days. Some children did not enroll until the harvesting was done. Eventually, this problem was remedied partially by starting the school in August, then a few weeks later recessing for several weeks. Even then we still missed many days of school to pull bolls. When most of the crop was gathered, we still had to hurry home after school and pull bolls until dark. Usually the last of the crop was gathered during the Christmas holidays. In spite of our many absences, four of us siblings graduated in the upper level of our classes.

All of the gizzard stones of the farm could be represented by cotton bolls. Just think of teenagers looking out across forty acres of white cotton that will require two pickings -- or seeing the weeds in ten acres of corn, twenty acres of maize, and fifty acres of cotton that must be hoed. Plowing with our two teams of mules was easier work, but it was

slow and boring to go row-by-row across a farm. The maize matured in August when each head was cut off with a knife and pitched into the wagon being pulled along. I can still feel the chaff around my collar in the sweaty heat of the field.

One day we were heading maize, using the narrow-rimmed wagon with “butcher knife” wheels. The ruts leading to the barn were deep. As the team plodded along with a load, I was sitting absent-mindedly on the front corner of the wagon. Suddenly there was a lurch and I fell directly in front of the front wheel with my rib-cage over the rut. Fortunately for me, there was one command that the mules liked to obey at any time. As I landed behind Ol’ Kate, I hollered “Whoa!” and instead of the mules giving a frightened lurch, they stopped instantly.

On a very hot, sultry day when I was ten and Emily was fourteen, she and I were hoeing cotton together. There were some cloud formations in the distance that offered no threat. But as I looked at Em, I saw her “Buster Brown” hair style with much of it floating upwards due to static electricity! I have often wondered how close we were to being stricken by lightening that day seventy-seven years ago. Only God knows all the “close calls” we survived.

Farm kids who worked hard learned patience and endurance. They learned that work is essential and that not all of life is easy. They learned responsibility which made them realize that they had a place to fill in life. They knew that both people and animals needed their help. Boring jobs gave time for meditation and developing a philosophy and goal of life. Mindless tasks fostered creativity for improvement. Children who work hardest usually value their successes and possessions more highly and appreciate opportunity for advancement more deeply. And not least of the learning experiences is that kids learn to add fun to all their activities – even in the cotton patch. Unpampered children have a wonderful capacity to enjoy what they have rather than being depressed by thoughts of what they do not have. Grit in the gizzard serves well. []

(Cecil Hook: February 2006)

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