

Grit In My Gizzard, # 6

Time and Change

Regardless of your age, times before your memory seem like ancient history. So it is difficult to imagine what life was like a hundred years ago – or even 87 years ago when I came upon the scene. Let us try to shrink some of those years. As I was born 54 years after the Civil War ended, no doubt, I lived contemporary with some veterans of that conflict. In fact, the lives of some who lived when the Alamo fell in 1836 and Texas became a nation might have over-lapped with mine. It is likely that many veterans of the Revolutionary War in 1776 lived contemporary with those of the Civil War. Also, I have been blessed to live one day for each 23 days that have passed since Jesus walked this earth.

In 1903, just 15 years before I was born, there was not a charted road across the United States! In making the first auto trip across our nation that year, they had to follow local wagon roads which were uncharted on any map. By 1905, the 8,000 cars in our country had only 144 miles of paved road to travel. Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, Hawaii, and Alaska were not yet states. Georgia was more populated than California. Our national population has more than tripled in the last hundred years. In the book of history, our nation is a relative newcomer. Unimaginable changes have developed in the lifetime of my generation. Time and change have supplied many gizzard stones making most of us old heads seem out of place, or “quare” as some old-timers of my youth would say it.

Most of the factual material that I am including here is from memory rather than research, so there may be inaccuracies. My county, Haskell, was named to honor Charles R. Haskell who was killed at the age of 23 in the Goliad Massacre by the Mexican army. (The town of Haskell is the home of current Governor Rick Perry.) The only pavement in the county was brick paving around the court house square. In Rochester the street of the block-long business district was dirt and the sidewalks were wooden – a strip mall! I have faint memories of our first “trip” in our Model T probably in 1924. The route of about 150 miles to Stephenville was dirt road except that we crossed a site where they were paving what I suppose was Highway 80. Black-topping was called macadamizing then. I still remember that strange word. My first ride on pavement was several years later when Highway 277 was being paved from Abilene to Wichita Falls. Leaving Knox City where Mom was in the hospital, Dad took us eastward where we intersected the road being paved with concrete. In our new Model A, Dad revved it up to fifty miles per hour momentarily as we kids held our breaths. Later we made a 90-mile trip to Spur, all on dirt roads. As autos multiplied with more speed, town dwellers suffered through the misery of the clouds of dust being raised by passing cars. In the early thirties, Highway 6 was created and paved within a mile of our farm being enabled by Roosevelt’s recovery programs. In order to help local people, farmers were hired with their teams using “slips” or “fresnoes” to make the road bed.

At the time of my birth in 1918, our country had 1,000,000 troops in Europe, WWI having ended thirteen days earlier, after our 116,708 casualties. A moral crusade had resulted in the Eighteenth Amendment which outlawed the sale of alcoholic liquor in 1917. Commentators today will almost gleefully tell what a failure prohibition was

because of the moonshiners and bootleggers. But thanks to prohibition, I had seen only one drunken man and not even one person drinking liquor until I left for college. Yes, there was moonshine liquor to be had, but it did not receive social or religious approval.

This may seem unreal to most of you: liquor is still illegal in Rochester! In the Roosevelt-sponsored repeal of prohibition, it was left to local option. In our precinct including Rochester it has not been approved yet, and Abilene approved it only a few years ago. I had not lived in a city where liquor was sold until I moved to Beaumont in 1944. Many Christians would not eat in a place that served beer or buy groceries where it was sold. Preachers could cry out against drinking in those days. And they did! And no one was killed in our community by a drunk driver like the 16,694 killed by them in our country in 2004.

During my teenage years, we hardly traveled into the next county. The Brazos River was six or eight miles due west of our farm but I never saw it there! Going by road through Knox City or Rule, it was about fifteen miles to the river, but I only saw it there three times in my youth. Having no radio then, we were limited in access to the world about us except mostly through the printed page. Cultures, religion, traditions, and dialects were more regional across our nation but radio was about to change that. New grit is always being introduced.

For graduation from high school, I got my first store-bought haircut. Dad cut our hair using manual clippers that had a way of keeping you awake. My first telephone conversation was when I was in college. I never bought a hamburger or ate in a café until after graduation from college. A few times we kids shared a soda pop but I do not remember having bought a whole one for myself. As far as I know, fast food places had to wait until after WWII when the extruder type ice cream maker came into use spawning businesses like Dairy Queen. Our chewing gum was made to last by using only half a stick at the time, sticking it on the window facing for meals and bedtime, and later adding the other half of the stick. Except for candy bars, piece candy was not wrapped. Often when Dad went to town alone, he would buy a nickel's worth of mixed candy providing two or three pieces for each of us five siblings.

For "drummers" (traveling salesmen) and others, Rochester had a small hotel but could not boast of having a motel. They might not have been invented then, but we had the next thing to it – a "wagon yard." The Bradleys had a small grocery store and a courtyard area downtown with accommodations for persons traveling by wagon and for their animals. That species, I suspect, is extinct. So is the four-inch, mouth-watering cookie you could choose from a glass container in their store for a penny.

Although cellophane was in use for wrapping some things, plastic had not made the scene. Bread was wrapped in waxed paper and it was not sliced. Kraft paper bags were used for some groceries, but many purchases in various stores were wrapped in paper and tied with a string or secured by paper tape which moistened automatically as it was unrolled. After the butcher cut off the meat for a customer it was wrapped in white paper. Fruit was sold by the piece rather than by weight. On the grocer's counter was always a special cutter to cut off a plug of Red Tag Tinsley chewing tobacco from a larger slab of it. The only rubber bands we ever got were those used by the druggist to hold the label on the pill bottle. We contested to determine who got each new one to use for launching various projectiles like spit-balls. Old tire inner tubes made of red rubber were used to make our (politically correct) "sling shots." Glass containers were very fragile, so extreme caution was exerted when pouring anything hot into one. We had one

glass gallon jug which was wrapped in tow-sacking for use as a water jug in the field. It would be soaked in water so the evaporation would help to keep it cool. The person working separately would carry his water in an open bucket. It would quickly become warm and ants, gnats, and trash would have to be blown back in order to drink of it. Tobacco chewers and snuff-dippers would always rinse their mouths with the first mouthful. A thermos of ice water? – science fiction!

Watermelons were kept under the bed where it was cool – which only meant cooler than out on the ground in the hot sun. Water pumped from the well was the coolest thing on the farm in the summer. Would you like to try a week without electricity and refrigeration? In summer most leftovers would spoil before the next day. Fresh meat could not be kept on hand, so chicken was the fresh meat of summer. The milk of the morning would be turning sour (blinky) by supper time. Some made covered troughs extending from a kitchen window in which water was kept and the milk containers were put and covered with a wet cloth. The evaporation would help, but not always with satisfaction. We had three kinds of milk – sweet milk, clabber, and buttermilk. Farmers were not equipped for pasteurization, and homogenizing was unknown, so the cream rose quickly to the top. Many meals consisted of only sweet milk with corn bread crumbled in it. Green vegetables would have to be picked the day of their use. If the rooster attended to what he does best, the egg would begin forming an embryo immediately. Eggs bought in the store now are unfertilized. All food and beverages would be warm or hot. Cream saved a few days for making butter would become very sour. That, however, was a plus, for sweet-cream butter cannot compare with country-made sour-cream butter.

We had no central heating, running water, electricity, or bathroom. In the coldest weather it could be below freezing in our bedroom. We piled on quilts until they weighed us down. In the morning after a real blizzard our kitchen water, milk, eggs, and meat would be frozen. Before going to bed, sometimes we would place a heated, wrapped brick under the cover to warm our feet. In the morning Bud and I had turns at getting up and starting the fire in the front room wood stove, then almost hugging the warming stove-pipe until it became red hot. Fortunately, it was severely cold very seldom. In the frosty weather of winter one did not leisurely read the catalog while in the outhouse or the bushes. Having no anti-freeze, it was vital to drain the car radiator each night. In order to start the car in the morning, usually some hot water was poured into the radiator to heat the motor so the starter could crank. It could be a real project getting a car started. Cars had no heaters, radios, dimmer switches, automatic transmission, or windshield washers then, but they did have foot feeds, chokes, carburetors, generators, cranks, and spinner knobs.

Because we had no overcoats, sweat shirts, or parkas, in adjusting for colder weather, we put on extra shirts, pants, and sox. By the time outside chores were done or Bud and I had played on the frozen tank, our hands and feet might be numb with cold. But how nice it was to hover the wood stove and prop our feet up near it to feel the warmth penetrating. Patience was important lest we warm our hands too fast bringing on painful throbbing. It was truly a scene of the past – a family sitting encircled around a stove entertaining themselves with games of their own invention. Little reading or homework was done in the evenings because a coal oil lamp only provided about as much light as a night-light. And teachers gave very little home-work then.

The few times we would be snowbound were exciting. Using the flat-top “bachelor heater” stove in our front room, we would cook on it. For an afternoon snack, we would pop several skillet full of home-grown popcorn, for a family of seven could eat half a

dishpan full of it. We kids would mix cream, sugar, and vanilla to add to snow for a treat. But not much time was wasted on a farm. Idle kids seemed to activate the minds of parents to think up chores. One was particularly reserved for winter days. There was an ever-present quilting frame hanging from the ceiling by hemp binder twine. The twine at each corner was wrapped or unwrapped to raise or lower it. So we would have a quilting party which was not exactly a fun party for us kids though we did entertain ourselves while sewing. You can imagine the quality of the quilting of teenagers. Utility rather than art was the objective. Because we had no blankets, many quilts were needed. Cotton batting was available in the stores for nicer quilts, but we used cotton left over from the last bale that was ginned.

I will spare you a discourse on prices in my teenage years. Most every thing has increased in price ten, forty, or even a hundred times what they were then. Your salary may be a thousand times higher than a farm hand's pay! The increase applies to groceries, automobiles, homes, clothes, medicine, doctor bills, movie tickets, education, salaries – everything – everything except gasoline! Now people are screaming bloody murder about gasoline prices which are finally increasing but not yet matching all those other inflationary increases. Expect it to go higher yet, and don't expect it to go down until all these other items go down. It is a fact of life; so we do well to get used to it. Did you refuse to accept an inflationary salary increase or "windfall profit" on the house or anything else you have sold? Do you really want more governmental regulations setting limitations on your profits?

Adjusting to our time, place, and change regardless of the time and place in which one lives, goes far in determining happiness and character. I am mentioning all these things, not to gain sympathy as though we felt deprived, but to emphasize the blessing of the many grind stones affecting our character. We had as much as most other local people. Regardless of their austerity or affluence, few people ever get all they want, or have all desires fulfilled. We blamed no one for our condition – well, yes, the Democrats blamed it all on Republican President Herbert Hoover, making it a political issue. We called jack rabbits "Hoover hams." We did not feel that the government owed us anything. Later welfare programs gave birth to the "we are victims entitled to government aid" attitude. Due to the independent spirit of farmers, many of them felt disdain toward city people who wanted hand-outs from the government. Instead of poverty defeating us, it created determination to survive and succeed. Farm people shared what they had with others who had less. They cared for their own aged, crippled, disadvantaged, and mentally ill family members. We knew of no starving person in our country and had sympathy for those starving in China and other places reported in the news.

The most determining grit in my gizzard was the togetherness of family. What a difference if I had been an only child, or had only one parent, or if we had not learned to live together in harmony in austere times, or if my family and community had few moral and spiritual standards. The absence of such family scenes as I have pictured, whether by choice or fate, is probably the most weakening influence in our current society. The family is the foundation of civilized society in any time, place, and era of change. []

(Cecil Hook: February 2006)

NOTE: Come by my booth at the ACU Lectures, C-10, in the Teague Center. Because Leroy Garrett will be so involved with the Restoration Forum, he may not be with me any at the booth as I formerly stated. I plan to leave at noon Wednesday.

