

Grit In My Gizzard, No. 9

God's Creatures Great and Small

The family life on the farm prior to WW II was an experience of nature with creatures and critters great and small. They all had to eat. Some ate each other. Some were determined to eat what you intended to eat. And you ate some of them. Relations with God's creatures were not all sweet Bambi stories. You met and dealt with reality on the farm.

I am amazed when I try to list all the creatures that lived on, or migrated to and from, that hundred acres. Let's begin with the smallest ones. Gnats, fleas, mites, lice, blue-bugs, ants of various sizes, weevils, lightning bugs, doodle-bugs, mosquitoes, flies, bees, wasps, dirt daubers, lady bugs, June bugs, tumble bugs, spiders, centipedes, crickets, grasshoppers, leaf worms destroying the cotton, horned tomato worms, horse-flies, "wolves" in the backs of cows, and various other unnamed insects in worm, bug, or butterfly stages. We were spared from having chiggers, cockroaches, and bedbugs.

Winged creatures included sparrows, doves, mockingbirds, scissor-tails, night hawks, orioles, blackbirds, woodpeckers, meadow larks, killdeers, shrikes, ravens (We called them crows.), buzzards, ducks, geese, guineas, chickens, and turkeys.

Among the animals were mice, rats, snakes, ground squirrels, striped lizards, horned frogs, salamanders, toads, turtles (terrapins), cotton-tail rabbits, jack rabbits, civet cats ("pole cats" –also called skunks), cats, dogs, pigs, cattle, mules, and horses. There were no coyotes or rattlesnakes as you might have expected in West Texas.

There were no effective controls for fleas, mites, lice, and blue-bugs though creosote, grease, and snuff helped a bit. Some claimed that a banana stalk in the hen house would help, so there were always those waiting for a stalk when the grocer had sold all the bananas off it. Dozens of fleas would infest the eyebrows of dogs. Fleas would accumulate where the animal could not scratch. Dogs and cats enjoyed having the fleas picked from them, and we enjoyed leisurely picking them off our pets. I liked to pull cactus thorns from the noses of mules and horses. They always seemed pleased by it.

Each of the dogs we had was a mixed breed male give-away dog. Based on the OT teaching that the price of a dog could not be brought to the temple, many people, including Mom, thought it was a sin to buy or sell a dog. One of ours had pointer instincts but tried to drive cows or mules by head-to-head attacks and he had no killer instinct even to kill a mouse. Others knew to nip at the heels of animals and then dodge their kicks. Usually, during the day when we were working separately in the field, the dog showed his pack instinct by checking on each of us. No dog was allowed in the house, and the only food was table scraps. I never heard of a person buying dog food. All farm dogs chased cars and left their territorial markings on each wheel of every visiting car. Our cats were not fed for there were plenty of mice for them where they usually lived around the barn. Often, mice could be heard running through the house at night. Traps were set most of the time.

When the maize was low in the barn, Bud and I would shift it by the fork full and watch for the mice to run out. Pinning them down with foot or gloved hand, we would catch them by the tail and slam them against the wall or floor. That was not just sadistic sport. The mice were destructive in our world of survival. On finding a nest of little rabbits, cute as they were, we would kill them, for grown rabbits had voracious appetites for your crop. Due to the eradication of the coyotes (I never saw one while growing up.), the jack rabbit multiplied menacingly. A government program paid a bounty of five cents for each pair of rabbit ears. That nickel would buy one shotgun shell. So Dad took great care to kill one rabbit with each shot. Bud and I were not allowed to use the gun.

One season, in addition to the usual mice, there was an infestation of big rats. The haystack was nearing depletion and Bud and I knew there were mice and rats in it. So, with the dog on guard, we began moving bundles. When a mouse or rat would run out, he would quickly overtake it and disable it with one crunch. Sometimes two or three would run out at the same time and he would disable them and then go back and make sure they were dead. Once when we moved a bundle, a mouse ran out and he started for it but then saw a big rat coming out. He continued toward the mouse, lapped it up and swallowed it without a bite, then returned to kill the rat. I have always wondered how his insides felt with a live mouse struggling in there.

A good many years later when Lea and I returned to the farm on vacation, there had been a migration of field rats that made tunnels a few inches underground. Fay and Emily were there with their old terrier, Pancho, and we had our terrier, Cisco. We had fun watching those two excited dogs dig out rats. Pancho, because of age and bad heart, would dig excitedly until he would keel over in a faint, and Cisco would take over. After a minute or so, Pancho would revive and dig again until he fainted again repeatedly. He survived but did not take part in Cisco's later experience that day.

On a fence row, Cisco found a skunk's burrow and started digging. When he finally encountered the skunk, it was the wrong end! He was sprayed but he continued his attack until he would have to stop, vomit, and roll in the sand to try to remove some of the odor. Then he would attack again. Over and over, he would attack, be sprayed, and then become so sick he would have to stop. At long last, he completed his mission. It was our turn, however, to endure a long trip back to Louisiana with him with odor which we could not fully eliminate. By the way, the civet of the civet cat is used in making perfumes! We killed them, not for sport, but because they would kill chickens – even several in one night. There was a market for their fur, so some fellows were desperate enough to kill and skin them.

On sultry days gnats could be a nuisance while we worked or sat in the shade. When taking our noontime naps, we usually placed our straw hat over our face because of the gnats and flies. It has been many years since I have seen a tumble bug rolling its marble-sized, perfectly round ball of cow manure backward to its hole where it stored it. As little kids we would capture a colorful June bug, tie a thread to its leg, and let it fly on a leash. It was a challenge to knock down a large wasp nest without getting stung. Their sting matched the red ant in the pain inflicted. Once I learned that red ants had crawled up my pants when one stung me. I shed the pants without ceremony. The ants would clinch into the fabric so that the pants had to be turned wrong side out in order to remove them. The only good thing to be said about red ants was that horned frogs thrived on them. We all liked the harmless horned frogs for they looked like a survivor of the dinosaur age. After turning one on its back and gently pressing its underside for a short time, it would remain still for a long time. But so many insecticides and defoliants have been used in

later years that the horned frog, multi-colored striped lizard, turtles, and ground squirrels are hard to find now. I just hope they are faring well in the ranch lands. The turtles were harmless except that they would eat the ripe cantaloupes. If placed on their backs on a hard, smooth surface, they could not turn back over on their feet. Callous kids were known to place them on their backs on the smooth top of a post and leave them to die. Sixty acres of the farm are now being returned to nature.

It was pleasant to dreamily watch the ravens on a hot day riding the updrafts in circles hundreds of feet upward. They ate much grain and could quickly spoil a whole patch of watermelons. They were so wary that a person could not get close enough to shoot them. Now in the city they will light in the front yard and fly close to moving automobiles.

Mockingbirds were loved so that they got a free pass. The old saying was that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. The elegant and graceful scissor-tail was never harmed either. Both birds ate insects and were territorial and would chase the much bigger raven away. Being faster and more maneuverable than the raven, they would attack from the rear overhead pecking the raven on the back of the head. The defenseless raven would make a hasty retreat. Many times as I came close to a mockingbird's nest, she would attack the back of my head. The dove, however, uses a different technique. As you approach her nest, she will drop to the ground close by and flutter as though crippled to lead you away from her nest. Jesus advised some preachers to be harmless as doves but he did not encourage their being deceitful as doves. The night hawk (We called the bull bats.) lays its eggs on the flat bare ground while the oriole weaves a swinging sack for a nest using the long hair from the tails of horses and cows for strength. Because sparrows were so prolific, we often tore their nests down.

For any sort of plowing, I was assigned the gentlest team of Ol' Pete, a light colored mule, and Ol' Dolly, a worn-out old quarterhorse that Dad got for a work horse. In the drudgery of the warm day, I would almost have to wake them periodically to keep them moving. One day, however, as I was working on a weed-sled approaching the lane by our field, I saw them getting really nervous. In spite of my efforts to control them, they were spooked and took off across the field with the abandoned sled. They ran to the corner through a weak barbed wire fence, circled around and came back into the field on the other side of the corner coming to a stop about a hundred yards into the field. It was fortunate that they did not injure themselves seriously by the barbed wire. What had spooked the sleepy team? It was a boy draped face down across a donkey approaching in the lane.

We never owned a saddle, so it was easier for us to fall off than to stay on. Dolly had a boney back. One day we had a tow sack with some cotton in it which we decided to use for a cushion. We led her under a tree limb, put the sack down her back bone, and lowered ourselves on to her from the limb. Don't try that at home! Dolly was rid of her riders without moving a muscle.

Once Dolly went under the clothesline with Bud, sliding him down her back, over her rump, and seating him on the ground. Fortunately, he landed in deep sand. Another time he was riding her and for some reason fell off landing on his all-fours facing the opposite direction. I still cannot figure how it happened so quickly but Dolly kept going after leaving her hoof-print on his bottom as her parting gesture.

When I was about fourteen, I had an appendectomy (with a modern spinal block!). I still have a 4 ½ inch scar as a reminder. I suppose Dr. Edwards had to get both hands in there

to operate. After two or three days I was back home to remain in bed for five more days. There was fear of breaking the stitches back then. Anyway, Mom's decree was for no horseback riding for several more weeks.

As a few weeks past, Bud was on Ol' Jude, a long legged mule, and I was on Ol' Dolly chasing each other around the mesquites in the pasture away from the house. Suddenly, I fell from Dolly and made the mistake of holding on to the reins. She whirled around and stepped on my right ankle. Though there were some skinned spots, no broken bones were evident, and there was little pain. Fortunately, my ankle had landed in the sand. But that was not the end of the story. I could not afford to let Mom know about the riding and the fall. So I made sure not to limp. As a day or so passed it swelled and became painful so that I could hardly avoid limping. As more days passed, I could press on the injury and feel a squish indicating that things were getting worse instead of better. Now I was really scared for I would be in big trouble with Mom and Dad. So I determined to "tough it out" as long as possible. In a week or more, the swelling and pain did begin to recede and it soon healed. That secret was kept from Mom for many years.

Dad bought a beautiful draft horse quite out of our class. Ol' Pet was truly a gentle pet that we all loved immediately. She soon had a colt in her image and disposition. She won our hearts also. The church was having midweek services then, so we kids went while Dad stayed with Mom. As we approached the house in our return, the six-months old colt was in the pasture through which the lane went. Being unaccustomed to the car lights at night, the colt ran directly into a headlight. Getting a lamp, we examined her and saw that there were two deep cuts at the base of her neck. They would need to be sewn. There were no veterinarians around. I had heard of "horse doctors," but it was usually a derogatory description of an incompetent doctor. So Bud and I did our emergency room residency work that night, sewing up the wounds the best we could with ordinary needle and doubled thread. Daylight examination the next morning revealed that she had already broken some of the threads. So we repaired our work and put a horse collar on her to protect the wound but it showed no signs of healing as time went on. On the contrary, her condition grew more desperate as days passed. As all hope was gone, one morning Dad said, "Cease, you take the shotgun and shoot the colt," and he went on to the field to work.

WOW! I had never fired the gun before. I was so shocked that I did not even ask "why me?" or raise an objection. I had been steeled to do shocking and unpleasant tasks that had to be done before but none matched this assignment. She was a loved pet. In preparation I studied her head to determine just where to aim to hit her brain. Then I steadied the gun on the horse lot fence and pulled the trigger. That was the only time I ever fired that gun.

Whether it is a man or beast, dying is not as quick, clean, and easy as it is pictured in the movies. I will not describe the horror, but it was far from bloodless, clean, and quick. As we later dragged her body to the far side of the farm, I realized that I should have led her over there before shooting her.

We loved most all of God's creatures, great and small, yet life among them was not idyllic. Even with beautiful creatures and beloved pets, there was a balance of reality which often demanded harsh choices. We learned to do what had to be done regardless of the emotion involved. Those gizzard stones have served their purpose in the seventy years since. []

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