A LITTLE MORE ABOUT LIFE IN EARLY 1900's

by

Olen Kincy

Since I wrote about my mother's 99th birthday celebration and told of some of the hard times our family had growing up in Crawford County, several folk have contacted me with congratulations on the letter and identified with early year problems similar to ours. Being encouraged by this, I will tell more of our life in the early 1900's, especially about the big flood in 1914.

As was our yearly custom, we moved from Georgia Ridge to the Arkansas River bottoms in late spring of 1914. We had just finished with the strawberry harvest and had moved on to work in the cotton fields. We hired out that year to a Mr. Flemings who farmed around 160 acres of river bottom land, two and one half miles southeast of Dyer. Mr Flemings owned several mule teams and he, the Bowlins, and Alexanders, operated what was then considered the largest farms. Most of farmers back then owned just one horse or mule team and could handle only 25 or 30 acres, growing mostly cotton with some corn and alfalfa.

We moved into one of Mr. Fleming's houses near the old cotton gin, also owned by him. The gin had ceased operation and was being used for storage of corn, hay, and shelter for the mules. Our house, along with 14 others in the bottoms similar to it, consisted of a drafty one-room shack, with a front and back porch and a sheet iron roof. Gum Grove School where all grades were taught was located nearby. The school operated for three months during the winter and was the sole source of education for a lot of children growing up like we did.

We walked or rode wagons to Dyer for our meager supplies and the trips were rare. We lived mostly on beans, potatoes, cornbread, biscuits, and flour gravy made with water. We depended on fish and wild game for our meat and were seldom without. My father liked cornbread and molasses three meals a day and was especially grouchy when we ran out of molasses.

At the time, seven of the twelve children had been born and only four big enough to pick cotton. The four of us, along with my father and mother, could earn about $5 a day and this was considered good money back then. We never noticed that our quarters were cramped and paid no heed to the horde of gnats during the day and mosquitoes at night that filled the bottoms.

Our wardrobes were limited. The boys wore overalls, chambray shirts, heavy work shoes, and in the winter we had bulky woolen sweaters, worn underneath cotton ducking jackets and caps with earflaps. Mother and the girls wore cotton dresses, cut from the same bolt of cloth, that she made by kerosene lamp late at night after a long day working in the fields, caring for children and doing the household chores. I believe if all the tiny stitches her hands had made were laid end to end they would reach from here to St. Louis.

In September of 1914 the cotton harvest had gotten underway, and every one had a bumper crop that year. One day when we returned from the fields, dark clouds began to gather in the West. My father was very fearful of storms and he kept his eyes glued to the sky. Before long he told mother to gather the children and we headed for the old Fleming's gin where an old rusty boiler, used to power the gin's machinery when it was in operation lay discarded in the lot.

On our way, the storm hit with high winds, heavy rain and lightening flashing around us. The boiler had a little opening that my father, who was a small man, could barley squeeze through. All nine of us crowded into the small space with the older children holding the young ones on their laps. Before long it became difficult to breathe and we had to remove the temporary cover from the small opening to provide outside air. When the cover was removed, the strong wind blowing through the baffles inside the boiler set up a loud howling noise that we could stand for only short periods until we had to replace the cover. The children began to whimper with fright, but my father, a very strict disciplinarian, quieted them at once so that he could tune his ear to the weather outside. The storm intensified and timbers were blown from the old gin nearby struck our shelter with loud clanging noises and our imagination that the boiler was being blown through the air. We were really happy when my father gave the "All Clear" signal and let us crawl out.

The wind and lightening had abated, but heavy rain was to continue throughout the day. We made our way home through the darkness and downpour and when we arrived we discovered both porches gone and the house blown off its foundation but still intact. The next morning we found that we were fortunate because the tornado had destroyed practically all the houses in the bottoms.

Our troubles weren't over yet. Around five o'clock the next afternoon, Mr. Flemings arrived with the warning to leave the bottoms immediately, that the river already swollen from the previous rains in Oklahoma, had overflowed its banks. He told that the water was rising rapidly and already had the roads covered. He had brought a small skiff in his wagon for us to make our escape in and hauled it down to the water's edge, then left to warn others of the impending flood.

All nine of us crowded into the skiff, and my father made the seating arrangement to balance the load as evenly as possible but then we had only one inch of freeboard. I was assigned to the rear of the boat and it was my responsibility to bail the water that leaked in as fast as I could throw it out. With a final word of caution to sit absolutely still, my father manned the oars and we started our two mile trip to Dyer.

We stayed as close to shore as possible and after about one mile we began to relax a little. As we neared Dyer, the current grew much stronger and the boat ran aground on a fence post hidden under the water. .The rear of the boat went under and filled with water. We would have sunk immediately had not my father grabbed one of the oars end bracing it against the sunken fence and the side of the boat, kept us .afloat. The children began to panic but one harsh word from my father stilled them, probably because they feared his wrath as much as our drowning. He yelled for me to bail as fast as I could and after what seemed like an eternity and just before my arms completely tired I had the water down to an acceptable level.

With considerable effort, my father maneuvered us free of the post and we continued our journey shaking but thankful that the good Lord was watching over us that day as my father was the only one of us that could swim and at best, he could have saved only one of us in that swift water.

As darkness fell, we made it to the main road at the southern edge of Dyer where Boss Flemings, a brother of Mr. Will Flemings, met us with a wagon.

We stayed with them for two weeks, then after the flood receded returned to the bottoms to pick up our few ruined belongings and went back to Georgia Ridge to spend the winter.

That winter was rough on everyone since the flood ruined all the cotton and most folk depended on money from this crop to see them through until the next season. We trapped and sold what furs we could and managed to scrape through until spring.

WHY MY 99-YEAR OLD MOTHER DESERVES HONORS

Before I tell you about the party, let me give you a little background on Mother. She was born Rachel Caroline Moses to Jesse and Lucettia Moses near the Turner Community in Northwest Arkansas on January 18, 1886. She had two brothers, Virgil and Jesse Moses, and four sisters, Alice, Emily, Addy, and Lora.

She married my father, Cooper Kincy, when she was 15 and they had 12 children. They are in order of birth: Leia, Ellis (Red), Olen, Minnie, Alvia, Claud, Rayburn, Charley, Hazel, Gladys, Pauline, and Bessie May the youngest, who was born when Mother was 46 years of age. All the children are still living, except Charley, who died at three months, and Ellis, who was age 80 at death. Of the ten living children, the oldest is 83 and the youngest is 54 years of age.

My Mother is made of the strongest pioneer stock available and proved it by raising this large family, practically single-handed, during long periods of hard times. My father was a part-time tenant farmer who moved the family frequently. He was very temperamental and was prone to absent himself from the family for extended periods. We existed on what little money the kids could earn from the fields and what we could raise in the garden in the summer.

During the winter our income was limited to what furs we could catch and sell. Staples often ran low and rabbits made up a large portion of our diet.

Our temperature today, January 19, 1985, reminds me of one of the many periods in my Mother's life that demonstrated her strong will, determination, and ability to provide during periods of extreme hardship. It was in January 1918 and we lived in a drafty log cabin alongside Highway 64, two and one-half miles East of Dyer, Arkansas. My father was away on one of his extended absences, money was gone and staples were low. One night it began to snow and continued until 18 inches lay on the ground. This was followed by low setting low temperatures, that lasted for a month. The snow was so deep that rabbits couldn't travel. Ellis and I could only find the few that opened up a hole in the snow then burrowed back under for protection.

We had even a greater problem, that of trying to keep warm. Even with a roaring fire the cabin was not too warm, unless you were near the stove. Wood to supply the fire was critical. It was Ellis and my chore to supply the wood. Two young boys, ages 14 and 12, trying to cut enough wood, with only a small axe, then carry it down the mountain north of the cabin was almost more than we could manage. Mother helped us when she could spare the time away from the rest of the children. She would struggle through the snow down the mountain, carrying a larger log than either I or Ellis could handle. Finally the situation became desperate but Mother was to proud to complain or ask for help. After about two and one half weeks, some of the neighbor men realized our plight and gathered several ricks of wood for us.

When spring came, Ellis and I made a crop on the four or five acres of poor mountain land we farmed that year. We only had one half-starved mule to work with but, under Mother's supervision, we made a crib of corn and a bale of cotton.

Mother made life as pleasant for us as she could. We never realized that we were having it rough, but had a good time as a family.

Now to the birthday party held January 18, 1985, at the Green Country Restaurant in Checotah, McIntosh County, Oklahoma, where my sister Gladys, had arranged for a private dining-room. Mother arrived dressed in a tan cashmere coat trimmed with a mink collar, a white scarf and sweater, and a beautiful blue floral-patterned silk jacket-dress with a red corsage. Her snow white naturally curly hair was combed to perfection and the twinkle in her eye, from seeing her children, made her look like a living doll.

At 99, Mother is in good health except for her arthritic knees that confine her to a wheelchair. Her hearing and eye sight is good, she has a sharp mind, and you would not believe her memory.

Eight of her children were at the party: Leia Peters from Mulberry, Crawford County, Arkansas; Olen Kincy from Dyer, Crawford County, Arkansas; Minnie Dodson and Alvia Smallwood from Checotah, McIntosh County, Oklahoma; Rayburn Kincy from Lawton, Comanche County, Oklahoma; Gladys Psalmore and Hazel Williams of Checotah, McIntosh County, Oklahoma; and Bessie Northcutt from California. The two remaining children, Claud Kincy and Pauline Frietas from California could not attend.

A total of 26 attended and enjoyed a good meal of chicken or fish, mashed potatoes and gravy, whole kernel corn, combination salad, hot rolls and cornbread, dessert and choice of coffee, tea or cold drinks. After lunch we spent two hours reminiscing and taking pictures. Mom smiled through it all but along toward the end of the picture taking, she began to tire, and I noticed a small frown creased her forehead. Coffee and a beautiful decorated cake were then served. Even with the cake's size, there still wasn't room for 99 candles so they were foregone.

Everyone enjoyed the day a lot but those with some distance to drive began to excuse themselves with promises to return next year for Mother's 100th year birthday celebration. Those departing left in a cloud of dust kicked up by Arctic blasts of 35 miles per hour winds that ushered in our zero temperatures last night..

May the Lord bless and keep my Mother.

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