

## The Ramshackle Old House We Called Home [The Bob Walker Place]

### I REMEMBER

I remember the old house, the animals required to maintain the farm, the out buildings, the old barn, the hay loft, cotton bin, corn crib, smoke house and I definitely remember the old out-house [ which I will speak of later] the old pitcher pump where it seemed someone was always pumping water for various reasons, around these surroundings is where I, my siblings and at times my cousins for many hours played games of that era and especially hide and seek. I remember the hog killing time, syrup making, cotton planting time, corn planting and pulling fodder, and all the memories that make-up the hard work of the sharecropper and most of all, I remember the sounds and chatter of the family in and around the house, especially we children going about our daily activities, playing our games, making believe and going about our daily chores. I remember our beds in the rear room had a worn out and rusted mesh net with worn out and rusted springs. The bed in the living room from which Mama and Papa slept was likewise rusty and exhausted. The mattress was padded with corn shucks or brown straw and at times raw cotton and always smelled old, stale and moist, was morbid with bedbugs, fleas and at times with lice.

The sheets are made from thin but rather weak unbleached cotton flour or seed sacks. The padding [filling] was sewn through to secure it. The mattresses was very uncomfortable and lumpy in places.

The pillows also of same standard thin, hard, crackling under any motion of the head. The pillow cases made by mama was from the sheeting of twenty five pound flour sacks, [when available] washed and bleached with lye soap.

The beds are insecure enough in their joints that motions of the body must be gentle, balanced and to some extent thought out beforehand in turning from one side to the other. The mattresses and springs are loud, each in a different way to any motion of the body. The springs sag so deeply, that two or more sleeping, balled together at the middle almost as in a hammock. Mama would draw the sheets tight in making the bed, I believe to make the sagged bed look level.

During the years when the family was small, slept in two rooms, the living room bedroom combination and bedroom for the children. Mama and Papa slept in the livingroom between the fireplace and outer front wall with window at the head of the bed and a window on the outer wall. Due to the closeness of the room the partition is very thin. Even if there were no children such patients are limited enough that they are deeply embarrassed and distracted by noises coming from

any sexual contact, even if there were no noises as I mention before the bed frames are insecure, the springs sag weakly, the mattress are thin and lumpy and the sheets are not pleasant. On the bed however and among the children so closely by, they get whatever sexual good they ever have of each other, as noiselessly and with as little movement as possible.

There was a tin roof on the kitchen and the children bed room, it leaked when it rained and you could see the outside sky through the nail holes in the tin roof while lying in bed, when it rained the drops of water would drop on the rafters and being slanted would run down to the outside wall to the floor and through the cracks in the floor. However the difficulty was more with heat. The kitchen was slightly smaller than the living room, very little more but big enough to crowd in the stove, table and chairs and the slanted lean-to roof is quite low. with no ceiling and the tin itself is visible. The outdoor sun light alone is in the high eighties and nineties during many hours of one day after another for weeks on end. The thin metal roof collects and sends on this heat almost as powerful as a burning glass. Wood fires are particularly hot and violent and there is scarcely a few feet between the stove and the back wall, Many share croppers homes was destroyed by fire from hot burning cooking stoves.

The natural heat and the heat coming down from the tin roof and stove the kitchen was a place that hardly a meal such as it was, could hardly be enjoyed.

The back kitchen door-way was in the center of the wall leading to the smoke house, barn and privy. The door made of unfinished boards attached to the outer door frame by rusty nails. On either side of the door was an open window, one being near the stove and wood-box the other near the dining table.

Outside the window near the stove was a wood rack with bucket used for dish water, dinner scraps, etc for hog slop, and other liquids was thrown out the window for hog wallow. In the summer the stench and flies was hardly bearable.

The wood-box stands along the near side of the stove, The dishpan was on a table near the window by the stove with water bucket and dipper for drinking and wash pan for washing hands before dinner time when coming in from the fields. The water was carried in from a pitcher pump that required priming, station near the "lot" [corral] as we called it where the animal were kept. After washing dishes the dish water was thrown out the window or into the hog bucket depending on the amount of table scraps in the dish water.

The windows had no glass, just plain unfinished boards nailed together and held open with hay wire wrapped around a rusty nail attached to the house, In the

winter they were closed and held shut likewise with wire and nails.

The coffee pot and iron kettle usually remained on top of the stove except the kettle would be placed near the fire place at night time in winter.

Pots, skillets and pans was hung on nails along the wall by the stove, pot lids was kept on top of the bread warmer top of stove.

The knives, forks and spoons was very cheap light and dull metal. No two plates, cups, jelly glasses or saucers was of the same size or pattern, usually chipped or thread split running its full length. Tin plates of rusty dull metal was also used for cooking and dinner plates.

Our meal bin was a twenty pound lard can with a homemade sifter made of window screen and a rounded homemade wooden screen for top cover whereby a few flies is always trapped within. The broom was made of what we called, broom straw grown in open fields, approximately thirty six to forty six inches high, cut at bottom, folded and wrapped with string. When the broom would lose its firmness Mama would send us kids out into the field to gather more straw. The broom was always placed in a corner along with a scrub brush Mama used for scrubbing floors with lye soap and water. The scrub brush was made by my father from a 2x12x14 inch board with two inch holes bored one inch apart and corn shucks forced through the two inch holes with long handle attached.

The kitchen considering the slanted roof was long and narrow and the sitting bench was close to the back wall and the table was brought up close against it so we children had to climb to our places with a fair amount of difficulty and in spite of this economizing, the table when everyone was seated the room was pretty nearly blocked. When our relatives visited on Sunday, we children always ate last and two of the children, mostly H.D my brother and myself had the privileged of fanning the flies away from the table while the grown-ups ate. Our weapon used to fan the flies was a branch or limb from a sassafras bush with leaves striped from the branch and about three pages of news paper draped over the end and cut in strips, my brother H.D. at one end of the table and I at the other end fanning back and fourth. When the grown-ups finished eating, then we children were called, much different from to-day when the children comes first in all forms of every day life.

Mama had an old oil cloth that was used on our dinner table on Sunday when company was coming, usually worn thin and holes at each corner of the table and along the ridged edge of the boards in the table surface and always showed traces

of a wet rag, and odors that smelled of mold and grease from frying fat foods, and so mingle with the odor of the oil cloth, this is the typical odor of a share croppers eating table. At the middle of the table is a mason jar of syrup, a box of black pepper and a empty sardine can with salt. And in the summertime mama's mason jar always full of wild flowers.

The wood stove was made of rusting iron with an oven, bread warmer and with a food warmer located at the bottom of the stove with a wide drop down iron door with heat proof handle to keep left over food hot for the next days meal. The stove had to be set well out from the wall to prevent the wall from catching fire. At times the top of the stove and the stove pipe would be red hot and in spite of all the open air, the kitchen would smell powerfully of the cooking, for the walls would be saturated with the grease, black with soot and smoke residue coming from the stove, from which the eye lid covers not being seated properly.

A Little Deviation::::: Mama was always doing something in the kitchen that always made my papa wonder if he would ever start a day without some shenanigans that Mama would activate or some disaster she would have in the kitchen from the time she arose in the morning until she finished cooking breakfast. One morning she went into the kitchen and noticed she had left the bottom iron door to the food warmer open the night before, she closed it and continued her routine of preparing breakfast, after the stove was beginning to get hot, the stove started shaking as though it was coming apart and a loud rumbling noise and sound was coming from the food warmer and she started calling, Haskel!, Haskel! [My fathers name] and I can imagine what my father was thinking by the second call, What have Annie, gone and done now!. He comes into the kitchen and sure enough the stove was leaping and skipping about as doing a dance ritual, he thought she had gotten the stove too hot again and began pulling the wood from the stove and throwing the burning pieces out the open window but the stove was still doing the dance, he opened the bottom door to the food warmer and mama's old cat had gotten himself into the food warmer the night before and after getting himself full of food thinking he had a cozy little arrangement just decided to spend the night, it being warm and so comfortable, but got the surprise of his life when mama sprung the trap and unknownly closed the door. Anyway when Papa open the door that cat came out the hot warmer like greased lightning and didn't even hit the floor and sailed through the window

opposite the stove and didn't touch anything until he hit the ground and headed for the woods. Mama grieved over that terrible incident until one morning about a year later before daybreak when mama was preparing breakfast as usual she heard a mewling sound coming from out side, she looked out the window and low and behold there was that cat. She again, calling Haskel!, Haskel! Papa wondering what, now! He comes into the kitchen and mama points the cat out to him, he goes outside picks the cat up into his arms brings him into the house and place the cat into mama's arms. The cat had no ears, blind in one eye, no tail and most of his fur was gone. During the past year he had gone into the woods, and by some miracle healed himself and survived only to return to where he belonged.

[Now to continue] A carry all for kitchen implements, a mixed design of tin plates, eating tools and less perishable of the chronic cooking supplies was never known as a cupboard, but always as a "safe" it served for many purposes. The ordinary, [mostly hand-made] safe was a tall, dark flimsy wood cabinet with several shelves, with double doors faced in rusted tin pierced in ventilating patterns of radiant flowers or plain ordinary wire screen, smelling stuffily, yet rather sweetly of butter, fried pork [fat back] butter milk and sour cream. There was a metal lined bin for flour, tin cans for coffee, sugar and salt. It was really one of the good pieces of furniture and was mostly referred to as the bread safe. The dining table was home made by my father and was about fourteen feet long with long wooden benches for sitting, at the head of the table was my father's chair made of rough unfinished boards with a high back. Above the table there were always dim smokey cobwebs on the open beams, exposed rafters and in the corners , In the winter what light there was came through in gaps above and by the eaves and through the many imperfections of the walls. Along the walls was long wooden shelves filled with jars, some full or partly empty of certain herbs and spices mama would gather from the fields and deep inside the wooded area nearby. Through out the living room and kitchen area clothes hung from long rusty nails.

And so it goes....