

Not a Bad Crop

By Donna McGuire Tanner

I was not even 8 years old in August 1955, yet the events of that month are as vivid to me as if they happened just today. When my grandmother, Bertha Workman, came to stay with us at our home on the hill in Weirwood, W.Va., it was a sign that the time was growing near for the birth of my parents' fifth child.

Every day during the first week of that month, my father rushed home from his job in the coal mines at the end of his night shift—just in case. I was usually asleep when he came home, but one night frantic voices pulled me from my cozy bed.

I rubbed my eyes awake as I walked into the kitchen. Mom, Grandma and my older brother, Danny, were gazing at my coal-covered dad. I was used to seeing him covered in black from the mines, but this time something was different. I could smell smoke, as if he had been near a fire.

It took me a while to understand the scrambled words because everyone was speaking at once. Finally there was silence, and Mom asked, "What are they going to do?" Mom saw me standing there, and it was left to my dad to explain the panic. My father's brother, James, worked with him in the mines. He lived about 10 miles from us on Maple Fork Road. The brothers usually rode to work together in our family car.

That night, as they had come within sight of James' home, they saw the blazing fire. When they got there, my uncle's house was nothing but a burning memory. His wife, Arleada (we called her "Leady"), had been startled awake by the coughing of her 4-year-old daughter, Delores. She managed to wake all three of her children, and they barely escaped through a bedroom window.

For the first time in my life, I knew real fear. My cousin Hilda was my best friend. Only a month separated us in age. Delores was only a bit younger than my 5-year-old sister, Brenda, and the baby, James, was only 9 months old. Now, they and their parents had no home.



My brother, Randy McGuire, in April 1959.

My father told us that the family was staying the night at one of Leady's relative's homes a few miles away.

The next morning found my family staring at the pile of black ashes that had been a home. In the front yard was the only thing that remained: A metal blue baby stroller with a wooden seat had been left outside by accident. It was later given to my mother for our new baby.

We went to the home where James and his family were staying. Mom had gathered up diapers for Baby James and clothes that my 2½-year-old brother, Jackie, had outgrown.

Usually, Hilda and I would have been running around and giggling, but this time we just cuddled together on a chair. Then it was decided that she and Delores would stay with our fam-

ily for a few days.

Hilda and I had spent many overnight visits with each other, but this was Delores' first time away from her parents. That, coupled with the trauma she had just been through, made her cry that night. I can still see my mother comforting her in the old rocking chair.

Brenda and I shared our clothes with Hilda and Delores. They always respectfully called my grandmother "Mrs. Workman." I told them to just call her "Grandma," like we did. Grandma thought that was a good idea, too.

Grandma was an excellent seamstress. She

made all four of us girls matching dresses from beautiful flour-sack material.

A week passed so swiftly that we hardly noticed. We kept busy playing.

On Friday morning, Aug. 12, the smell of breakfast cooking drew the four of us from the bed we shared. In the kitchen we found only Grandma. When I asked where Mom was, Grandma told me, "She is at the hospital, getting you a new baby brother or sister."

A few hours later, my father came home. He was smiling from ear to ear as he announced, "It's a boy, and his name is Randy Eugene."

The Oak Hill hospital was about 15 miles away. Visiting hours began at about 2 p.m. Our gang crowded into the old 1951 blue Chevy. We were going to see the newest member of the McGuire clan.

Usually the hospital didn't allow children under 14 to visit in the baby ward. But they made an exception and let us all stare through the nursery glass at the pretty baby with black hair and blue eyes.

Soon, my uncle came to visit Mom and see Randy. That's when he told us it was time to take Hilda and Delores to their new home. We were sad to have them leave us, but we were so glad that they had a new place to live. We parted with promises to see each other the next weekend.

Five days later, we brought baby Randy home from the hospital. Many neighbors and kin came to see him. I especially remember that my Aunt Olive, her husband, the late Melvin Myers, and their daughter, Linda, came 100 miles over the mountain road from their home in Richwood. Olive could hardly wait to hold him.

When Olive finally let him go back to Mom, she watched mother and son rocking back and forth in the rocking chair. Mom loved singing softly to her newborn.

Olive was so touched by the scene that she wrote a poem for Mom. The poem was tucked away for 50 years. When Olive recently found it, she sent me a copy. As I read her poem with adult eyes, memories of the events of that month came rushing back. It was then that I realized that my parents had given the nine children they raised a treasure chest of riches. I know we were materially poor, but morally we are rich in strong values.

My brother Danny is a retired mechanic; I am a writer; sister Brenda is a retired medical assistant, seamstress and artist; brother Jackie is a pastor of a church, owns his own construction business and drives a school bus; brother Terry is a mechanic and school bus driver; sister Jane is a respiratory medical specialist; brother Johnny is a police officer in the city of Oak Hill and an Air Force Reservist; and sister Belinda is an artist.

"Baby Randy" is a minister. He and his wife, Orie, run the Hand in Hand mission in Oak Hill, which serves thousands of people every year by giving out food, clothing and household items. During the holiday season even more boxes of food and toys are given out to many who otherwise would have little or no Christmas.

My parents are both gone now, but they left behind a legacy: not a bad crop of children. ❖