My Mama's Methods

By Elizabeth Bowman Good

Mama was a little woman, barely 5 feet tall. Over her work clothes, she wore a smile that could light up a room. She mothered a dozen children, and I, the youngest of the lot, recall seeing her angry only one time in my life.

She was always busy—on her feet cooking, or scrubbing floors after she had finished doing the laundry on a rub board in a galvanized washtub. She always planted a huge garden, and what we didn't eat fresh, she canned for the winter.

I don't recall when Mama's hair was *not* turning gray, though I was told she had naturally curly hair of a lovely auburn color when she was younger.

After she got a family meal on the table, she seldom sat down to eat when the rest of us did. For years, I could not understand how one could be "too tired to eat"—until after I'd done a day's work on the farm and then spent more time on my feet cooking a hearty meal for my own family. (And we had only four children; how did Mama do it?)

My mother loved to pick cotton. Two of my brothers were forced to hire her, for she said, "All right, you don't have to pay me, but I'm picking anyhow." She loved outside work, and it took years for me to learn that one reason for the attraction was that it got her away from the perpetual indoor jobs.

Mama loved all of God's creation, and she used to declare that green was the Lord's favorite color. She said, "If you don't believe me, look around you. It's a refreshing, restful color."

When wild fruits and greens were available, Mama was out taking advantage of them. She gathered the beautiful blackberries that grew profusely by the dredge ditches. Snakes "grew" profusely there also, so Mama always kept her "snake dog" at her feet.

I loved to pick berries with Mama, but the chiggers that seemed to find her "hide," as she said, "too tough to eat" almost devoured mine and populated every joint I had. I was always sick after a berry-picking jaunt, so Mama did the picking while I canned the berries.

She also found possum grapes and delicious muscadines hanging in clusters, and returned home laden with the delectable fruits. If there was poke salet, it was added to our dinner as well.

Piecing and quilting quilts were Mama and Grandmaw's wintertime hobbies. One year they quilted 15 quilts—nothing really fancy, for they hadn't the leisure for that, but all of them were beautiful to me. It was fun to recall who had worn the dresses made from the fabrics represented in the coverlets.

Mama was a real stickler for clean beds. One autumn, she had washed almost all of the quilts and hung them to dry on the clothesline. The weather was balmy at bedtime, and one quilt was adequate. As the hours passed, however, the temperature plummeted. During the dead of night, the adults headed out to bring in stiffly frozen quilts to thaw out over a bunch of chilly people.

One of my favorite places in the summer was Mama's garden. It was fine with Mama when I, armed with salt and pepper shakers, raided her tomato patch. I searched beneath a fully leafed-out vine for the ripest, sweetest tomato. Mama had carefully tucked it there to ward off the sun's burning rays, which she said burned the fruit, making it tough and hard. She was right, too.

There were no tomatoes so good as those sun-ripened ones in the South. Here in the cooler climate of Washington, we prune leaves off our vines so the sun can "get at" them, but they still do not have the flavor of a sun-ripened one from the warmer climates.

Mama only went to school one day in her life, but she learned to read her Bible and recipes, as well as her canning books. She made her own salve that drew the redness out when blood poisoning threatened. She used poultices made from a beaten-up, very hot onion to draw enough venom from a snake bite to preserve my sister Esther's life until the doctor arrived in his horse-drawn buggy.

True, Mama couldn't read very well, but God must have known she needed implanted wisdom in order to take care of such a family.

Daddy was a preacher who leaned toward divine healing, and for sure, Mama believed in the

Lord with all her heart. But she also felt that given the brood she and Daddy had willfully brought into the world, it would be real considerate of her to at least help out the good Lord if she could.

When friends of my father's brought and then left their "itch" with our family, it was the worst case Mama had ever heard of—and of all times to have it, it was in the heat of summer.

Mama mixed sulfur and Vicks VapoRub and applied it to everyone—except Daddy. He was "gonna trust the Lord" to heal him. Mama couldn't convince him that he should try to help the Lord out, even as he kept scratching. Mama decided that Daddy could and would hang on to his faith. But she also thought that the Lord would understand and forgive her for liberally dusting Daddy's sheets with sulfur. He did a little fussing about her lack of faith, but he finally decided that if a sin was being committed, it was *hers*. He knew that the Lord acknowledged his innocence, so he slept well and contentedly while "Mama's sinning" helped the Lord out. After all, she wasn't a preacher.

Mama's humility and kindness, her understanding of childish pranks, and her forgiveness of such "spared the rod" for some of her guilty charges and their wicked little acts. Such was the case one day when she and my oldest sister were picking cotton close to the road.

My sister saw a strange man coming down the road and quickly squatted in the row, leaving our sweet, busy little Mama seemingly alone in the cotton patch. When he got near enough to hear, my sister called out an unprintable name to the man, who looked at Mama in astonishment.

Had it been our father Sister had been picking with, she'd have been "benefited" with a pulled-up cotton stalk! All Mama did was look at my sister and say, "Honey, you ortn't-a done that." Her gentle correction served the purpose far better than a cotton stalk would have! Mama's humility and gentle voice came close to bringing us to our knees if we did something wrong. All she had to do was look at us and speak a few words of love in her quiet manner.

Her way was far different from Daddy's, whose method of teaching obedience was pushing or pulling his "sheep" into the "fold." Mama chose to lead them and prove her way by demonstration. Her way is still more effective, for while a child is biblically instructed to honor his parents, parents are also given the directive "Provoke not your children to wrath." I wish I had inherited more of Mama's methods. ❖

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