The Rock Pile

By Faye Henderson

All the kids who were anybody walked to one of the two stores for lunch in Garrison, Ky., in 1956. Only the nobodies stayed at school. Being a newcomer, I didn't want to be different. Besides, my new best friend, Gerry Kamer, ate lunch every day at one of the stores. She always returned smelling like bologna, and she always had mustard in the corner of her mouth.

I *loved* bologna. There was, however, one slight problem: getting my mother's permission to leave the school grounds. The solution I came up with for that problem was my first mistake.

I was only 6 years old, and I knew that my mother would not allow me to walk along a busy highway. I was left with no choice but to print my own permission note. It worked like a charm, and the next day, I skipped and hopped with my friend all the way to Mr. Collins' store.

The store was buzzing with activity as we entered. Everyone was yelling their orders; sandwiches and soda bottles were being stuffed into large hands; the cash register *ching!*-ed as the drawer opened. As I stood in the long line, waiting my turn, my mouth salivated at the thought of the first bite. When my turn finally arrived, I ordered the coveted sandwich and drink, waited for the order, and handed the cashier my money.

I held my hand out for the change. But Mr. Collins stuck the sandwich in it and plopped the opened Coke bottle on the bar. "Did you need something else?" he asked, looking at my empty outstretched hand with a puzzled expression on his wrinkled face.

"My change, please," I replied.

"You gave me $1.25, young lady," he said rubbing his hand on the white apron that covered his potbelly. "The sandwich and pop cost $1.25."

That created an enormous problem; $1.25 was the exact amount for lunches for a whole week in the school cafeteria.

Then I made my second mistake.

After hours of thought that evening, I came up with a solution. Because my dad worked away from home all week, my family had a charge account at the store for emergencies. I had no lunch money left and there were still four days left in the week. I decided that the possibility of starving was an emergency.

In this photo, the author is in the front row, third from the left.

Mr. Collins charged my delicious bologna sandwich and soda pop without question for the rest of the week.

My dad came home on Friday night, just like always. On Saturday, he took me along while he completed some errands.

We entered Mr. Collins' store.

"Mr. Bloom, are you aware that your little girl has been charging her lunches to your account

every day?" Mr. Collins asked as he handed a pick sheet to my father. My dad was silent as he struggled to remove his wallet from his pants pocket. My heart beat so fast that I could hardly breathe. I felt like I was going to faint.

The two men chatted about weather, politics and farming for a while before Dad said goodbye. I trudged behind him to the truck. He handed me an ice-cold drink without saying a word as he slid under the wheel.

On an ordinary day, I would have been excited about the treat. This was judgment day, however, and I knew I had misbehaved enough to expect the worst. I studied my dad's face to get a reading of his mood.

One lone brown twig lay over his smooth forehead as he thought about the situation. When he began to whistle, I knew he had arrived at a solution—and I knew I was in big trouble.

Soon we pulled into the driveway. My father got out of the truck, walked across the footbridge that separated the barnyard from the house, and entered the kitchen.

Author Faye Henderson.

I sauntered along, kicking stones and sipping my Coke, dreading my punishment. "Your mother and I have decided we need to set the tobacco plants today," my dad said, sipping his coffee. I moaned a long pitiful sound. "And once we have that job done," he continued, "we can spend the rest of the day swimming."

We spent most of Saturday setting out tobacco plants, but I didn't mind because I knew I'd get to go swimming when the job was done.

Sunday evening came way too soon, and as Dad rose to leave, he asked me to follow him. He led me back to the footbridge. The stream under it rarely ever rose above a trickle.

"See all those rocks?" he asked, pointing to the creek bed. I nodded yes. "While I'm gone, I want you to pick up every rock on this side of the creek and carry it to that side by the barn." My mouth dropped open as I stared at hundreds and hundreds of rocks. The job would take forever.

"Why?" I whimpered.

"I paid your bill at Mr. Collins' store," he answered. "Now you need to pay me back. Since you have no money, you must work to earn the money to pay your bill." And with that, he waved goodbye.

"That was not the 'why' I wanted answered!" I yelled. "I want to know why the rocks need to be moved!" I watched as he sped down the road leaving a trail of dust.

That week, besides my other daily chores of gathering eggs and feeding the chickens, I picked up rocks for several hours after school and carted them to the other side of the creek. Every rock made me regret charging my lunches—and with each rock, I liked bologna less.

On Saturday, Dad went out for his weekly inspection of my chores. "Great job. However, I don't like all those rocks piled on this side. I want you to carry them all back to the other side."

"Why? My hands have blisters and … " I fell silent instantly at the sight of his raised palm, the dreaded "No more whining!" signal. Without another word, he walked away.

After his inspection at the end of that second week, my father and I set out to do our Saturday errands. As he handed Mr. Collins the money to pay our grocery bill, he said, "Ralph, my wife may not always be able to come for supplies. Let my daughter have whatever she comes after and charge it to my bill." Then he looked at me, winked his beautiful blue eye and smiled. I knew that the rock job was over.

I never left the school grounds for lunch after the rock job. Nor did I charge a single lunch at Mr. Collins' store, although our emergency charge account remained opened there until we left the state.

As I grew, I experienced more of my father's creative discipline. Most of the time, I would have preferred a spanking instead. ❖

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