# Going Green

## *We recycled before recycling was cool!*

*By Shirley J. Conley*

There must be an unwritten code that dictates when you can begin referring to your life as the Good Old Days. As a child, I sat cross-legged at my great-grandfather's feet while he told tales of traveling to Oregon with a wagon train. "Those were the Good Old Days," he'd grin, an old wooden pipe clamped between his teeth.

Born in Portland, Ore., I spent my formative years in the uncertain times of the 1940s. World War II was raging. Many families had not yet recovered from the Great Depression of the 1930s. Protected by my parents, I had no concept of being poor or of their struggle to raise four kids.

Saving our planet hadn't been thought of. But it is clear to me that my family had already "gone green," and somewhere between the Good Old Days and the 21st century, the color green has been lost.

Today I can hardly turn without seeing or hearing the term "going green" on talk shows, newscasts and in magazines. From energy to recycling, we're urged to save our environment.

And yet, I still see trees cut down to make room for another strip mall. "Just progress," I say as a tear escapes. I remember the old cherry tree in our yard that the neighborhood kids loved to climb. The day it crashed to the ground, dead, I wept at the loss of my friend. But Dad cut it into logs and stacked them neatly on the woodpile to burn in the stove that heated our home. Instant recycling.

Back then, the postman stopped to pass the time of day. He didn't bring junk mail—just an occasional long-awaited letter from Grandma that brought me running. The fast-food chains that give us piles of plastic foam hadn't been founded yet. There were no mountains of trash in landfills—no choice of paper or plastic. A dollhouse could be made from a cardboard box. We recycled everything.

*The author and brother, Roger, in 1948, Portland, Ore.*

There were no plastic water bottles, no paper plates or cups. Every Fourth of July, my extended family gathered at my great-grandparents' home for a huge picnic. My brothers, sister, cousins and I congregated on the back porch to drink water out of the long-handled tin cup that hung by the sink. Never mind the germs—Great-Grandma's water was sweeter and colder out of the coveted tin cup, and it left no waste.

In today's supermarkets, I find small sections of meat departments devoted to "green." I read labels on chicken: "all natural, no additives, no hormones." When I was growing up, we had our own chickens, and they were natural, as were our eggs. Dad believed that we should know how to kill, pluck and clean a chicken. My younger sister and I were horrified; my older brother just laughed at us.

I recall one of Mom's favorite expressions: "Company's comin'! Kill the chicken!" Sometimes she was kidding, but more often than not, the outcome would be chicken and dumplings with rich, creamy gravy.

Wherever we lived, Dad grew a lush garden with straight rows. Mom canned the extra fruit and vegetables in Mason jars with neatly written labels. Her hot, hard work was forgotten when she gazed upon the fruits of her labors lining the pantry shelves. Nothing went to waste. Leftover

food reappeared in casseroles; we tossed vegetable peelings to the chickens or dumped them on the compost pile. That's recycling in its highest form.

Saturday night was bath night. We little kids all bathed in the same washtub, which Mom filled with water she heated on the wood-burning cookstove. I was blessed to be the oldest girl because everyone knew that girls go first. That's water conservation for you!

My parents saved energy in other ways. Dad didn't allow us to have the lights on after a certain hour, and he continually hollered, "Turn out the lights when you leave a room!" This habit lingers with me today. I now see green cleaners on the store shelves: "natural, no dyes, perfume-free, nontoxic, biodegradable; contains filtered water, coconut-based and essential lemon oil." What's wrong with plain old vinegar?

Mom used soap powder in her antiquated wringer washer. She added a couple of drops of liquid bluing—"for the whitest whites, biodegradable and nontoxic." Hung on the line to dry and kissed by the sun, those sheets smelled sweetly of fresh air, not dryer sheets.

I admit that I have been caught up in progress. I probably wouldn't want to be without my high-efficiency washer and dryer, glass-top range with its convection oven, microwave, television or air conditioner. But I look back fondly on my childhood and know that I would trade all of the modern conveniences for the green of the Good Old Days. ❖

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