

# The Old Wellspring

*Each Thanksgiving, Grandpa found inspiration in the well that never stopped giving.*

*By Paul Sawyer*

“Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go.” Just humming that tune conjures up a scene in which a horse-drawn sleigh dashes through a snow-covered forest. The target? Grandmother’s house, which is always just around the next bend.

That picture changes a little when I talk about central South Carolina in 1941. We did not get an early snow that year, but the season and the reason remained the same. I was 11, and we came from Virginia by train, not by sleigh.

Uncle Crawford Thompson, my mother’s brother, met us at the depot. He drove a buggy with fringe on top—not quite a sleigh, but close enough. That, plus a 36-degree chill, became the catalyst for our Thanksgiving spirit—that and the mile-and-a-half gallop to Granddad’s in the open air.

Granddad’s house sat 300 yards back from the main road. Forget about electricity and indoor plumbing. Every farm had an artesian well or two, or at the very least, a cast-iron hand pump to bring up water. At Cousin Frank Jones’ place they had a hand pump right there in the kitchen.

Granddad’s large, L-shaped house had five bedrooms, a dining room, parlor and kitchen. Except for the kitchen, every room had a large fireplace. In the kitchen sat an old, cast-iron stove that had cooked many a meal under Grandma’s watchful eyes until she began losing her sight.

Talk about homey. The smell of burning hickory was accented by crackling fireplaces and noisy kids jostling for the most comfortable furniture. Magnificent odors emanated from the kitchen and wafted through the house.

Granddad’s artesian well stood 3½ feet high, about 40 feet from the back door. It boasted some of the sweetest water in Florence County, or in the whole state, for that matter. The water bubbled about an inch high above the pipe, and cool green moss lured thirsty drinkers to sample the cool pristine liquid.



Someone—maybe Grandpa—had tapped a tiny hole in the pipe about 6 inches from the top, allowing a tiny stream to pour into a bucket hanging below the hole. When water was needed in the kitchen, the cook simply carried the empty bucket out to the well and exchanged it for the full one (or got one of us kids to do it).

The overflow from the bucket ran into a no. 3 washtub that sat below it, conveniently within reach for the horses and mules. The overflow from the tub ran down a little trail through the yard where the chickens, guineas and turkeys could drink their fill. Granddad scooped out a small ditch through the field opposite the house where the cattle, pigs and goats were watered.

From there, the stream ran on a ways before it ended at the Rye Patch Pond, an oasis of blue-green water that fostered flowers and wildlife. At one time, a 2-foot alligator lived there, too, but Grandma made Granddad take him off to the Big Pee Dee River.

Where U.S. Highway 301 travels through the Carolinas, there are blisters on the roadside that enable travelers to stop. At these places, a pipe juts 3 to 4 feet out of the ground, delivering good artesian water. These wells give their all, and our satisfaction is their only reward. Seems there is a lesson to be learned there.

I suppose that's why Granddad always had tears in his eyes when we joined hands around a hearty Thanksgiving table. He thanked the Lord with every breath for all that he had—for the farm and the 13 children he and Anna raised, and for the events that brought new children, grandchildren and others into their home every year.

He was never known to complain. He and Grandma Anna worked hard all their lives. Apparently he didn't mind walking behind a mule from dawn to dusk every day. Whatever else, he knew that next year would be better than this year. And it always was.

Granddad's farm produced much more than vegetables, meat and a cash crop. It evolved into a large, loving family—Granddad's legacy to the world. And every Thanksgiving, Granddad promised that he would be there as long as the artesian well continued to flow.

And if the well stopped flowing?

"I'll drill another one," he said. ❖