Sharecropper Fourth of July

On the farm, everybody pitched in to celebrate America's birthday.

By Carlene Poff Baker

Back in the early 1940s in Northeast Arkansas, I remember only two holidays—Christmas and Fourth of July. I liked Christmas all right, but the Fourth of July seemed extra-special to me and my sisters, Bon and Mave. We were ages 9, 7 and 5.

A great deal of work went into getting ready for the grand event. Daddy went out with his saw to the bayou and cut down a tree. After our mules, Sam and Shorty, dragged it to the backyard, he sawed it lengthwise into boards for a picnic table. Shorter boards nailed together like X's formed the table's legs, but for some strange reason, he called them "sawhorses."

Out of her quilt box came Mama's year-long collection of printed flour and chicken-feed sacks, which she sewed end-to-end to make a patchwork tablecloth for the long table. After the picnic every year, she took out the stitches and made the sacks into dresses and sunbonnets for my sisters and me.

The choicest fryers were protected from hawks and foxes in readiness for the holiday skillet. Daddy pampered watermelons in the garden, thumping them daily to hear the ripening thud. On the Fourth, Bon and I would take turns pumping water to fill the cow's and mules' watering trough so he could place the watermelons there to cool.

On the Sunday before the Fourth, the grocery truck delivered more than the usual staples, like lemons, sugar, rock salt and sliced loaf bread. On the third, Mama gave me the delightful honor of turning the ice card in the front window to 100 for the iceman to see.

It was an inexpressible pleasure to stand beside Mama in the kitchen and watch her stir up potato salad, mix ice-cream fixings, fry crispy chicken, boil corn on the cob and roll and squeeze lemons for lemonade.

As I watched, my excitement heightened. I could hardly wait for the wagons of kinfolk to appear around the bend.

Bon, Mave and I also did things to get ready for visiting cousins. We pounded stakes into the ground for tossing horseshoes. We asked Daddy to check the swing ropes to see that they were sturdy enough for some of our plumper cousins who liked to pump their legs when they were swinging. We found a grassless spot, and one of us drew the squares for hopscotch while the other two scavenged the yard for colorful pieces of broken glass for hopscotch tokens.

When the Fourth finally dawned, everyone arose earlier than usual to get everything ready. We three girls made trips up and down the front porch steps, toting bowls, platters and pots of food to the long table with its colorful cloth.

When the blistering sun was almost straight overhead, we saw the wagons coming. We started waving and jumping up and down as they neared.

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Daddy unhitched their sweat-lathered mules and led them to the watering trough (where the watermelons were cooling).

Grandma Ryan and three aunts added their pails of beans and corn bread and molasses cookies alongside Mama's dishes. I looked right away for Aunt Elbie's juicy pineapple cake, and she never disappointed me. And nobody made better chicken and dressing than my Grandma Ryan (whom we called "Ma").

After scrubbing our hands to our elbows at the back-porch water shelf, we moved close to the long table and impatiently endured "Pa" Ryan's saying grace.

After finishing our delicious meal, we kids scampered off in many directions—some swinging, others climbing the cottonwood trees, scuffling on the grass, playing hopscotch or horseshoes.

Mama and her guests sat on the porch, fanning themselves and talking about kids, gardens, quilting and *Portia Faces Life*, a favorite afternoon radio opera program.

Daddy and the other men huddled under trees to whittle and talk about the war and their crops. Sometimes one of them would tell a funny story that made the whole bunch roar with laughter.

About the middle of the afternoon, we were called to the back-porch water shelf again to rinse off some of the play dirt before partaking of the cool watermelon Daddy had sliced. Then it was back to the wash shelf to get the red, sticky juice off our arms up to our elbows.

We resumed play until the men finished cranking the ice-cream freezer. Then we sat dangling our legs over the high porch edge, enjoying the refreshingly cold, white stuff. That was the only day in the year when we had homemade ice cream.

My sisters and I dreaded seeing the men start hitching the mules to the wagons and watching the women put on their bonnets and load up their empty pails. At the last washing-up at the water bench, I always felt a lump in my throat. I didn't want to talk. The other kids were quiet too. By the time our cousins climbed back into their wagons, however, we were able to grin sideways farewells to one another.

The drivers made their giddy-up clicking sounds and the wagons eased down the lane. By the time they had disappeared around the bend, I had already started wishing hard for next year's Fourth of July to hurry up and come around again! ❖

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