Dad, the Encourager

By Barbara Barton

y dad, Tyson Gentry, wanted his children to call him "Papa." In the 1950s and '60s, few fathers answered to that name, so I felt a little awkward using it. However, I never slipped and called him "Dad" to his face.

Papa was a strict disciplinarian, but we kids all loved him. He made each of us children want to do our very best, whether in school, playing sports, or hoeing cotton.

Being the child with a stubborn streak, I sometimes misbehaved and got a whipping. At about 8 years of age, I remember what I said after one spanking: "Papa, let me dry my tears so I can go with you." He nearly cracked up.

He and my mother encouraged each of us four children to excel at our strong points. Being the oldest, I received help first, in sports and piano. The second child, Sharon, loved art. My brother, Dave, was a good athlete and speaker. Ginger, the baby of the family, loved tennis and decorating. Papa saw to it that each of us got a chance to do our thing.

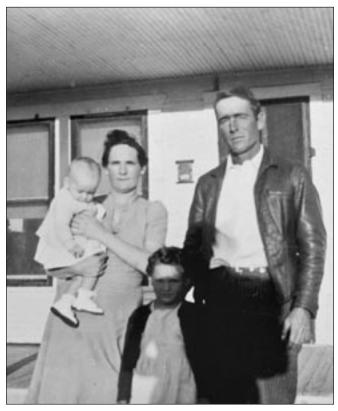
We all loved to read. That's not surprising because Papa read to us from the time we were babies until we were teens. In the 1940s, *The Saturday Evening Post* carried wonderful family stories in each issue. I listened spellbound as Papa read about the antics of Babe and Little Joe, two children in a regular series in that magazine.

Papa also liked to read the Bible to the family. He sometimes suggested passages of Scripture for us to memorize. He competed with us to see who could learn the verses first.

When my brother, Dave, looked back on our father's life, he said, "Papa took on many of the traits of a pastor in the little congregation we attended." Many times our church had a student preacher from the nearest Bible college who drove to our town to preach twice a month. The college was 120 miles one way, so the pastor wasn't around the rest of the time.

When sick or troubled members needed help, they often called on our dad, even though he wasn't a preacher. In 1948, I tagged along with

him to visit a neighbor, Fred Sanders. We took him food or whatever he needed because Fred couldn't walk and he had no job.



LaVerne, Tyson, Sharon and Barbara Gentry in 1946.

He didn't have a wheelchair, either, but he kept a donkey near his house. When Fred wanted to go somewhere, he just pulled himself up on the donkey and away they would trot.

Speaking of church, I cannot forget the summer revivals. It seemed like the visiting preacher and song leader often stayed with us.

One July day, Papa invited the two guests to go coon hunting with him after the evening's service. When the final amens were proclaimed, the young visitors followed Dad to the river with the hound dogs. Coon hides weren't good at that time of year, so they didn't intend to kill anything. They were just going to see if the dogs could find a coon and trail it.

One dog let out a yelp, and away the group

went, trying to find their way along the creek bank filled with brush and briars. The two young men looked for higher ground where the trail was better.

Right there, in the middle of the night, they found a watermelon patch. Papa's guests raided the watermelons and forgot the dogs. Dad had a lot of explaining to do the next day when he told his neighbor how the preachers had found the melons.

When we kids had homework, Papa supervised our progress. After one of us wrote an answer, he would say, "Read it to me."

Each of his four children learned to give speeches. He had us recite them at home so that he could make suggestions.

Although he was a "dirt farmer," as he put it, he was educated. In 1927 he graduated from an 11-year curriculum in Sherwood, Texas. His father had died several years before, and he lived with his mother.

She decided they should move 45 miles west to Big Lake, a town where one of my father's sisters lived. That school had a 12-year curriculum and, more importantly, they had a football team. The game was very new to most West Texas teenagers.

Papa graduated from high school again, this time from Big Lake in 1928, after playing football for the first time in his life. He went to college for two years, but the Depression and lack of money brought him home to farm and ranch. I often wondered what he would have become if he had stayed in school.

When we children reached the age to join 4-H clubs, we fed and showed lambs in the livestock shows. Papa taught us how to select good lambs, and then he expected us to take care of them.

As I look back on those 4-H activities, I realize that my parents knew they didn't have the money to send us to college. However, in the 1950s, a kid could make good money showing sheep and selling them at the auctions. Every dime we earned from the sheep went into our college savings account.

Papa died at 62 years of age, but not before he saw two of his children graduate from college. The other two got their degrees a few years later.

He has been gone for 35 years, but I remember daily the encouraging words he gave me: "You can do it." I try to pass those words on to my children. ��