Mom's Kitchen Table

By Kenneth Bowen

I was born in the West Virginia highlands in a tiny community called Frogtown. It was located in a narrow, picturesque valley. We called the valleys "hollows" or "hollers." The coal mining camp of Goodwill was one mile up the hollow. There were 10 houses and two stores in Frogtown. Charles and Mary Duncan owned one store, and Harvie and Mabel Heath ran the other. The Duncans sold only groceries. Harvie and Mabel sold groceries and beer. Every Friday and Saturday night, the miners from Goodwill would congregate at Harvie's store, and most of the time, things got very rough late at night.

Sally Garrison and her family lived below us, and there were several shallow ponds over from their house. There were some larger ponds by Tom Adkins' farm. These ponds are where the frogs lived. When the spring rains came, the frogs were so loud you couldn't hear yourself think. This is how Frogtown got its name.

Our house was located between the railroad and the hard-surfaced road, and since most people did not have cars, they walked the roads to Goodwill looking for work. Often some of the men stopped by to rest and talk, or do a chore for something to eat and perhaps earn a little money.

Our house was small. It consisted of four rooms—three bedrooms and the kitchen. With no living room, all the activity took place at Mom's kitchen table.

Mom's table sat in the center of the kitchen. It was solid oak and round, with a pedestal, saber legs, and claw feet. Six oak chairs surrounded it.

It was more than just a place where Mom served breakfast, lunch and supper. Mom's kitchen table was the only place we had to entertain visitors with coffee and cookies, and to sit and talk.

Mom's kitchen table was where Montcalm High School students warmed and rested themselves while they were waiting for the bus after the long walk off Sinai Mountain on cold, snowy mornings. Clyde Dillon always took his position by the window so he could watch for the bus.

My brother, Bobby, and Babe Johnson played basketball for Montcalm High. They would sit at the table, sipping coffee and talking about an upcoming game with Bramwell, Matoaka or another team.

My sister Betty, Sue Johnson and Annie Carver would sit at the table, putting the final touches on their makeup and hair. When Clyde saw the bus coming back out of the hollow, he would tell the others, and they would go out the door, trudging through the snow to the bus stop.

Mom's kitchen table was where my younger brother, Don, and I played checkers, dominoes and Rook. Late at night, after everyone had gone to bed, we would set the Bendix radio on the table next to the oil lamp. (It ran on a big battery that had to be recharged at a service station or hardware store when the power ran low.) With our ears pressed against the speaker, we would quietly tune in so that we would not wake anyone.

During the winter months, we took turns operating the tuner knob and warming our hands over the lamp. There we would listen to our favorite radio dramas: *Suspense*, *Escape*, *Red Ryder* and *Straight Arrow*. In those days, KOMA Oklahoma City, WCKY Cincinnati and WJJD Chicago were the powerful stations that came in loud and clear in the hills and hollows of West Virginia.

In the spring and summer, neighbors would make their rounds and visit each other in the cool of the evening. While our parents would sit around the table talking and drinking coffee, we kids would try to get a penny so we could go to

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Harvie's store and get us a penny bag of candy. About dusk, Mom would light the lamp, and that was when the storytelling began. I guess it was the soft glow of the lamp and the gloom of the approaching darkness that put everybody in the mood for horror stories. Pete Bailey and Grim Niswander were the best at telling spooky stories. Some of their tales about werewolves and ghosts made my hair stand up.

They always had some new information about the canals that someone discovered on Mars and about the Martians landing in New Jersey, wherever that was.

If Chill and Lige Bailey were sitting at the table, the storyteller would go into detail about how several people had seen a ghost lurking in the thick laurel bushes that grew beside the path they had to travel to get back home.

If Ed Gearheart was present, they would tell how someone saw a panther or a bear in Patterson's field. Sometimes I would get a lantern and walk with Ed as far as the drawbars on Patterson's fence. There, I would hold the lantern up high to give him more light. As I turned to go down the mountain, I could hear Ed running up the mountain as fast as he could go. I often wondered if Ed really thought I would run to his rescue if a bear or panther chased him.

Men who were out of work and looking for a job in the coal mine at Goodwill were frequent visitors to Mom's kitchen table. Some had been disabled in the mine, and since there was no welfare in those days, people were seeking odd jobs to eke out a living the best way they could.

One of these men was Grass Hook. That was the only name I ever heard him called. He got that name because he always carried a small sickle with him wherever he went. He also carried a Pepsi bottle in his pocket.

Grass Hook walked up the railroad track in the spring and summer from the community of Duhring or Montcalm. He was tall, slim and wore a black, wide-brim hat low on his forehead.

He always wore a long black coat draped over his shoulders that flowed to a little below the knee, exposing his black peg leg. He had lost his leg when slate fell on him at the Goodwill mine. Now he tried to make a meager living by cutting grass for people and sharpening scissors and kitchen knives. But the vast majority of homes in Frogtown and Goodwill didn't have grassy lawns. Everybody, including my mom, swept their yards every morning and plucked up every blade of grass.

Some weeds grew along the creek near our house, and Mom occasionally let Grass Hook cut those. But she always hired him to sharpen her kitchen knives and scissors because he could get them razor-sharp.

I loved to sit across the table from him and watch him work. While Mom was busy at the stove, fixing Grass Hook something to eat, he would take the Pepsi bottle out of his coat pocket and place it on the table with the open end toward him. Then he would stick one blade of the scissors inside the bottle, turn it at a slight angle, and apply some pressure as he pulled the blade out. He would repeat the procedure several times with both blades. Then he would pull a string out of his pocket, drop it and cut the string in midair.

Then Grass Hook would hold the bottle by the neck and place the butcher knife about two inches from the bottom of the bottle. He pushed the blade away from him under pressure and then turned the knife over and did the other side. Grass Hook repeated the process until he was satisfied the blade was sharp. Mom often said that Grass Hook got her butcher knife so sharp that it would split a hog's hair four ways.

Other people came to Mom's kitchen table to entertain us for a bite to eat during those depressed years. The old folks called them "rhymers." They only talked in rhyme. I was always happy to see them and I loved the way they told their stories. Two of the rhymers I heard had the same last lines: "A little piece of corn bread laying on the shelf, if you want to hear any more, you have to tell it yourself."

Then the rhymer would thank Mom for the food and bid everyone farewell—all in rhyme—and then head up the hollow toward Goodwill. I often wondered if they were born with the talent to rhyme or if they cultivated the skill to entertain people and earn something to eat during those hard and difficult times. I probably will never know the answer to that question.

The last time I heard a rhymer was in the spring of 1948. It seems as if the wonderful things from the Good Old Days are vanishing from the earth. ❖

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