Highlights of a Life Well Lived

By Violet Fancher Clemsen

I have nothing but happy memories of my childhood days on our farm near Gray, Iowa. What I had then was very precious: two good and loving parents, two older brothers and a sister. It was the Great Depression, and things were tough, but each year had many highlights that brought us pleasure and made wonderful memories.

One of those highlights was making sorghum with my family. My dad grew the sorghum cane himself, and in the fall, my brothers would harvest it by hand. We had a sorghum mill on the farm. Mules pulled its long sweep, which turned the mill that squeezed the juice out of the long, slim, green stalks.

My dad built an open building with a roof over it and a fire pit underneath. A baffled pan about 8 feet by 4 feet was placed over the open fire, and the strained juice was poured in at one end of the pan. As it cooked slowly, we stirred it with a long-handled tool shaped like a hoe, moving the juice through the pan. It took hours, but when the juice finally reached the other end of the pan, it had cooked down to delicious, brown, sweet, sorghum molasses.

The smell of wood smoke takes me back to those times when Mom would give me a cane stick to dip into the rich, sweet sorghum as it cooked—after warning me not to burn my mouth. I have seldom tasted such delicious sorghum since then.

I have another reason for remembering sorghum-making time. One day I was barefoot and no one noticed that I had wandered into the grove where they had dumped live coals from the fire. I stepped on one of those coals, and today, at age 82, I still have the scar.

Another highlight of life on the farm was when Dad went to the Omaha stockyards every fall to order several hundred feeder lambs. He always ordered one black sheep as a pet for me.

When the lambs arrived at the train depot in Gray, we would drive there in our Model A to walk the sheep home on the road. My siblings and I herded them up our long lane to eat the green grass.

It was always a highlight when we gathered around the piano to sing popular tunes from *Your Hit Parade*. My dear mother played piano and organ by ear, and she passed that talent down to my brothers and me. Our house always was filled with music. Those were wonderful times.

When I was 78, my grandson, who was attending Musictech College, took me to a recording studio there to burn a CD of me playing all the old tunes on a baby grand piano. This was another highlight for me, for which I am very grateful.

As you can tell, the highlights just keep coming. I'm thankful for such good memories of simple things that are really treasures in disguise. ❖

This photo from circa 1929 shows the author and her father, Orra W. Fancher, with his flock of sheep. A brother in the background is drawing the sheep. The author is favoring her sore foot, which she burned when she stepped on a hot coal at sorghum-cooking time.

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