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Notes and Documents

A Countryside Remembrance

CARL C. WRIGHT*

FAMILIES IN THE SOUTH CENTRAL TEXAS COMMUNITY KNOWN AS Adalia, where I grew up before and after the 1920s, raised mainly cotton for a livelihood. And with few exceptions they dreamed of the day when they might escape a hard prairie life in brand new automobiles. Failure to practice crop rotation and other scientific methods of farming drained the soil's fertility. Growing poorer with each harvest, disheartened tenant farmers in secondhand cars abandoned the country for town or city. Landowners, too, moved away and rented their farms to destitute peasants from Mexico. Before the Great Depression, Adalia's school, once the neighborhood center, disappeared through consolidation. Johnson grass and broomweed invaded the land, which was finally converted for cattle raising.

Today when I revisit those low rolling hills, their brows slit by a highway where cars whiz day and night, I inhale the bittersweet aroma of broomweed, and reminisce. I remember the classmate with whom I sat in a double desk, his election in early manhood to the Texas legislature; the prankster, who stole our lunches from the anteroom, now serving a life sentence in prison; my first teacher, an artist who taught me to draw; a little black boy, who sang in the fields, "I ain't got nobody, nobody got me."

In sharper memory, however, are evenings spent with my family on the long front porch of our L-shaped farmhouse. Here, chores done and supper over, we welcomed the coolest part of the day. And we talked and talked. Ironically, the world coming to an end was a popular subject, but the idea of Adalia ending never entered our minds. Whenever speculations about old Earth's being consumed like a blazing corn shuck grew tedious, we switched to ghost stories, a fitting replacement since we lived only a mile from ghost-ridden Laro's Hill.

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One dark evening someone told an especially frightening story. When it was finished, my father proposed a challenge: a shiny fifty-cent piece to anyone who would walk down to the horse lot, unhook the gate chain, rattle it, replace it, and then return to the house in a slow walk. At that moment, with a south wind moaning around the house and the tin roof popping with release of the day's heat, it required all the courage I could summon just to enter the house, lighted only by a flickering kerosene lamp, to wash my feet before bedtime.

What pleasure fifty cents would have given the following Saturday at the county seat, Lockhart. Two vanilla milkshakes and a ticket to Baker's theater where Charlie Chaplin was playing.

Our haunted hill probably inspired the ghost stories, since mystery of the hill's light on foggy nights persisted well into the 1920s. I first witnessed the phenomenon in 1918, on a Sunday night as we returned from church services through mist and fog. The church that night had presented several tableaux—spectral representations of historical and patriotic scenes. Local citizens arranged in dramatic poses were frozen into brilliant statuesque figures by the off-stage burning of a chemical that produced an eerie white light. (This brief but engaging entertainment drew even more “ahs” and “ohs” than “Hands Up!”, a serial with Ruth Roland at the local theater, housed in a renovated cottonseed shed where the projector was hand-cranked.)

Still excited by people momentarily turned to stone, we approached Laro's Hill. Suddenly Papa pulled the carriage to the side of the road and exclaimed, “We're going to meet a car—or it's that blamed light again!” (In those days only one or two automobiles traveled Adalia's dusty roads, or got stuck in sticky black mud. So the ghostly light seemed to be the logical alternative.) While Papa coaxed the restless team to hold steady, the yellow light beyond us made irregular movements, darting and resting, before the deep fog swallowed it up.

The simple truth of the light was now unveiled, and a folksy hill lore passed with the innovation of the automobile. We did not understand—more likely did not *wish* to understand—that our weird light emanated from cars on the postroad, connecting Austin and Lockhart, several miles north of Adalia.

Unfortunately the brunt of the light fell upon a poor black family living near our home. Mingo Breedlove, a gentle old man, and his wife, Aunt Jane, headed a household of thirteen members. Some thoughtless person covered himself with a bedsheet and moaned and wailed one night at their frontyard gate, claiming to be the hill's ghost.

But when Mingo walked out of the house with an ax handle, the "ghost" fled to the horse he had hidden in tall bloodweeds and rode away. According to Mingo the mean trick proved almost fatal to poor Aunt Jane, whose weak heart "nigh give out."

The Breedloves lived, "stayed," to use their word, in a dilapidated two-story house and rented on the halves fifty acres of rocky land marred by ancient buffalo wallows. Their landlord furnished teams, worn out implements, and credit for groceries, the staples being corn meal, molasses, shortening, and snuff. Harvest after harvest found them in debt, which kept them bound to the farm like the sharp flint rocks.

We depended upon the Breedloves for help at hog-killing time. For pay they accepted only heads and feet, refusing an extra payment in cash. In this family Mingo's niece had a son about my age. Sometimes called Dinkum and sometimes Mama's Boy, he had never known his father. Dinkum would hang around the butchers to ask for a hog's bladder, which he would then blow up like a balloon. Playing together, we threw rocks at bull frogs on the stock tank and made bows and arrows from willows below the tank dam.

I preferred getting away from the house to avoid sickening odors arising from the butchering; for example, the scalding of a hog in a barrel of hot water before its hair was scraped. Even more nauseating was the sight of Aunt Jane cutting fat from a tub of hog entrails, the fat used in making lard.

Once, while Dinkum and I played around in the barnyard, a safe distance from the hog killing, he picked up a piece of corn cob and rubbed it across a salt block put out for the stock. Then he put the bit of cob into his mouth and sucked on it. This impropriety I attributed to the boy's bad diet. He was always hungry. I knew the family rarely enjoyed fresh fruit and only a few vegetables, turnips and onions, in season. Space for cotton was too dear to be wasted on a garden. Rabbits, when not infested by parasites, furnished some fresh meat.

Adalia was located between two small towns, Mendoza and Lytton Springs, the population of each not much over two hundred. I can still hear the bell from Mendoza's Baptist church and Sunday morning strains of "Amazing Grace." Lytton Springs' three summer revivals, held by Baptists, Methodists, and Nazarenes, are deeply rooted in memory. Since we attended these meetings sometimes, they diminished my pleasures of summertime, particularly in the brief interim of freedom when crops were laid by.

Contrasted with Adalia's undistinguished landscape, Lytton Springs was an exotic oasis, a foreign geography: deep yellow sand with Bermuda grass and flowering bitterweed, giant oak trees, underground streams of cold water feeding shallow wells. A big tabernacle, which accommodated all three denominations, drew believers and nonbelievers alike to sermons warning against the primrose path leading to "eternal and everlasting damnation." I remember an outstanding Nazarene evangelist, Bess Williams, whose compelling oratory and hell-fire sermons attracted immense crowds. She put many a "hard sinner" under conviction.

Evangelists concentrated on preaching against corruption resulting from short skirts, painted lips, bobbed hair ("Long hair is a woman's glory"), playing cards (the devil's books), booze, red-light districts, motion pictures ("the filth of Hollywood"), and "mixed" bathing. Fear of burning forever in a fire "ten times hotter than any on Earth" brought sinners to the mourner's bench as the choir softly sang "Ye who are weary come home." Mothers scurried through the hay-strewn aisles to beg the young, sitting with bowed heads on back rows, to "turn from their evil ways."

Though near the age of "accountability," I did not swim in the countyseat's new pool—I swam only with my brothers in water holes along a creek—but my patronage of the movies, Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle, posed a thorny question. How I welcomed the cotton fields after those revival meetings ended!

The opening of school in the full swing of harvest meant a three-mile walk, "a sort of crusade," as Thoreau explains in his essay, "Walking." The early-morning winter walk to school took me along fence rows lined with the fernlike greenery of prairie lace and a scattering of frost, across plowed fields to disturb coveys of quail, up the big dirt road to meet noisy schoolmates, their dinner pails flashing in the sun. Returning home, I might ponder the mystery of cobwebs hanging in shimmering light of late afternoon and forget grammar and arithmetic. Such walks, Thoreau claims, prevent "rust," and preserve health and spirit.

Often in winter, onslaughts of icy winds roared across the prairie and shook the floor of our frame house. On these days we frequently cut wood for the fireplace, using the green mesquite in our pasture to supplement cords of live oak hauled from woods twelve miles distant. We built fires and burned thorns from prickly pears, making a food for cows, an earthy communion between man and beast.

Now at night we gathered in an arc close to the hearth. Reading replaced the storytelling of summertime, unless a neighbor dropped in with guitar or fiddle. We turned to a semi-weekly farm news, novels by Horatio Alger and Zane Grey, and New England magazines, after rushing through homework for the next day of school. Split mesquite logs in the fireplace crackled, spewed, and sputtered; the leaping flames led the mind down visionary pathways.

Closing a book, you saw cowboys riding on the plains, a poor boy rescuing the rich man's daughter, even fairies sitting on morning glory blossoms. Wind sweeping down the chimney brought puffs of smoke whose scent transported you to lands far beyond Adalia's horizon. But you suddenly rejoined the family arc when a log burned into and crunched on the hearth, your father reaching for the poker and saying, "It's bedtime."