

With the Grain

Dusting off old ways

COMMENTARY

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When my great-uncle Dick was a young man, he packed up his new wife, and left the family farm to settle on the Mississippi River meander in western Tennessee.

The soil was rich. Dick and Geneva were not. They had each other, and the belief they could carve out happiness together.

Dick, barrel chested with square jaw and bull neck, went to bed every night at nine, regardless who might still be in the parlor visiting. He had a farm to run. He especially enjoyed saying goodnight to the niggling preacher.

Geneva rose every morning at four, stoked the fire, and baked a pan of twenty-four biscuits. At harvest, she cooked three meals a day for twenty-eight farmhands in a kitchen only slightly larger than the ice box, which stood in the corner.

Dick and Geneva had a milk and egg route, and sold timber from their woods to earn the extra cash needed for their growing family.

The farm sat on gentle, undulant countryside. My Mother spent nearly every childhood summer there. She recalled the sky darkening as Uncle Dick worked his team through the Dickson soil.

She vividly remembered the smell of the furrowed land, the farm animals, and joining her cousins at night in the summer meadow, counting stars from horizon to horizon.

Mother rode horses ... and pigs! She delighted in watching chicks hatch. There were chores to do, but once complete, there was plenty of time for fishing or swimming in the “crick”.

She loved everything about the farm. Almost everything.

Farming has a harsh side, she learned, when a favorite white-faced calf fell victim to congested lungs — or that time when she witnessed a hungry timber rattler slip behind a procession of ducklings, and gulp them down one-by-one — as if inhaling a long strand of spaghetti.

Life and death. That was existence in the early twentieth century.

I don't recall Dick and Geneva mentioning the Influenza Pandemic of 1918, even though it claimed 7,000 lives in Tennessee. Perhaps it never touched our family. More than likely, it was just accepted as another of life's uncertainties. These were also the times of Yellow Fever, Cholera, and Tuberculosis, after all.

I'm sure they faced the risk the way they faced everything, with faith and fearlessness, and love of family.

Today, the coronavirus prods us to return to old ways. My neighbor is planting a garden for the first time, for instance. My niece is teaching herself to sew. Our kids are learning at home. Parents and children are eating meals with each other.

It's ironic. By distancing ourselves, the coronavirus is actually bringing families together.

Field work erupted here, this week, shrouding the sun in rusty haze. It reminded me of Dick and Geneva and the farm. I thought about their trials; their triumphs. Their fears.

We have our fears. But through it all, family is the light that we share.

We are told that there is nothing new under the sun. Farmers remind us that sometimes we must wait for the dust to settle to see the brightness that's been there all along.

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