Inside the Classroom (And Out)

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Published by University of North Texas Press

Untiedt, Kenneth L.
Inside the Classroom (And Out): How We Learn through Folklore.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7372.

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Small-Town Texas Wisdom

by J. G. "Paw-Paw" Pinkerton
When I was old enough to drive legally, Mister Barney Ragland asked me to come and work in his store with him and his wife, Mis’ Mattie. They owned a Mom & Pop grocery at the east end of Main Street in my hometown of Junction, Texas. It was a small, rectangular, stucco, cinder block service station and grocery store painted white, with Raglands Grocery in black letters across the front. My folks bought most of their groceries and gasoline from Mis’ Mattie and Mister Barney. The year was 1942, and I worked there after school and on weekends, except for Sunday mornings when I attended church with my parents.

The Raglands taught me all the things I had to learn to serve the customers who drove into the service station or came in the grocery store. In those days you waited on everyone. I already knew how to service a car, but I had to learn how to slice, weigh, and price meat and to wrap it in white butcher paper. All fresh foods were wrapped in paper and tied with string. People didn’t go around the store with a basket gathering up the things they wanted to buy. They’d stand in front of the counter that divided the store and tell you they wanted a can of peas and you’d go over to the shelf and get a can of peas, and so it went. I liked waiting on people and I really liked working for Mis’ Mattie and Mister Barney.

Mister Barney was a medium sized man. He always wore khaki pants and a dark shirt with an old blue, narrow-brim felt hat pulled down low on his forehead. While he was courteous enough, he never made small talk. He left that to Mis’ Mattie and me. I noticed early on he’d rather either Mis’ Mattie or me waited on the customers. Though, if a lady came in and he had to wait on her, he was always careful to first remove his hat. I soon learned that if
Mister Barney didn’t take off his hat, he was making a comment about the woman standing in front of the counter.

Mis’ Mattie was slightly shorter than Mister Barney and a little rounder. She’d formerly been a school teacher and wore her hair in a bun at the nape of her neck. Usually, she’d have a yellow pencil poked through the bun and when she couldn’t find her pencil, we’d have to remind her where it was. Most often, Mis’ Mattie wore some plain cotton print dress covered in front with a bib apron in a dark color. Over that, if it was cool weather, she’d have on a dun colored sweater. She hustled about energetically and eagerly smiled as she waited on customers. She enjoyed chatting away at some news of the day. If she was working alone in the back storage room, I’d hear her softly whistling to herself. Both of the Raglands were fine people with good hearts and no pretense.

Mister Barney had tried to be a rancher, but it hadn’t worked out. He’d lost his ranch in the Depression and they’d gone to Old Mexico and worked for several years in The American Grocery, owned by Mis’ Mattie’s brother in Mexico City. Consequently, both of them were fluent in Spanish and about half of our customers were of Mexican descent. But Barney was not one to be living out of the country. He had served in World War I and he was a true American citizen and soldier. They came back to Junction, borrowed money from a local bank, and started their little store in the mid-1930s. Like I said, when I was old enough to have a driver’s license, I went to work for them.

Mister Barney had a problem. He drank. When I was working for him I would say he drank a fifth of whiskey each day. The amusing thing was he didn’t think anyone knew, and it was the worst kept secret in town. You could always tell when Mister Barney was about to take a nip. He would go and find the bottle from some place he’d hidden it, tuck it under his coat and go around the corner of the building to the men’s restroom. There he’d have a nip. Most often, as I remember it, he drank bourbon. Then he would rinse his mouth out with Listerine Mouthwash. I figured some days he drank just about as much Listerine Mouthwash as he did bourbon.
On the rare days when he’d have a little too much, Mis’ Mattie would say, “Barney, are you coming down with a headache?” That was her signal that he’d overindulged. I would drive him home and come back and Mis’ Mattie and I would run the store until time to close. Then, Mis’ Mattie would drive home in their black 1939 Chevrolet two-door coupe, and I would ride my bicycle across the South Llano River bridge to the house where I lived with my parents.

On occasion, when I was driving Mister Barney home and he’d really had too much to drink, he’d want to spend a little time thanking me for working for him and Mis’ Mattie. Then, he’d say he was going to raise my pay by five dollars a week. At first, I doubted he’d remember what he’d said, but he always did. Mister Barney was a man of his word, with or without too much bourbon.

Mis’ Mattie was a kind, generous woman. All over Junction there were people who needed help, and Mis’ Mattie helped them. She would send me out with basket after basket of groceries to deliver to poor people who couldn’t possibly pay. Sometimes, if a person was sick and Mis’ Mattie knew about it, she’d have me stop at the City Drug Store and pick up some patent medicine to help them recover.

When I’d make a delivery, many of the people would say, “Now, son, you tell Mis’ Mattie that we’ll pay her just as soon as we can.” After a while I came to know that they weren’t ever going to be able to pay Mis’ Mattie, but that didn’t stop her from giving them food.

Every few days, she would send me by to see about one old woman and her retarded grown daughter. They lived in two rooms of an old house that was half-burned-out. In my mind’s eye, I can still see those old scorched rafters black against the blue Texas sky. Mis’ Mattie would tell me I was to go right on in the house and see if those people had any food. She said if I knocked at the door and asked, the mother would always say, “Now, son, we’re just fine. We don’t need anything. Tell Mis’ Mattie thank you, anyway.” But Mis’ Mattie said, “You’re not ever to let her stop you at the door.
You’re just to go right on in the house and look around and see if they have anything to eat.” One day I went to that half-burned-out old house and there was not one thing to eat anywhere in the house except a shriveled up head of cabbage on the bottom shelf of a refrigerator that wasn’t working.

People were poor but, even in their poverty, they had a lot of pride and did the best they could. After I’d been working for the Raglands about a year, I turned seventeen and was old enough to join the armed services. World War II was on and I kept begging my father until he finally agreed to sign my enlistment papers so I could join the Navy. Mister Barney was proud of me for going away to help fight in the war.

I was gone about two years before the war was over. When I came back, nothing would suit Mister Barney except for me to come back and work for him and Mis’ Mattie. He already had two people working there but he just insisted I come back, so I went to work for them again. Only, now things were different. Mister Barney had me doing the ordering and pricing of the merchandise. I was soon in charge of all stocking of the store. I began to see that if Mister Barney kept on, I was going to be running everything.

One October day, Mis’ Mattie said to me, “Son, I want you to stay back tonight and help me with the books.” Helping Mis’ Mattie with the books was something I did about once a month. We’d add up what people had charged on credit and send out statements so people would come in and pay what they owed. A lot of people ran up sizeable accounts with the Raglands, and I didn’t think
some of them would ever be able to pay what they owed. Mister Barney was just too softhearted to press for payment.

That night, I drove Mister Barney home and when I came back, Mis’ Mattie and I closed the store. We turned out the lights in the front of the store and went back into the little office. I got out the charge books and the manual adding machine, ready to add up the accounts and write out statements. For a few moments, Mis’ Mattie busied herself doing something in the stockroom. Then, when Mis’ Mattie entered the office, she said to me, “Put the books away. That’s not really why I asked you to stay back. There’s something I want to say.”

I put the books away and sat down facing her, wondering what might be about to happen. Business had slacked off lately. My heart began pumping hard. I tried not to show how concerned I suddenly felt that maybe I was going to be let go.

Mis’ Mattie started by saying, “Son, there are some people who can live in a little town like Junction all their lives and find it quite satisfying, but I don’t think you’re one of them. If you stay here, Barney is going to go on giving you more and more work and pretty soon, you’re going to be running the whole store. You’ll like that because you like learning new things and you like being in charge. That’d be good for Barney and me, but it won’t be good for you. I want you to go down to The University of Texas in Austin and get yourself an education.

“If you stay here, after a while you’ll find you’re not satisfied. Like most young men, you’ll find a young woman and fall in love and get married. Then, the two of you will start having children. About the time you’re in your middle thirties you’ll come to realize you have never fulfilled the promise that lies within you. And you’ll become restless with your life and maybe start drinking like Barney does. Or, even worse, start chasing after women.

“So, I want you to go down to The University of Texas. You’ve got the G.I. Bill and that’ll pay for your books and tuition. You study whatever you want to be, only just make sure you can earn a living with it once you have your degree. Later on in life when you
feel like you have fulfilled the promise that lies within you, you may decide to come back to Junction to live the rest of your life. Right now, the thing I think you should do is get an education.”

She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out three hundred dollars in cash. She handed it me and said, “Now, you go down to Austin and enroll for the Spring semester. I want you to buy all the room and board you can with this money. Then, by the time this money is gone, if you’re as smart as I think you are, you will have figured out how to stay there.”

I took the money. I went down to Austin and enrolled in The University of Texas. Coming from a small town like Junction, I was scared, but Mis’ Mattie was right—it was where I belonged. I knew that shortly after I got there. She was also right about something else. By the time the three hundred dollars was gone, I’d found a job working after hours and had figured out how I could stay there.

The years went by. I graduated from The University of Texas. I got a job and married. The three hundred dollars was always a secret between Mis’ Mattie and me. She said it was her money. Mister Barney was never to know anything about it. After I married I would say to Mis’ Mattie, “I can pay back the money now. I have it in the bank.” She would say, “No, son, you keep the money. You keep it. One of these days, I’ll find someone who needs the money more than you do and then I’ll tell you where to send it.” It wasn’t until after our third child was born that I got a letter from Mis’ Mattie. She wrote to say she had a friend down in Nixon, Texas who was sick and in a bad way and could sure use that money if I could afford to send it. Of course, I got the money together and sent it off.

Sometime after that I learned Mister Barney and Mis’ Mattie had lost their store. They couldn’t meet their loan payments, so the bank took over their store and sold it. I didn’t know the couple who bought it, so I never went back.

Mis’ Mattie and Mister Barney lived on a few years, but they are both gone now. When I’m back in Junction on a visit I always
go by the cemetery where Mis’ Mattie and Mister Barney lie buried under a great big mesquite tree and pay my respects. They only have foot markers on their graves. For some reason the family never raised headstones. But then, Mis’ Mattie and Mister Barney never had any children.

Mis’ Mattie and Mister Barney loom large in my life. Their small-town Texas wisdom still serves me well as I try to help others fulfill the promises that lie within them. Someday I’ll be going back to Junction for good. My wife and I have bought burial plots not far from the mesquite tree that shelters their graves.