Both Sides of the Border

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A FAMILY FULL OF SCARS
by George Ewing of Abilene

My mother’s poverty after her father died never wiped out her Old South aristocratic tastes, but when I was two or three, the meager evidence we had of this heritage was her one sterling silver baby spoon and a many-faceted sugar bowl.

“That’s cut glass!” she used to explain, but the only significance of cut that I got from that was the half-inch white scar in the middle of my brother Henry’s thick black left eyebrow. I knew the story by heart. When he was just a little fellow tugging at the skirt of our pretty teenage cousin Ruth, she had accidentally knocked the sugar bowl off the icebox, and it bounced off Henry’s upturned face, splitting the eyebrow to the bone and providing an identifying feature he would wear to the grave.

Henry’s lifestyle seemed to attract injury. After he started to school in Bishop, Texas, at recess one day when he was running full speed with his eyes on the boys chasing him, he glanced ahead and saw his path cluttered with little girls. Unable to stop—and certainly unwilling to hurt the friends of Mardelle McKenzie, whom he loved with all his heart—he turned and dived headfirst into a brick wall. He was sent home with a lump in the center of his forehead the size of half an orange and both eyes swelled shut. Those eyes turned so black he was the envy of all the tough boys of the neighborhood, and the knot never disappeared completely from his forehead.

When Henry was about ten or eleven and we had moved to Edinburg, we became Tarzan fans. The Lower Rio Grande Valley
didn’t produce the type of vines we saw Tarzan swinging on, but we could make do with a twenty-foot tow chain hung on a big mesquite out near the garage. We were aping it up pretty well until Henry decided that if I would swing the chain up toward him, he could dive from the garage roof and grab it. The plan worked pretty well until he discovered he couldn’t hang on without sliding down the chain. His Tarzan yell turned to a howl when the big hook on the end stopped his slide—but ripped a three-inch gash in his belly from crotch to abdomen. We got him unhooked with no trouble, but when he ran into the back door, holding himself together with both hands, he realized that he could not possibly expose himself to the two church-going women friends of my mother who were sewing in the livingroom.

“Mother! Come here,” he called from the diningroom.

“What is it, Henry? Come in here.” She was obviously too busy to get up.

“I can’t! You come in here!”

“Well, why can’t you?” Mother was getting a little annoyed.

“Well, I hurt myself! I can’t come!”

This brought her to her feet and into the diningroom, where one glance at the blood running through his fingers and down his leg triggered one of the screams she was famous for, and that brought the other two, shouting advice, to the side of the blushing boy. It all worked out in his favor, though; he was rushed to the doctor, had “stitches taken” to get his parts back together, and got to lie up in bed glorying in the attention he got from visiting and envious friends. None of us had ever had stitches. In later years, however, we used to keep each other in stitches telling of Henry and the screaming woman.

Some months later, Henry was walking in his Sunday, slick, leather-soled shoes on the top of a church building Pappy’s crew had just finished framing, when his feet slipped, and he bounced through three sets of two-by-ten ceiling joists on the way to the ground thirty feet below. He came crawling out from under the building, flat on his stomach, just as Pappy and one of the elders
came around the corner engaging in a serious discussion of the blueprints. Henry looked up at the astonished men, gave one long groan, and passed out. Since no one had seen him fall, no one knew what was going on. He came to before the hastily called doctor finished examining him, and was diagnosed as having his breath knocked out and a few ribs cracked. Once more he and his taped-up chest were the center of attention for a few days.

When he was sixteen, and a bunch of us were going swimming one night, Henry, who had never swum in this big canal before, beat us all to the bank and dove in, putting a long gash in his head on a pipe a few feet under the water. But I guess that wasn’t any dumber than the time when, a few years later, just before he flunked out at Texas A&M (is that possible?), one night he was cruising the streets with a bunch of other Aggies in an old jalopy. He was on the running board when he decided he would show off by climbing around to the other side of the car by way of the rear bumpers, only to discover, too late, that these had been removed. He stepped into the dark spot where the bumper should have been—and ended up sitting in the street, unable to walk with two sprained ankles.

Henry would have known that the dumb-injury family stories didn’t start with him. When he was a pre-schooler he was visiting kinfolks in Cleburne and was fascinated by the way Uncle Jack Jordan, a groceryman, could deftly tie knots in the twine string around the brown paper bags used for everything in those days—even though Uncle Jack had only a thumb and one finger on his right hand!

“What happened to your fingers, Uncle Jack?” little Henry asked.

“Wore them off playing the Jew’s harp.” This was Uncle Jack’s usual reply, but now and then he would tell the real story. As a boy, he and his brother were playing with an ax at the chopping block. Jack would lay his hand on the block; his brother would swing the ax, stopping it just above the hand; Jack would jerk his hand away, and the brother would complete the swing.
“After we did it a few times,” Uncle Jack said, “I thought, ‘He always stops before he hits me,’ and he thought, ‘He always moves his hand,’ so the next time he didn’t stop, and I didn’t move.” I never heard what they did with the three fingers on the chopping block.

Maybe Henry just inherited a careless-injury tendency. Pappy told us of the time when he was a boy leaning on his .22 rifle, with the muzzle on the top of his shoe, when the gun discharged and blew off his big toe. One of my aunts authenticated this story and added that his mother sewed it back on with her needle and some cotton thread. Then too, my grandpa, visiting us about the time I was born (that would make him about seventy-one) in Robstown, during a flood when the cow pen was under two feet of water, offered to tend to the animal. He didn’t think about how many boards with nails in them might be lying around a building contractor’s house. When he got back to the porch, he had a short plank on each water-and-manure-soaked shoe, held on by sixteen-penny nails completely through each foot. After he managed to get them pulled out and washed his feet, since this was in the days before tetanus, Grandpa avoided “lockjaw” by soaking both feet in coal oil from the barrel on the back porch that held the fuel for our up-to-the-minute stove.

We would not have expected Grandpa to go to a doctor. He had lost his faith in that profession some thirty years earlier when he was having some earaches, went to a physician who poked around in his ears and left him stone deaf for the remaining fifty years of his life. This wasn’t the only discouraging medical experience in my family’s story file. Uncle Robert told me of the time he came from Cleburne to Robstown to build a house for a rancher near there. When he checked into the hotel, he had a sore throat and asked that the local doctor be called to prescribe something for it. Without so much as washing his hands, the doctor began to probe with his fingers and a flat stick in Uncle Robert’s mouth, discussing, as he did so, a call to a Hispanic’s house he had just made.
“Why, that girl’s got smallpox. Got all the symptoms! Textbook case—but they wouldn’t believe me!”

Well, he made a believer out of Uncle Robert; in a few days he, too, was flat on his back with smallpox, and the hotel owner was flabbergasted at the idea of his other customers finding out about it, so he had the patient moved out by night down the back fire escape and taken to a shed out on the ranch where he was to build the house. There, for a couple of weeks or more, he was left to nurse himself back to health, aided only by the doctor, who now convinced he might pass the disease on to someone else, would come by now and then, shout some instructions from the road some fifty yards from the shed, and maybe leave some medicine on the gatepost. My uncle told it as if he was the butt of a good joke.

Another uncle, Alec, gave up on doctors when he was in an army hospital in France during World War I, terribly ill with influenza. One day, the soldier in the cot on his right was carried out dead, and the next day the one on his left took the same trip. Uncle Alec figured he was scheduled for the next day and thought, “If I’m going to die, I just as well do it somewhere more pleasant than this stinking hospital tent!” So he got his 220-pound frame out of bed, found his uniform where the nurses had stashed it, put it on, and walked out, no one daring to try to stop him. He was well in a few days. I heard the story many times back in the Twenties, but when I asked Uncle Alec about it sixty years later, he added what my family would agree was the clincher: “There’s no doubt in my mind; it was my mother’s prayers that did it—and she changed my whole life.”

It may have been not so much a mistrust of doctors as a faith in home remedies that caused my family to get along with a minimum of professional help. (I was sixteen the first time I went to a doctor—and that was only because I fell over a wheelbarrow at school, cutting my shin to the bone on a cotter pin, and the teacher made me go.) Pappy liked to tell when he and my cousin Luke, both young carpenters, went to visit Aunt Janie, who had a houseful of children by that time. They mentioned that they had
both got lice at the cheap boardinghouse where they had been staying.

Tiny Aunt Janie reacted, “Don’t come in the gate! You’re not bringing lice in my house or to my kids! Stay right where you are! We’ll fix those lice! Get your clothes off! I’ll get a tub and water.”

I guess it must have been some distance to the next house, for Pappy told how they had to undress, bathe, and shampoo with homemade lye soap in the front yard, dry off, and sleep on the porch that night tied in cotton sacks dusted with sulfur powder—but they had no trouble with lice.

Home remedies seemed to work better for my kinfolk than they did for some. Once I was telling a boy that tarantulas were not poisonous enough to be afraid of; they wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“Not hurt anyone! Are you crazy? My father, when he was a boy, almost died of a tarantula bite!” This was contrary to my experience with the big old gentle spiders, so I asked more about it.

“Oh, it probably would have killed him, except that his daddy grabbed him as soon as he killed the spider, jerked his pocketknife out, cut the bite on Dad’s thumb open about an inch, spit tobacco juice into the hole and rubbed it in. Dad’s hand swelled way up, and he was awful sick a few days, but the poison and pus drained out. It left a bad scar—but he live over it!”

My family’s medical practice was more successful. When Uncle Alec, playing first base in a sandlot ball game, got his rather long nose in the way of a batted ball, it healed without professional help but had a rather sharp nose angle to the right for several years. But then one day he was playing third base, and a ball hit his nose from the other direction, putting the end about where it was originally, and leaving only a slight S-curve in the upper portion to remind us of his athletic career.

More remarkable was Pappy’s remedy for a leg injury. He needed to get a brand new pine door ready to hang by trimming it down to fit the opening with his razor-sharp drawknife. He put his knee up against the end of the door to give himself more pull on
the knife, when it slipped, and the blade went completely through his kneecap! He quickly grabbed the knee, pulled the cut’s edges together, and thought, “If I go to a doctor, he’ll open this cut and clean it out—and all the fluid under the kneecap will drain out, and I’ll probably have a stiff leg the rest of my life. The knife was freshly sharpened and clean. The new wood was clean. There’s probably no infection in the cut.” So he held it shut with one hand, hopped around on one foot until he found some scantlings to make a splint, tied his leg straight so it couldn’t bend, then cut away the pants around the knee with his pocketknife, rubbed some carbolized Vaseline (a long-time family all-purpose disinfectant) on the wound, wrapped a bandage of clean rags about it, and went on with his work. It not only healed rapidly, it left only a barely visible hairline scar and a completely functional knee that gave no trouble the rest of his life.

Pappy always saw logic in what he was doing. As the oldest of the four boys in Grandpa’s “younger” family, he felt responsible for a younger brother whose arm was broken on the school playground. Reasoning that the lad might faint if he didn’t stay active, Pappy and his other brothers made the injured one run all the two or three miles home where their mother set the arm and put it in a sling. Apparently, the exercise didn’t hurt anything; the arm healed, and gave my family a good story I heard many times.

Even the treatments that did not result in perfect healing were thought to have worked to the advantage of the injured. As a toddler around the turn of the century, Uncle Joe, Grandma’s last child, fell into a bed of coals in the fireplace, horribly burning both hands and feet. This is the only story that hints that Grandma could let her emotions control her. She panicked, grabbed the baby, smeared hog lard over all the burned skin that was just hanging from his fingers and toes, and began to bind them up together with rags.

“No, Mama, don’t do that!” screamed her oldest daughter, Fannie, who was a mother herself by this time, and just happened to be at the house. “The fingers will all grow together! He won’t
be able to use them!” Fannie grabbed Joe away from her mother, took off the wrappings, and carefully greased and bandaged each finger and toe separately.

The wounds healed, but not without terrible scarring. The toes bent under his feet—but years later this would keep him from being sent to the front in World War I and gave him an early discharge, which his mother, who died of the 1918 flu, saw as an answer to one of her last prayers. The scar tissue on his hands also kept his fingers from straightening more than about half way, but the right hand’s curve could hold the hammer or saw that made him a carpenter and cabinet builder who could work on any job and be hired immediately by any contractor who had ever seen his work. The left hand was even more remarkable. Every scarred finger was curved exactly right to fit the neck of a violin (fiddle, he called it) and could make the old waltzes sing so pathetically that I found tears in my eyes the first time I heard Uncle Joe play. He was by far the best country fiddler I ever heard; he could listen to the classical violinist Fritz Kreisler on the radio and by ear come awfully close to duplicating the performance.

Uncle Alec’s burning was far less dramatic, but recounting it got a lot of laughs at family reunions. When he was about eighteen and seated for breakfast, Grandma accidentally dropped a big pot of boiling coffee on the table and the entire contents into Uncle Alec’s lap.

“Take off your pants! Take off your pants!” Grandma was yelling—but his somewhat prudish sixteen-year-old sister (who in later years was a missionary to Japan) was pointing at the door and screaming,

“But go in yonder! Go in yonder!”

Alec was also featured in one of the stories in which injuries were the embarrassing result of trying to show off prowess. He was foreman on a construction job when he saw two carpenters pecking away at nailing blocks up under the overhang of a roof, a difficult job, since the work is overhead and the hammer swings against gravity. Alec knew he could do better.
“Here! Let me show you how—you’ve got to get a good swing!” He grabbed a block with the big nail started in it, held it up in the proper place, gave the hammer a magnificent full-arm swing, drove the nail deep into the wood—and lifted a one-inch flap of skin from the base of his thumb that was holding the block. Stepping back and trying to hide the gushing blood, he explained, “See? That’s the way to drive those nails!” but the other carpenters just grinned and continued in their own inept way.

My stable, wise, older Uncle Robert was nearly as embarrassed when he watched with exasperation three laborers on his job ineffectively trying to take a fence post out of the ground.

“Look! Do it this way!” Uncle Robert grabbed the post and pushed it back and forth in the muddy ground a few times to loosen it. Then he crouched with the post between his thighs, hugged it up against his chest, gave a tremendous heave upward, lifted it from the ground—and broke three ribs!

“See? You have to pull straight up,” he gasped and tried to look normal as he walked on to tend to other things that might need his attention.

When my folks would tell jokes like this about themselves, they seemed to be saying, “Yes, we are able people, but even gifted people make a lot of mistakes, have a lot of pain, and the fact is, the most serious aspects of life can wear a comic dress. Let’s remember the tears—but smile at the incongruities. If you’re strong enough, laughter is better medicine than pain-killers.” And this was before the days when we learned about endorphins!