Introduction

On September 28, 1929, in Collin County, ten miles from Plano, Texas, Eddie Stimpson, Jr., weighing fifteen and a half pounds, was born to Eddie Stimpson (age nineteen) and Millie Stimpson (age fifteen). The young mother, the boy "Junior," and his two sisters all "grew up together," with the daddy sharecropping along a Texas road rich in history and folklore but poor in the luxuries of life.

Preston Road is the oldest north-south road in North Central Texas. On some of the farms along this road, even today, are broken strips of depressed land marking the original route, which ran from the Red River to Austin and San Antonio. This historic route was first used by buffaloes, then by native American Indians. It was a wide path mainly of white rock, old residents have told me. My colleague, the late historian Adelle Rogers Clark, said in 1959:

No one will ever be able to estimate the number of people who have traveled Preston Road. Many wore moccasins; some were clad in boots; some were swift, some slow. Some came from Europe, others from Canada and Mexico. Many were whites, some were red skinned, others were black. . . .

After the Civil War and the freeing of the Negroes, Kansas offered Negroes inducements to settle there. The Preston was the route of many of these former slaves making their way northward in wagons, on horseback, and on foot. ¹
Some African-Americans and their descendants stayed in Texas; others left but soon returned, riding out the rough years of Reconstruction, of the turn-of-the-century years, of the Depression, of the 1950s. Today, Stimpson muses in his unique spelling style:

Would any one or any body be interested in what really happen to black famleys during the 1930s when the depression and dust boles? I thought my grand and grate grand kids might read a history book some day and would like to no what happen and how we made it through the 30s out on a farm ten miles north of Plano along Preston Road in Collin County.

The interesting traffic up and down Preston Road apparently never ceased. On pages 149–51, Stimpson tells a believable story of the time Bonnie and Clyde stayed overnight at his folks’ house. The outlaws were generous and likable white folks, he says, as he paints a word picture with overtones of the old Robin Hood tales.

When discussing his life as a farmer before and after his twenty-year hitch in the U. S. Army, Stimpson (nicknamed “Sarge”) draws on traditional black folklore when he uses a variant of an old tale that says returning to sharecropping has too many “ups” in it. If he had to, Stimpson says he could

Get up
Wash up
Eat up
Run up the horses
Feed up
Catch up the horses

xiv
Harness up the horses
Hook up to the plow or wagon
And then you say, Geddie up
After that you may have to pick up rocks
Pull up the corn
Fill up the wagon
And empty up
Put up the horses
Go up to the house
Wash up
Eat up
And go up to bed.

A widely quoted version recorded in the 1950s by black folklorist J. Mason Brewer of Texas appeared in a national anthology in 1957:

Well, when Ah goes to bed at night, de first thing in de mawnin’ Ah got to wake UP; then Ah got to git UP; then Ah got to dress UP—go to the lot an’ feed UP. Ah can’t let de Mule stan’ dere so Ah haf to say git UP; time Ah done work all de summer an’ gather UP ma crop an’ sell it here Ah come to you to settle UP; you gits yo’ pencil out an’ figger UP an’ say to me, ‘Ah’m sorry but you done eat it UP.’ Naw, suh, Ah don’t think Ah’ll try it.2

“Tough time never last, but tough people all way do” may be the best single explicit theme of Eddie Stimpson’s book. He uses poetry to illustrate his point:
Tough time never last.
Life is sweet. Life is swell.
You can look up. You can look down.
Still, there is nothin to be found.
You can look left. You can look right.
And thing seems out of site.
We no that tomorrow is not promis.
But we don't have to live in sorror.
Don't look back because you won't fine any tracks.
Look ahead. You ain't dead.

Changing from verse to poetic prose is traditional in the black folk speech I have collected in East Texas. At his most original, Stimpson describes the feeling of a young black sharecropper in church on Sunday:

Being young, it was hard to no why I and the other kids would find ourself clapping our hand, patting our feet, and even crying. As I grew older I under stood why. I can remember thing like this: Some one would say, I've sweat all the week in that field for that white man. Now I'm going to enjoy God Day. After sweating all week and blister in hand and feet, this one day I'm free to sing. I can clap my hand because I happy. I can stomp my feet because I glad. I can shout because I feel alive and don't have to worrie bout no body stopping me. This let all the last week burden out. I don't have to think about famley problum. I don't have to worrie bout that bad field of cotton. And I don't have to worrie bout no body telling me what to do.
Stimpson’s story grows better and better as you read along and get used to the style and vocabulary. “No” is used for “know,” “nabor” for “neighbor,” “whin” for “when,” and so on. Interestingly, he uses “show” for “sure” (which is usually written “sho” in black dialect and “shore” in white dialect), but only when “quoting” what he remembers other people saying. He ordinarily spells a word like it sounds to him, although some very difficult words will be spelled correctly. Most interesting are the unusual phrases—like “new ground,” understood as “newly cleared land” by rural folk to the third generation. After a day of washing and “wrinching” [rinsing] clothes, you washed your hands with lye soap, sat in a “cain bottom chair,” ate by a “karseen” lamp, and stayed away from the “volchars” [buzzards] by staying alive. There is sometimes a serious reflection, such as the startling effect pesticides had on the wildlife in his fields and in his garden, the old-time food supply.

In a lecture at East Texas State University, J. Mason Brewer quoted black folklorist Zora Neale Hurston’s recipe for a medicinal tea made of cow chips or sheep droppings. “Why don’t you try cow chip tea?” is still heard today in East Texas among the sick. The folk remedies in this book reflect the people’s efforts to “do something!” Smutt (soot) from the fireplace, as Stimpson records, really did stop the flow of blood.

Some of the folk customs Stimpson records were, as far as I can tell, largely limited to black families, such as the practice of papering the walls of the house with all kinds of scrap paper to keep out the wind. He writes: “We mix flower [flour] and water for pasting paper. News paper, brown paper sack, Sears catalog.” Many of the other black folk customs recorded by Stimpson are similar to those used by poor whites in my own childhood. People swept their bare yards clean with homemade brush brooms (daily in the back yard, if you had chickens) and
picked up rocks to put around flower beds. “Mother all way had flowers and mint next to porch.” In summer, tubs of water and burlap bags (what Stimpson calls “grass sacks”) were kept handy for grass fires in the field. The “straw mattresses” which he refers to seem strange in the land of cotton he lived in, but I have no reason to doubt he slept on them.

“If that don’t take the rag clean off the bush” is a mysterious folk saying recorded by black folklorists. Stimpson may explain the meaning in his account of a large white rag always being carried to work by the field hands for the purpose of waving it from hill to hill as a distress signal to call someone at the house.

Many of Stimpson’s sketches are full of humor, such as his description of the children getting into the “home brew,” but he knows which rituals to take seriously, such as his discussion of how religion helped people keep going or how hog killing time should be cold, but not “blue norther” weather. Stimpson writes “If you ever look to the North and see red over blue, head for cover.” Blue is cold wind, red is West Texas sand. “You ain’t never been whipped until you get a sand whipping,” he says, but Stimpson adds an optimistic note about northers: the blowing sand improved the sticky blacklands around Plano.

Like folk poet J. Mason Brewer, Stimpson uses the dialect speech of his parents and grandparents, although Stimpson’s dialect is less exaggerated. Brewer, at East Texas State University from 1969 to his death in 1975, often delighted his folklore students by making up a folk verse for students when a “norther” struck Commerce. Here is an example:

Hyeah dat win’ uh whistlin”?
See dem tree limbs shake?
Hyeah dem leaves uh rustlin”?
Hyeah de noise dey make?
See dem geese uh flyin'
To'ds de gulf ergin?
See dem dark clouds sailin’?
Lissen at dat win’!
Dat’s uh Norther.

. . . .
Go and git dat kivver
Unnerneaf de bed.
Is you thoo wid supper?
Is de mules all fed?
Bring dat ol’ sack tuh me,
Lemme stop dis crack:
Feels uh pain uh runnin
Up an’ down mah back.
Dat’s uh Norther.³

Stimpson’s recollections include the recreational activities and “sins” of the Depression era around North Central Texas. His discussions of folk games show the fun of farm life and of Juneteenth holidays. Tap dancing, and even a form of “brake dancing” were common on the Preston Road, as were “the shimmy” and “the chicken.” In the shimmy there was a whole lot of shaking going on, and “the chicken” might have been based on chicken fighting, a source of gambling on the Preston Road which frequently led to some violence. There were juke joints, bootleggers (both male and female), and trained dogs chasing rabbits to bet on (with whiskey and women available).

Folk foods aplenty are mentioned early and late. He uses the term “dry salt” to describe pork cured in a barrel with a large amount of salt, including hog jowl for New Year’s black-eyed peas. “Biscus” [biscuits] are more rare than corn bread and hominy. Black birds and field larks can be baked in a pie, but more frequently eaten, he says, was wild rabbit, fried in
gravy, and served with pork-seasoned “dry salt beans.” If a fish was big enough to bite the hook, it was big enough to eat. Wild tea was made from “tea weed” to go with the tiny crisp fish, eaten bones and all.

“Time were tough for many farm and city people,” Stimpson says of the Depression, “but it was peoples like mom and dad that kept a lot of people from getting ‘miss meal cramps.’ So I don’t doubt that some where on that road to glory you might see a sign say”:

Millie and Eddie Diner  
Open around the clock  

Menue for today  

Breakfast  
Bacon or sausage  
Gravy with homemade biscus

Lunch  
Red bean with fat back  
Corn bread

Dinner  
Black bird dumpling  
Or rabbit stew  
Corn bread.

Country folk, black or white, are shown to be superior to city folk, of course. He does quote a folk saying, “If you white, you right. If you black, git back,” but there is generally a very balanced view of white people. The chapter paying homage to Mrs. Frances Wells (who helped Stimpson bring the book to
final form and helped him find a publisher) and other white friends is moving and eloquent. *My Remembers* is a book of unspoiled simplicity. Read it and see. "Everybody invited and nobody slighted."

James W. Byrd
East Texas State University

---
