My Remembers

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Hussling for Survival

As far back as I can remember work was part of my family's every day living. Starting back when, I was told that my Dad had work all his life. When his family moved to Plano from the country, he moved in with his uncle and family. There he worked for room and board. He did as all other kids at an early age—chop wood, help in the fields. He learned how to farm, such things as how to harness and hitch up a team of horses, he learned to plant and set the plows to plow corn and cotton. He learned about counting acres in a field. At twelve years old he went out on his own with Ray Haggard. He raised his first crop as a sharecropper. The money he made on cotton the first year went to his mother Corie Stimpson. I think it was about $180. His mother put a roof on her house. That about all I learn about what Dad did that so special at that age.

Ray said he could call all the way depend on Pete (what he call my dad) to get the job done. By the age of fifteen, he was often used as a straw boss, even to some of the older men. A straw boss was responsible for keeping drinking water, sharpening chopping hoes, moving from one field to another and the welfare of the hands. The word "hands" mean the peoples the straw boss is in charge of to see the job is done right.

A straw boss would be glad to see the big boss ride up on his horse and hear a few word of how good a job they are doing or even how bad, or maybe you need a tool, but could not go get it. We was all way glad when Mr. Ray or Johny Ray rode up and we welcome them.

You may have two or more straw boss on one farm depending on how many job going on. Look at it this way: You have the boss who is the owner, the straw boss, and assistant. Today you have president, vice president, supervisor, foreman, and secretary. One good thing about the old days—you didn’t
have ten people to go through to get to the boss.

Dad help support his family and his self until he got married. This is where my mother took up the slack. She began raising a garden and kept ther cotton field clean. Whin I was old enough, I remember the grass sack they made for me to help pick cotton. Whin my sister were born Mother would take us to the field where Ruth would ride on the cotton sack that Mother dragged. Some time whin the sack got full the baby would roll off, mother would stomp a holler in the cotton sack and lay the baby in till she got about thirty to fifty pound and go weigh it. Whin Bessie Lee were born Mother some time had to drag both the girls on the sack. Ruth were big enough to walk but would get tired.

By the time I got six or seven I were a big help. Chop wood, cook the beans and corn bread, feed the chickin and turkey, feed the hogs corn, and put corn out for the horses and mules. That would help Dad out. All he had to do is unharness the horses and go to the house. Whin all the cotton were pick, my Mother and us kid would go scrapping cotton. Scrapping cotton was picking up cotton that was wasted, pull the few bolls that open late and a little piece of cotton left in a cotton burr. We would all way make enough to buy our school clothes and shoes. We would scrap until it rain or got too cold—usually until Christmas. Mother would save enough out to buy her Christmas baking needs.

During the winter the men would cut wood for home use and sell about once a month. They would load up a wagon, leave early in the morning going to Plano where they sold the wood and split the money. There would be my Uncle Ronney, my cousin Almond Drake, whose nickname was Fat or Tank. I guess I make my first dollar helping saw, chop, and load wood at about eight or nine years old. We also hussle and pick up scrap iron. We kid and mother no that was pretty good money.
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During the summer months Ray Haggard would all way come by the house, drive up to the gate. We kid would run out to meet him. He would give my sister a nickle or dime and ask my mother could I go with him. He call and say, Millie, can June Bug ride with me? Mother would all way say yes. He use me to open and close the gate or that day I would go with him.
he would go to every paster or field he had stock and ride through the herd of cow and count them, the same as sheep. Some farmers had goats running with the sheep. They were good to lead the sheep from one place to another. I would stay all day with Ray. We would go by the store. He would buy my pop, candy, and feed me a sandwich. Whin he bring me back that evening he would drop me off at the gate of the paster I live in, give me some money, and thank me. I all way took mother the money.

My next hard earn money was building fence. I was thirteen or fourteen and made seventy-five cents a day. It was hard work because we had to take a crow bar to chip though the rock deep enough to put a post level with the other. We use bord’arc and cedar post and barb wire.

My third earn money was chopping cotton. They said I was old enough to work as a half a hand. I was paid sixty-two and a half cents a hour. I did not like it. I told them so and I quit. If I could do the same work as the grown up, I wanted my pay.

Lets go back to cotton picking. I was never able to pick cotton. Mother would give me a quarter to pick that day and I could never pick over a hundred pound. The most unbearable thing I remember about picking cotton was early one morning when I was ten or eleven year old. There were no dew. My Uncle Ronney ask my mother could I pick with him that day. He was going to learn me how to pick cotton. She said yes. And oh boy I think she regretted it for days. My uncle and I started out picking snatch row. I was on the right side of him. You straddle one row on the outside, and snatch all you can of the middle row. My uncle were use to picking seven to nine hundred pound a day in good cotton. This was good cotton. By the end of the day I had pick three hundred pound and he had about a thousand pound.

I think I had to crawl home. With Mom help I went to bed
without eating and could not rest or even hardly move. The next morning I could not get up. For two day I had to stay in bed. My mother would rub me down, put hot pad and hot iron and brick on me to draw the soreness out. That was the way I graduate from the cotton patch. I did not put on another cotton sack.

I had learn enough about math so I keep books and weigh cotton for every body who work in the field that day. Whin the truck or wagon got 1800 or 2000 pounds on it, it was a bale of cotton. If any body wanted ther money that day, I would figger ther pound and pay. And Ray Haggard at quitting time would drive up with a sack of money and would ask, June Bug, does anybody want ther money today?

After the cotton were pick I was good with horses and mules. I was made a field hand cutting stalks, plowing, planting, braking ground. I could catch my own team of horses and harness it and hook them up to whatever machinery were going to be use. Whin Ray got his first lug wheel tractor I learn very fast to operate it. By fifteen I was a full farm hand following in Dad foot steps. I had to go through the fifth grade and the seventh grade twice because I had to work to help support the family, working with farm animal and farm work from braking the ground, planting the seed, and harvest the crop. It's not too much I don't no. I may not no it all but most of farming I no—from the horse and mule days to the modern equipment days.

I think my family was very fortunate by my Dad ability to start out early in life as a farmer, and to have a boss man like Ray Haggard. There were never no money, but there were hand me down clothes, and plenty of garden space to grow food. I use to wonder where were the money since we work all the time. But I soon found out all the money we made was paid to cover what had been borrow to keep the car running and thing we
need in winter when there were not much work.

It was years before my Dad learned this, until he and my Mother sat down and talked it over on what to do. For a year we did without to see if it would work. They did not borrow any money and Dad and Mom would lay the crop by and go to other farms and work. We were fortunate enough to have a boss like Ray who did not care that when all the work on his place were finish we could go to work some other place. Most of the other area farmers would not let his colored hand go and work some place else.

And some farmers, no matter how hard or how good a worker you are, all way had a way to keep you from getting ahead in finance or moving away from his farm by keeping you in debt. Now, by not borrowing money and by working extra on neighboring farms, we were able to stay out of debt. We couldn’t save but we were debt free. It was then in 1944 we moved to Allen. Until now I have puzzled over why we didn’t stay, but that another story.

I was working all my life as a farm hand. When I went into the army in 1948, I was a farm hand for Quentin Robinson and Miss Ammie Wilson. I came out of service in 1969, as a sargeant, and work as a farm hand with my dad for a while with Cyril Carpenter and the Wells Brother until 1986. I still had no money. I made as a farm hand just enough to get by or work by week and sometime not even enough. I guess if I had to do farming all over I would love the farming. So if I had to do all the ups again I suppose:

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

And that day in and day out if you a farm hand. Why don’t you try it some time, if you can find a mule or if you smart enough to drive a tractor.