

Personal Memories Of Growing Up In Rural Kentucky During Leaner Times

Life Has Certainly Changed In Kentucky Since The 1930's & '40's

Editor's Note: Jim Allen, H.C. 60, Box 640, Argillite, KY 41121, president of the Eastern Kentucky Railway Historical Society, shares the following essay written by his mother last year.

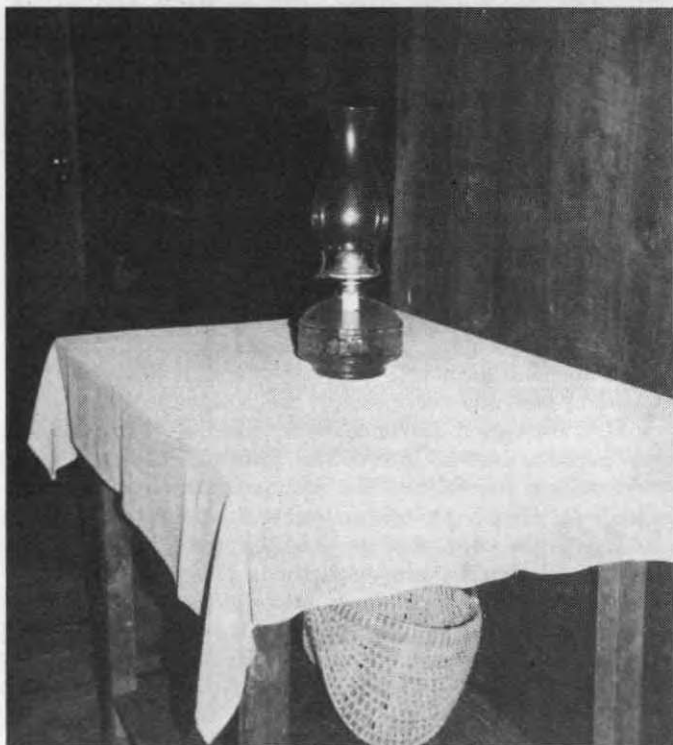
By Letha Harlow Allen -1995

Looking back on my childhood days I can remember so many good things, but there were also many things not so good. I remember my momma and what a helpless woman she was. She depended on Daddy for every decision and never handled any money; there wasn't much anyway. Daddy bought what was needed. My momma's maiden name was Maggie Dean Flake from Lost Creek, Greenup County, Kentucky. My daddy's name was Jeff Morgan Harlow also from Lost Creek. The farm I was raised on was located in Ross Branch just down the creek

from Iron Hill, Carter County, Kentucky.

Momma and we children raised the garden and canned what food was needed for the winter months. Of course, when the tobacco crop was raised and sold, there was some money. Daddy took the wagon pulled by two horses up the hollow and over the hill and down another hollow to the store. In the store in one corner sat a big barrel of salt and another of crackers. Then there was flour, sugar, coffee, brown beans, and, in fact, most any small thing was there. For our corn meal, on Friday nights we had a corn shelling time. The shelled corn had to be ready for the grist mill on Saturday morning. Once ground, it provided us with corn bread for about two weeks. This was the fall and winter of 1934-35.

There was a large family of us children. Daddy had been married before and had brought 4 or 5 children into Momma's young life. She was 18 years old, and Daddy was 48 when they married. Two of Daddy's boys were almost as



Reminders of life in the rural Kentucky of only a few years ago. At left: The kerosene lamp was used for lighting in most country homes until about fifty years ago. At right: Many Kentuckians used poles in their barns to support tobacco, flax, and other plants which had to be dried for household use.

Virgin forests once covered some 24,320,000 of the 25,715,840 acres of land in Kentucky.

old as Momma. Back then the only thing for a girl to do was marry. After a brief courtship Momma and Daddy were married on December 24, 1922. Momma was 20 years old when the first child was born July 19, 1924. This was John Richard. Then I came along November 2, 1926. Then every two or three years there came another for a total of nine. All were delivered at home.

I can remember one older neighbor lady coming by on her way to the store. Sometimes she rode a horse and would be carrying eggs in a basket. She probably made the basket. She would stop and talk to Momma and ask her how much longer it would be, and Momma would say it would be a few more weeks. Then came time at 4 a.m. April 7, 1937. I heard the lady in the bedroom, and I knew it was time for the baby. Momma would start back at her household duties in a few days.

Momma was a stout woman. She was helpless, hard working, and she took care of her family because that was the only thing she knew.

Looking back I can't see how such a large family lived in such a small house. There were four rooms downstairs and two bigger rooms upstairs. We had a good dug well and a path to the outhouse. That path was long on a cold dark night without a light to see by. Young people today don't know what they have missed.

In the winter months, we bathed in a large no. 3 wash tub in the kitchen behind the old wood cooking stove. The stove couldn't set too close to the wall, so the wash tub sat between the stove and the wall. The stove made a pretty good hiding place to bathe. The water for the tub had to be carried in from the well and heated on the wood cooking stove. So most of us would bathe in the same water.

Summer time was more fun because you could go to the creek or small stream to bathe or sometimes just take your soap and wash cloth and bathe in the rain. We lived on Tygart Creek in the same house for my 18 years.

Where we lived was a hard place to get into. There was no road to speak of; it was hardly more than a cow path. Maybe a wagon could go over it, but there was no room for passing. No one had a car. If you saw someone coming, you knew they were coming to your house.

We walked when we went to school or anywhere else. The school was just a mile and a half away from home. There was a swinging bridge across Tygart Creek, and we walked across it because there was no other way across the creek to get to school. The school sat on top of a hill. It was a big white one-room building. The name of the school was Fairview. There was a well for drinking water, and two paths to the outhouses, one for the gals and one for the gents. The school was a fun place. Inside was a big pot-bellied stove in the center of the room. Ages 6 - 16 were there, with grades 1-8 taught by one teacher. I really don't remember my first grade, but after that I can remember. This was in 1932-33. In my seventh or eight grade I swept the school and built the morning fire. I swept after school in the afternoon. I would arrive at school early before the teacher and students and have the room warm before they got there. I did this for 10¢ a day. I don't guess that was too

bad 55 or 60 years ago.

All the time I was growing up Momma never complained much or seemed to want much. If she asked Daddy for something, maybe she would get it and maybe she wouldn't. Daddy would spend his money on drinking, but would go 3 or 4 months without getting drunk. Momma didn't like it, but couldn't do anything about it. With no money and the children to look after, what could she do? She was helpless.



The outdoor toilet - a passing institution which once was very common most everywhere in Kentucky.

I remember when we got our first radio, a battery powered one. This was June 7, 1939, Momma's birthday. Daddy said it was a gift. It was war time in Europe. The neighbor men would come to hear Lowell Thomas on the 6 o'clock news. This happened throughout the late '30's and early '40's. All were concerned about the war.

Then came electricity, used only for lights at this time. This was an improvement over the old oil lamps. Momma still used the old wash board. What a back breaking job it was. During the dry summer days when the well water was low, Momma would take our clothes to Tygart Creek to wash them. She would build a fire to heat water and boil the white clothes to get them clean. After all this she would carry them back to the house and hang them on our clothesline to dry. What a day! I don't know why Momma didn't complain. I know she had to be tired of doing that twice a week. Lord knows I was. Our neighbors



Gone are the one-room school days in Kentucky and the old desks with an ink well.

had to do the same thing for we were all just poor dirt farmers, using the hoe, plow, and horses to make a living. If we didn't work during the summer months and take care of our crops, we didn't eat come winter.

We always had a cow for our milk and butter. We had chickens for meat and eggs. I remember going to the barn to milk one morning when the cow was having a calf. She was a small cow, and we had just gotten her so we didn't know when she was due. We called her Ervin, and I don't remember why now. I stopped milking for a while after the calf was born. We also had hogs for meat and our lard. I would help Momma make sausage and render the lard. I remember the old big black kettle on the wood fire in the wood yard where there would be scraps of wood to use. The wood was cut by hand; it was not easy. An axe was used and a cross cut saw. It had a handle on each end to hold onto. I would help with the sawing. It didn't take long if the wood wasn't dried out and hard. The wood had to be split into small pieces for the cook stove then stacked.

My momma always had a quilt around for hand quilting. All would try their hand at it. It was fun most of the time. We would have popcorn to munch on. We always had plenty of popcorn because we raised our own. I remember Momma sewing on her old treadle Singer sewing machine when I was about 4 years old. This would have been around 1930. She would let us children sew and try to make doll dresses. I remember one dress Momma made for me. It had 3 yards of material and a real full skirt and it was so pretty and it only cost 10 cents a yard. This dress only cost 30 cents. Sometimes a scrap would be left for a doll dress.

I remember my first doll, a porcelain one with eyes that opened and closed; it was the most wonderful doll I

had ever seen. The girl who gave it to me was the daughter of the man we rented the farm from. Her name is Annabelle Glass. I don't know where she is now. This would have been in 1934 or '35. I was 8 or 9 years old at the time.

I received another doll for going to school every day. The teacher usually gave a silver dollar for not missing a day of school for the entire school year. She knew I wanted a doll. Momma helped me make a dress for the doll, and what a joy it was when it was finished. It looked so pretty to me.

We never had any toys, and each one of us would get something we needed, like clothes and shoes or rubber boots. This would be in December after the tobacco was sold. Our toys and play things were made by us. I remember on rainy days we would go to the barn and make play things out of corn stalks. We would cut pieces about 12 inches long and with these we made chairs, beds, horses and other things.

Momma would play with us sometimes in our playhouse. Daddy would play marbles with the boys. I liked to play marbles, too. I got pretty good. I won several games at

school, and I took lots of marbles home with me. I always keep marbles around. Now in 1995 my thoughts are that children should try some of the games we played as children, it would be a learning experience for them.

Children today won't wear hand-me-downs. My momma would make things for us. She would do without so she could do for her children. She did good with what she had. Daddy didn't care one way or the other as long as our backside was covered.

I remember the ghost stories. The older children would tell the stories. The children that slept upstairs were afraid to go to bed. Usually we would find a corner where it was warm and go to sleep. Momma would have a hard time getting us into bed. Since we had no inside plumbing, a chamber with a lid was brought in at night. What a blessing we didn't have to hit the cold night air.

Our house sat close to Tygart Creek. There was another 4-room house and a path within hollering distance of our house. Across Tygart Creek was another big three-room house, and it also had a path. These 2 houses were called the weaning houses because when one of the family got married they would move into one and stay there until one of the other children were old enough to marry and then they would move in. This went on for several years.

So you see, there were several around all the time to help with the farming. Also, when not working, we played cards or poker and told ghost stories.

In 1944, August 5th, I married James Elmer Allen from Oldtown, Greenup County, Kentucky, and moved away from home. The same year my husband of four months got a job with Armco Steel Co., Ashland, Kentucky. How proud we were. He was making 5 dollars a day for 8

hours work. Then the next year on October 6 we had our first son, James, Jr. We lived in town close to Elmer's work. Rent was high and so was everything else. Meat, sugar, and coffee were hard to get. We had to have a coupon or stamps to get things because of the war. I waited for months for an electric iron. I used a flatiron. In the spring we moved back to our Greenup County.

We didn't have a car at this time, but the buses ran several times a day from Greenup to Ashland. Our first car was a 1937 Ford. I didn't drive, but I wanted to. In the morning after working all night my husband would come in and go to bed. Well that was my chance to learn to drive. I would slip the keys out of his pocket and take old Lizzy out for a spin, or course it was in the field where there was no traffic or people.

All these years I haven't forgotten my momma. She was still a helpless lady at this time. Daddy had gotten older, and Momma had more to take care of. Daddy died in 1961, and it was a hard time for all of us. We loved Daddy, although he wasn't a very loving Daddy. I remember him, and I still look at his pictures. Momma didn't have much to live on because Daddy didn't pay into Social Security so when Momma was 60 years old all she drew was \$54 a month. This \$54 a month was all she had to live on for years. Momma died June 19, 1989, and still was only getting \$267 a month. Just think what a hard life Momma had. But she was a very good, kind, loving momma who never complained about anything. She raised nine children of her own and several of Daddy's. I look back and think, could I have done with and without as she did?

Our second son, Gary Anthony, was born January 1, 1951. Both our sons have been good boys with no serious problems. When Gary was born I was 26 years old. I had a hard time keeping up with the work, since we didn't have much to do with. We bought our first home which consisted of four rooms and a path and a well for drawing water. It cost \$2800. What a mansion I had.

I didn't have a washer when Jimmy was small, but got one before Gary came along. I got my first washer in August, 1950. It was an old Kenmore Sears brand, and we got it somewhere for \$10. The washer had to be filled with water by hand. The hot water had to be heated on the stove. I also had an electric stove at this time. There was not room for the washer in the house so it sat behind the house by the back door.

As I remember one Thanksgiving night November 26, 1950, it came the biggest snow storm I had seen in many years. There were drifts several feet high. I couldn't see my washer, the snow was over it when we dug it out. We brought it in the house to thaw out. After a while we started it up, and I did the wash. Then I hung the clothes on the clothesline outside. They froze before I could get them out of my hands. After a few times of my husband hanging them out, he bought an electric dryer. He said the clothesline was for the birds. The snow stayed on for more than a month. We couldn't get the old '37 Ford to the house. What a time this was, I hoped the baby didn't take a notion to come. He didn't.

All in all I haven't had it as hard as my momma did. I have survived many things. I have some very good memories of my childhood days and then there were the bad things. We have not had very many serious things to happen in our married life. Our family has had respect for one another and shown love. That binds a family together. Last year on August 5, 1994, our two sons and their wives, and our 5 grandchildren gave us a 50th anniversary party. What a good memory that was. We have had our 51st one and didn't do anything special. We are looking for at least 8 or 9 more.

So you might say, I am not one of the helpless vanishing women, or could you? I know there are other women out there who have had a tough life, when they didn't have all the modern conveniences. They survived and became much stronger and patient women for it.

The old family life was hard work and not much play. Although after a hard day's work with supper over and with the dishes all done, we would go to the front porch for resting, and telling of stories and playing music. I didn't play any instruments but I did try to sing. My sister and I did some harmonizing and didn't sound too bad. Oh, yes, there was a constant fighting of mosquitos at dusk for about one hour. After dark we went to bed early. We had to get up in the early hours to fire up the old wood stove and bake bread. In the summer time we had to make enough to last all day early because it got so hot later on in the day. In the winter time we made bread three times a day.

Since my life was surrounded by canning, quilting, and all the things that go with poor country living, I never forgot where I was coming from and where I was going. I never forgot these things so they were brought along with me into my married life.

I tried to work outside the home, but wasn't happy, so I went back to homemaking. I was never a very good keeper of the house, but clean with my cooking. I still do today lots of cooking and baking. I am interested in sewing and quilting now more than anything (crafts that is). I try to hand quilt one a year and have no limit on what I do on the machine. I have done five so far on the machine. I have three rolled and have five more to do. I have one to hand quilt. I do these from the last of April to the last of November because we go to Florida during the winter months. We have spent our winters there since 1983 when my husband retired from Armco Steel Co.

Well, all in all, we (my husband and family) have had a good life, no bad sickness or any bad trouble with the grandchildren. So I'm a proud Momma myself of all my accomplishments in my 69 years. I hope I can have many more good years.

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