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Family reunion

GRANDMA CALLED IT DECORATION DAY

By Karen Young

Cemeteries, tombstones, and Memorial Day might seem a somber combination for a holiday celebration, but it has proved to be just the right mix to establish a tradition in my family. For over forty years, the Lassiter clan has gathered in Binger to remember, regroup, and decorate with flowers the graves of loved ones.

When I was a child, the day began early in Hydro. The first order of business was the gathering of fresh flowers. Realistic artificial blooms weren't readily available, and Grandma considered plastic not quite proper. Following her ideas about flower etiquette, we collected the red climbing roses deemed necessary for our parents' graves, honeysuckle for Grandpa, and sweet peas for the babies. Anything else we could find with a bloom supplemented these basics. Often, hurried phone calls to the neighbors brought extra flowers and greenery. Then, all would be wrapped in wet newspapers, stuffed into tin cans, and placed in the trunk of someone's Chevrolet—along with other equipment judged necessary. We loaded juice and vegetable cans to bury for vases, garden trowels and clippers, and a big bucket to carry water in from the cemetery pump.

And, food. During the trip, the aroma of baked beans, fried chicken, and Grandma's lemon dessert would mix with the perfume of roses and honeysuckle. The car filled with a designer fragrance.

Upon arrival at my aunt's house, the noise and hug level raised exponentially with the coming of each new batch of relatives. Bits of news, exclamations about children's growth and adults' girth, plus general discussions and teasing comments, added to the general din. The main question actively discussed was, "When do we need to go to the cemetery?" No one ever seemed to be in charge, and each adult had a definite notion of the proper time.

Finally, the decision would be made, and we were off.

The road to the cemetery provided a journey of adventure and excitement. Each year's trip was unique because of the spring storms and county repair crews. The cars swooped and dipped, bounded and dodged around deep ruts and washouts in the red sand road. Road conditions sometimes necessitated a detour through a neighbor's yard, which added spice to the trip.

Once at the grave sites, activity would go into high gear. The adults dug, pruned, and arranged flowers. And, "Didn't the cemetery look nice this year?"

The kids had their own activities. We dared one another to walk across the graves and then shuddered when some brave soul did. Cheeks pressed against cool polished granite, and fingers traced deeply chiseled words. Most prized were stones with angels or lambs on them. Pictures and poetry were also highly regarded. We called back and forth the testimonies and ages found on the monuments and then expressed sadness for "our little angel taken away" or amazement for the one who "died at 100 years of age."

Everyone became philosophical. "Can they feel us walk on their graves?" (Consensus: no) "Are they watching us?" (Maybe. You better behave and be reverent.) "What kind of stone would you want?" ("Gray, with sparkles—and an angel.")

Later, children would join adults and walk to each cluster of family graves, admiring flowers and telling stories of long ago. There were tales of harvest time on the old farm and where Grandpa met Grandma, accounts of the aunt who loved to have her picture taken in trailing chiffon dresses, stories of babies and the terror of epidemics, and how much a cousin looks like Great-grandpa. These were not stories of sorrow and hardship, but stories of

hope, perseverance, and continuity.

Listening to the stories, touching the names carved in stone, and simply being there with family caused our ancestors to come alive. The chain remained unbroken. We felt certain that we would be shown the same homage that we had shown others. A kind of immortality, along with a new commitment to uphold the past and create a sound future, filled our minds and hearts.

Then, back to the house for dinner. All the favorite dishes would be present, plus whatever new recipe that was making the rounds. Later, the uncles might sing or tell jokes. The aunts visited and played with the babies. Children napped or went on great adventures in the backyard, led by an imaginative cousin.

Today, the ritual continues, but with a few changes. We take flowers for Grandma now and for two of the uncles. The earlier children bring their children—and grandchildren. New stories have been added to the oral history, but the old favorites are still asked for and retold to new spouses and "coming of age" children. Artificial flowers are considered acceptable, but we still try to find roses and baby's breath for Grandma and Grandpa. Even the food looks the same, but now Mama brings the lemon dessert.

Call it Memorial Day or Decoration Day. For me, it's Celebration Day—a celebration of family memories. ●

KAREN YOUNG and her husband, Richard, who works for Phillips Petroleum, were reared in Western Oklahoma and attended the University of Oklahoma. After living in Bartlesville for twenty years, they moved to Houston in 1988 because of a job transfer. This nostalgic article is Ms. Young's first submission to WESTVIEW.