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Western Oklahoma, 1950

Ava Snowden Sailors

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Ava Snowden Sailors, now a free-lance writer living in Pueblo, Colorado, was reared in Western Oklahoma--near Erick.

a discerning papa

Papa's blue eyes had such a bleak, worried look that a pang of fear clutched me as I watched him surveying the cotton that was rapidly shriveling and turning brown in the fields.

For weeks, there had been no rain. Only the relentless sun blazing overhead each day, making freckles ridge my nose and the sand sear my bare feet as I went skimming over it.

We had all worked so hard to clear the shinnery from our land. Our land, bought after the last trip back from California where Papa had worked on the 99 Highway and we seven had lived in a homemade trailer house parked down by the creek near Gorman. There, we had saved every dime to be able to move back to Oklahoma where Papa bought a few acres of land near Erick and we moved into the little two-room shack that came with the land.

We were so proud to have a place of our own and as we worked, cutting down shinnery and digging the deep, tangled roots from the sand (saving the roots to burn for warmth that winter), we scarcely noticed our raw, bleeding hands and aching backs because we knew we were definitely going to be rich--just as soon as we cleared the land and the cotton was planted, hoed, and harvested.

We talked excitedly about new clothes and shoes and the frequent trips we would make into town to see a Roy Rogers movie and a Three Stooges comedy, with the grand finale being a chocolate Skipper at Bennett's Ice Cream Store. How perfect our life would be!

There was a joy so intense it bordered on frenzy as Papa began early one morning to plant the cotton. The old Farmall tractor moved slowly but steadily day after day making long, straight rows.

Each morning, after the planting was finished, I would go with Papa to check the progress of the cotton, until one memorable morning there they were! Tiny green shoots poking tentatively through the sand, almost as if to ask "Do I dare come out?"

I raced back to the house, taking joyful leaps as I ran, and yelling loudly, "Ya'll come look! The cotton's up!"

"We sure need a good rain now," Papa said seriously, and we all knew it would come any day. Each afternoon, clouds began building and lightning flashed in the distant sky.

The cotton struggled and grew for a while; then with an almost audible sigh of despair, it wilted and dropped beneath the scorching sun.

"Is it too late to save the cotton if it rains tonight?" I asked each evening as I stood with Papa, watching his eyes anxiously searching the southeast sky where another cloud bank was forming.

"I don't know, Sweetie. We'll just have to wait and see."

I prayed, "Please, dear God. Please let it rain tonight. I can't bear that worried look in Papa's eyes."

The money for pinto beans and cornmeal to feed five children was nearly gone, and without cotton, what would we do?

"Please," I begged again in silent agony. "Please let it rain."

Western Oklahoma, 1950

By Ava Snowden Sailors

I tried to stay awake so I could hear the rain when it began, but my eyes were heavy and my body was tired.

Always, I awoke with a start in the morning. Rain! Rain! Had it rained during the night?

But the sun would be blazing in the bright blue sky, and the dry sand burned my feet as I ran to find Papa. I clutched his arm and he patted my shoulder, swallowing hard as I said in a shaky but hopeful voice, "Don't worry, Papa. I just know it'll rain tonight." ❧



Illustration by Lisa Lowry