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Robert W. Shook

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JUST A FEW CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF MATTIE D. STEUSSY

edited by

Robert W. Shook

We lived in the "piney woods" of East Texas. My father had a sawmill.¹ We were a long way from any town. Eight miles was a half day's journey in those days, with deep sand and stumpy roads. There were very few roads that one could travel with a hack or buggy. In the winter we were water bound as all streams were swollen and dangerous. There were foot logs but very few bridges. We did not have schools or churches except in the small towns or thickly settled neighborhoods. We had cottage prayer meetings once in a long while.

My brothers went to school in the old town of Plantersville.² The terms were short but they had a good school. The pupils rode horseback. They took their lunches in tin buckets with tight lids. We had never met "Mr. Germ" then but he was there. The lunches consisted of biscuits, cornbread and homemade syrup. We had fresh meat and fruit of some kind. We had fine orchards and there was plenty of wild fruit. We had berries—blackberries and dewberries—wild plums and grapes as well as the cultivated fruits. The woods were full of game. My father and my brothers were great hunters and fishermen. My mother cooked anything, such as rabbits, o'possums, squirrels, turkeys, deer, wild ducks, geese, quail, and "coons" but she would not eat very many of these things and if mother wouldn't eat it I wouldn't either. We also had a few sheep, goats and Longhorn cattle. We would milk twenty cows and very seldom made more butter than we could use. Once in a while we would sell a pound. Later my father crossed the Longhorns with Durham, which was a wonderful improvement.

We always had dogs, hounds at that. We had a cur or bulldog as watch dogs. As a child I hated the hounds because they were always hungry and we could not get outside with anything to eat or they would take it away from us. Our men never thought of killing for sport but just for food. Sometimes the neighbor men would come over and bring their dogs. They would have a big fox hunt but the fox was most always safe. When I heard all those old hounds on its trail—I could tell when they struck a warm trail—I would cover up my head and hope that the fox would get away, even if they did like chickens and geese. We had a flock of geese for their feathers as everyone was expected to have a big fat feather bed in those days. Believe me, they are still fine. We also had ducks, turkeys, and peacocks. We drew the tails of the male peacock in the summer. Mother³ nearly always received five dollars for each tail. They were made into long handled fans or brushes to fan flies off of the table while eating. These fans were very fancy and beautiful. Screens were unknown at that time. There were some good old black "mammies" who went among the neighbors every six weeks in the summer to pick geese. They could pick about thirty in a day. We also picked the ducks.

I had one sister and brother younger than I. We did not have any place to go but we were happy. We had swings, seesaws, and stick horses. My older brother would give us a dime, when he was at home, if we would not ride astride for he did not like to see little girls astride. As soon as he was gone we would straddle our horses and away we would go. We would pace, trot, and lope. We had a play house and we had dolls. We learned a little about sewing by making doll clothes.

There was a little cloud coming into our happy young lives. There was not any school near enough for us to go alone, so that was my first heartache when I had to leave mother and stay with a neighbor and go to school. But the term was short, only three months. Later I went to my brother's house in the old town of Montgomery⁴ for two

terms of school. That was the only real school I ever went to and I did very well. I would have done better but all I thought of was Friday when one of my brothers would come for me to spend the weekend at home. I remember one day brother Frank came for me and told me that I had better not try to go home this week as the creek was rising when he crossed it. He was afraid that he would have to swim it on the way back home. I begged him to take me anyway as I would not mind if he were with me. Old "Reb", his horse, was a big old fellow. I rode behind Frank; so when we came to the creek it was out of its banks but we went across safely. Old "Reb" went under all but his head but we hung on some way. Of course, we were like "drowned rats" but that was okay with me for we got home in a little while. When I saw my mother coming to meet me I cried because she was so glad to see me and I was so glad to see her after almost a week and I was so glad I had come.

I don't think children now get homesick like we did, for mother was all we had. We did not have many playmates or a lot of places to go and we were taught to love home. We did not have Sunday School in the country, but my mother was a wonderful mother. She would read to us out of the family Bible and tell us of the Master. She taught us to trust him and we would be saved, and "To do unto others as we would have them do unto us." Surely He was with us for we would roam through the woods looking for turkey nests and picking berries when every step we took was one of danger. I never remember being afraid of the many snakes or wild animals that were plentiful at that time. We were taught to look out for stray Negroes that would stroll through the woods. They were the "Big bad wolf" in our happy lives. There was one especially scary clump of bushes and trees we sometimes had to come through. I would take my little sister's hand and say "Jessie, let's say a prayer and then run like the dickens." We always came through unharmed.

When the Sabbath day came around we had no place to go, but we always bathed, put on our Sunday clothes, and dressed the beds up and had the house looking nice as we usually had company.

In the spring mother would take us walking in the woods and tell us of the trees and the flowers. She seemed to know the name and habit of all of them and some of them we used as medicine. I remember the Red Oak and the Sweetgum bark. We would drink water steeped in the bark whenever we had the flu or bowel trouble.⁵ Then there was the Haw, both red and black, with their lovely sweet scented blooms, and the Dogwood with its beautiful blossoms almost covering the trees. They looked like a snow bank. When the Magnolias would come in bloom we would have long poles to twist off the blossoms from the highest limbs. The Locust was so sweet and beautiful too. I seem to see the old pines with the new growth in the spring. Some of them were so tall they would be fifty feet to the first limb. I wonder if sometimes my child eyes saw things more beautiful than they really were. The long veils of moss on the oaks in the spring, for instance. I have never seen moss that looked like that, with its long streamers floating in the breeze with the new growth in the spring. It was wonderful. And I must not forget the dainty little [Sumac] with its dark, glossy green foliage. It was so pretty with other flowers or weaths. The sassafras with its ash colored foliage from which we made tea in the spring. We were all supposed to drink it once a day to cleanse the blood but I never did drink much of it.

When I was about ten years old, life changed some for us. Mother's sister came to live near us. She had a girl near my age, one grown son and another daughter; so they had parties and we learned to dance. Not like they dance now, we had . . . [the] "Virginia Reel" and a lot more square dances. Everytime we were together we always danced. My cousin played the "fiddle" for us; so we did not care whether we had a party or not, for we were always dancing.

In the old days it cost very little to travel. Anyone would take you in and make you welcome and seemed to enjoy your company. But even then it was hard on the housewife as she would have to prepare extra meals and find a place for them to sleep. When a strange man would ride up, my father would say "Light" and he would "light" and then father would say to my brother, "Put this man's horse up and feed it." Then to mother he would call, "Mother, have you a bite to eat for this stranger?" So often she would have to cook extra. I remember my father went to North Texas about some land matters and was gone about a week. He went horseback, of course. When he returned he said he only spent one dollar while he was gone and that he gave to a widow and her children for keeping him one night.

In the afternoon mother would sit on the porch with her mending basket and darn and mend. We would sit near her and listen while she would tell us of the old times when she was young and how much better times she had then. For one thing, mother had a sewing machine that you turned by hand. I believe she bought it in 1867. She also had a cook stove. We did not have to mold so many candles, either, as we had little brass lamps with round wicks. We also had matches but they were high, about 50c for a small box about the size of a penny box now. We covered the fire with ashes and never let it go out. Sometimes a neighbor would come before daylight to get a shovel of coals to start a fire. We would have lighters made out of colored paper to light pipes or candles. In winter we used rich pine to make torches if we had to look after the chickens. The black pitch would run out of these torches and if it dropped on your hand or arm it was just too bad. But later father bought some beautiful glass lamps with chimneys, and a lantern. We thought them wonderful and fine.

Mother would make her own soap by dripping lye through grease and ashes. Of course we had an old hopper. We bought a soap we called turpentine soap. It was expensive but was fine for white ruffles, shirts, white dresses and fine linens. Our washboards were very crude, too, and Monday mornings you could hear the old battling sticks doing their duty.

Later in mother's life, father bought her a sewing machine that you peddled with your foot and that was some better. The name of it was Howe and it made about as much noise as a Model T Ford car. Later we traded the Howe for the American machine and it was almost as good as the machines are now. It had all of the attachments. There was a hemmer, tucker, gatherer, and a quilter. Mother could not get the hang of it then but I could use them from the first day. Mother was so proud of me. I would tuck, hem and gather ruffles by the yards for the neighbors, and quilt bonnet tops too. Believe me, mother was not the only one that thought I was smart. I believed it myself.

There were very few places we could go in those days in buggies. We had to go horseback. Ladies all had long riding skirts with large buttons down the front. Of course they had to ride side saddle. The first woman I ever heard of or saw riding astride was the great sculptress, Elizabet Ney. She and her husband, Dr. Montgomery, would go to the county seat on business. At that time Old Montgomery was the county seat. She and her husband had a large saw mill not very far from my father's mill.⁶ I remember one morning she and Dr. Montgomery came to our house for the first time. Elizabet Ney had on pants and was riding astride. Our mill at the time was running full blast with a lot of buyers, visitors and a full crew of men. Father thought at the time he would have to stop the mill for fear of accidents as every one wanted to see a woman in riding pants and riding astride. She was a great artist or sculptress but her fame was nothing to the working men at the mill. Her pants and the way she rode were the attraction. If there are any of the oldtimers living they will still speak of her as the woman who wore pants and rode astride. After that she came every now and then. She and Dr. Montgomery would stop at

our home and ask for coffee and sometimes fresh eggs. They ate the eggs raw, just breaking them in a glass and putting salt and pepper on them. My father tried to teach my sister and me not to stare at strangers, so while they were drinking their coffee in the dining room we would go back in the kitchen where she could not see us and gaze all we wanted to. We need not have been afraid of her. We could have gone in where they were and I doubt if she would have even seen or noticed us. I never remember seeing her smile or notice the beautiful shrubs, flowers, trees, or lovely snow white turkeys, lambs, or anything that most strangers would have enjoyed. Her mind seemed to be in the clouds and, strange to say, she had a son about six or eight years old and he was still in dresses the last time I heard of him.

We children did not wear pants, but we had long pantaloons almost to the shoe tops. Our Sunday pantaloons were very fancy with silk and lace. Our dresses seemed to me to have three widths in them and were a bit longer than now. You could not see much of a little girl's legs then. We called our legs limbs and would not have thought of saying leg or limb in company. We were taught to be seen and not heard. We understood a lot too. Mother would always say that little pitchers had big ears. We were just as eager to know about life as the children are now, but the children are wiser now and can tell their grandmothers a few things that will make them sit up and take notice.

Mother did not go out much but we had three nice neighbors. Our families had been friends for years. They would come in and spend the day or afternoon sometimes and how happy we would be to have girls our ages to play with. If they came in the afternoon we would always have coffee, little cakes or biscuits, and butter. Everyone would have some kind of refreshments when old neighbors came for a visit. When I see the beautiful playgrounds of today with their merry-go-rounds, fancy swings, seesaws and swimming pools and many other things, I wonder if the children get the thrill out of them that I did when I found a goose nest full of large snow white eggs. The old mother goose would make her nest by some log and would always cover up the nest when she left it. But the old gander would always show me where the nest was. He would get on top of a log and call every now and then. If I heard him I would have no trouble in finding the nest but had plenty of trouble getting the eggs if he was still there. I never could wait for him to leave; so he would pinch my arms black and blue but I got those eggs just the same. And how I did love those geese. There is nothing any sweeter than a baby goslin so soft, helpless, and silly. Children don't seem to remember things that happen now.

I was not quite four when my younger sister was born, but I remember her little red face as plain as yesterday. When she was three months old my oldest sister was married. She was such a sweet companion for my mother and such a help and comfort, too. It was hard for mother to give her up. The night of the wedding we had a big supper. Mother and some of the old friends cooked for days. Her dress was white Swiss with a long veil with orange blossoms. I seem to see my mother yet, the day after my sister married, when they came for her trunk, bedding, and so many pretty quilts. With tears streaming down her face she bade farewell to the first child to leave the home nest.

My sister and her husband only lived about a mile from us. In less than two years they moved near where the town of Rogers⁷ is now. The only town near them was Belton. After my brother-in-law had his farm in good shape, they had someone to care for things so they could come to see us in the summer. They came in a covered wagon and I never see one to this day that I don't think of those wonderful visit. They must have gone three years or more before they came the first time when they had a little girl with black curly hair. Her name was Florence. We called her "Babe." We thought her the prettiest and smartest girl living. Mother could not love her enough. It seems that my sister did not have any Negroes near them so the first day they came my little sister and I had "Babe" in our playhouse when in came Pete and Anna, our colored friends and

playmates. I will never forget the scream Babe gave when she saw them. But by talking and petting she soon got used to them; but anyway, she told her mother to make them wash their faces! There was one Negro girl on the place who was just my age. If she could have lived now, she would rival the Mills Brothers. She sounded just like a band when she hummed or sang her songs. She made such fine dance music that we made her sing while we danced.

It seems to me now that father may have had nine or ten families on the mill yard and they were sick quite a bit and there was where my dear mother was to be found—with the sick and the dying. She always helped to put away the dead. She was at every birth, too. She also helped at the weddings of some of the young folk. You could not buy a coffin nearer than Houston, so the coffins had to be made. I never hear a hammer at night that I don't think what that sound used to mean. We had a graveyard right near the mill under some big trees. Father had it fenced and I wonder if it could be found now.⁸

In 1870, the year my sister married, my sister Livinia, older than I, passed away. So poor mother had a birth, wedding and death within a few months. Until I was about fourteen my father was making money with his saw mill; then so many better improved mills were being built around us and our timber was about all used up as we only sawed the best timber. He tried to find a new location but it cost so much to move and we would have had to buy a lot of new machinery, so my poor father went broke. Then trouble was as now— [it] never came alone.

In the spring my brother, Charles, was very ill with pneumonia and his life was threatened for three weeks. But he soon recovered. My mother's only sister was stricken with the same complaint. Mother had not had time to rest from nursing my brother before she had to nurse her sister, who passed away in about ten days. She left her three children without a mother or father. But my mother's brother lived with them and he was a good man. We all loved him. The children took their mother to the old Springer graveyard about eighteen miles away. It took a day to go and a day to dig the grave and put her away. Then it took a day to come home. The day they left Uncle Rie came over to eat supper with us but said he did not feel well and in a short time he had a chill. Mother took him home and stayed with him awhile. Father went for a doctor but the doctor couldn't do anything and he also passed away in 24 hours. When my cousins returned home they had to start back with Uncle Rie's remains.

In about ten days it was to be my mother's birthday, the first of March. Brother Frank came in with a large catfish so mother told me to go after her poor sister's children. I can never forget that supper for it was the last supper my mother ever cooked. Right after we were finished with supper she told one of my brothers she was cold. Father became alarmed and sent Brother Frank for Doctor Irons. He worked faithfully with her but she left us. When we returned from putting her away I was dazed. I did not know what to do. My poor little brother and sister were lost too. My father was pitiful. How were we to live without our mother? Father would not stay in mother's room. He told my sister and me that it was ours, so he took little brother Baylor and moved in a room across the hall. My happy childhood was over. I became a woman in three days. I who had never had a care took up my mother's burdens. I tried to make my father and brothers comfortable. With my young sister's help we did our best but that was not so good. I wonder why I was so selfish not to have helped mother more while she was with us. She was only fifty-four when she died.

I don't remember how long we stayed with father and my brothers. Anyway, they had to leave us alone most all day and they were anxious. They did not feel that it was safe for us to be alone, so my sister and I went to father's sister's [house] to live. Then Brother John came for Sister Jessie and my oldest sister took my brother Baylor. We knew this separation was best for us but that did not keep the hurt from our young hearts.

We knew that we would never walk the same path or be together any more. I stayed on with my aunt until I married. I believe that my life in some ways was not as hard as that of my mother, although I never heard her complain. I have had many comforts that she never had. I went places, have seen more, made more mistakes than she ever made, and I have had some troubles that she never had.

NOTES

Mrs. Mattie D. Steussy's "Memoirs" have been preserved by Mrs. L. C. Hooper of Victoria, Texas, who generously contributed from her extensive notes on the Dupree family.

¹Mrs. Steussy's father was Captain Franklin Goldstein Dupree (1826-1914), one-time member of Company "H", 26 Mounted Calvary, C.S.A. Dupree's father, Colonel Lewis Dupree (1801-1855) was a veteran of the Seminole War and established a plantation in 1842 on his arrival in Texas. Lewis Dupree's migration was the result of encouragement from his cousin, Mirabeau B. Lamar. The plantation was located in what is now Grimes and Montgomery Counties and was traversed by the Old San Antonio Road connecting Montgomery and Navasota. Franklin G. Dupree owned sawmills at Hockley, Hempstead, Calvert, and Hearne. His initial efforts included adapting steam engines from the *Harriet Lane* to his mill operations. Mrs. L. C. Hooper to Robert W. Shook, August 11, 1972; H. A. Trexler, "The Harriet Lane and the Blockade of Galveston," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXV (October, 1931); Worth S. Ray, *Austin Colony Pioneers* (Austin, 1970), 92; Eighth Census of the United States (1850), Grimes County Texas, 69; *Ibid.*, (1860), 80; Charles Spurlin, "John Lewis Dupree," *Texas Bar Journal*, 30 (December, 1967). Duprees appear in numerous nineteenth-century Texas newspapers. Surname Index, Newspaper Collection, University of Texas Archives, Austin.

²Plantersville is located in southeast Grimes County. *The Handbook of Texas*, edited by Walter P. Webb (Austin, 1952), II 384-385; Eric L. Blair, *Early History of Grimes County*, (n.p.), 1930.

³Canzadia Tines Springer Dupree (1830-1882) was Franklin G. Dupree's first wife. She descended from Zacariah Landrum (1766-1833), Revolutionary War veteran and one of "Austin's 300" who arrived in Texas in 1831. His wife was Letita Tines (Tynes) (1776-1848).

⁴Montgomery was designated the county seat of Montgomery County in 1837. Both Montgomery and Plantersville were on the Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe Railroad. The county seat was moved to Conroe in 1871. *Handbook*, II, 226. For details on development in the area see W. H. Gandy, "A History of Montgomery County, Texas," (M.A. thesis, University of Houston, 1952).

⁵William R. Hogan discusses early Texian cures in *The Texas Republic* (Norman, 1947). Numerous guides to medicinal herbs were available, judging by old family libraries, to late nineteenth century Texans. Dr. R. V. Pierce's, *The Peoples Common Sense Medical Advisor* (Buffalo, 1875) was a popular volume and contained a full chapter on homemade remedies.

⁶Elizabet Ney and Dr. Montgomery were without peers as early members of the state's artistic and philosophic community. Their lives are recreated in numerous sources: *Handbook*, II, 55-56, 278; Vernon Loggins, "Elisabet Ney at Liendo Plantation," *Southwest Review*, (Autumn, 1946); Vernon Loggins, *Two Romantics and their Ideal Life; Elisabet Ney, Sculptor, Edmund Montgomery, Philosopher* (New York, 1946); Bride Neill Taylor, *Elisabet Ney, Sculptor* (New York, 1916); Morris T. Keeton, *The Philosophy of Edmund Montgomery* (Dallas, 1950); I. K. Stephens, *The Hermit Philosopher of Liendo* (Dallas, 1951); Frank Edd White, "A History of the Territory That Now Constitutes Waller County, Texas, from 1821 to 1884" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1936).

⁷Rogers, Texas, is located near Temple and Belton. The community was established in 1881 and after a boom during World War I began a decline. *Handbook*, II, 144,499.

⁸The Dupree Cemetery has been rescued from the wilderness near Navasota.