

THE “NOT SO GOOD” OLD DAYS

We've often heard people talk about the good old days, but in many ways, they were not so good. When we think about how things were a hundred years ago or more, we should appreciate the life style we have today. Here are a few things I remember from my 75 plus years.

WATER (or the lack of it)

Our house was on top of a hill and our water came from a well when I was a kid. The well was only about 25 feet deep and didn't produce the amount of water our family needed. We made do until it came time to take a bath. We could only fill the tub about two or three inches deep and then the next person would have to wait an hour or two before having enough water for their bath. When I started working and making some money, I hired a well driller to drill a new well about twenty-five feet from the old well. He drilled down to 38 feet and found plenty of water. The problem was the old hand-dug well was just too shallow to provide enough water. At least we had running water. Some folks had to haul their water from a spring, especially in the days before electricity.

AC

We didn't have air conditioning when I was a kid. Our old house had high ceilings which helped some and we had an oscillating electric fan. We even had a window fan when we moved into our new house which helped cool the house at night so we could sleep. Sometimes, when it was very hot and muggy, I would set up a cot on the front porch with a mosquito net over it and sleep there, usually with a dog or two for company. My wife's folks in Missouri didn't have any air conditioning either. The afternoon sun heated up their house like an oven and cooking supper made the kitchen even hotter. My mother-in-law always said "Let's eat supper and get it over with". She was an excellent cook and I thought it strange that she wanted to rush through eating the good food. She was wanting to get the meal over with so we could get out of the hot house and sit under the sugar maple trees where it was cooler. Life before air conditioning was "not so good".

HARD WORK

There's no doubt about it. Folks in the old days had to work much harder than we do today. I grew up on a farm and did my share of hoeing crops, picking peas, hauling hay, mowing the yard with push mower, and other chores, but at least we had a tractor. Our ancestors had to plow their fields with a horse or mule. I missed out on all that. I had certain chores I was expected to do each day after getting home from school. All members of a farm family had to pitch in to get the work done. Work came before play in those days. Besides being a farmer, my Dad also hauled pulpwood and I spent much of my time helping him load the truck. He did all the cutting. He probably didn't trust me with a chain saw

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COTTON

Cotton was the main cash crop grown in our part of Arkansas up until about 1950. I don't remember having to pick cotton, but we did have some cotton scales and cotton sacks left over from those days. I remember dragging a long cotton sack behind me when we picked dry peas. Much of the pine forest land in our area was once planted in cotton and much manual labor was involved in growing cotton in the early days.

TV

I think we got our first TV about 1955. We were living in our old house at that time and we were one of the first around to have a TV. Neighbors used to visit us mainly to watch our TV. Television was a welcome change especially for the younger folks. Some of the old folks complained about the children sitting too close to the television or claimed it would ruin our eyes. Soon, the old folks began to enjoy television as much as the kids. Of course, our first TV was black and white and we could only receive two or three channels depending on which way the outdoor antenna was turned. The early TV's were not nearly as dependable as they are today. Sometimes, the picture would roll and we would have to adjust the vertical hold or a tube would burn out. Mr. Watson Roll at Chidester was our local TV repairman. We really missed the TV when it was in the shop.

Finally, color TV's came out but were expensive at first. I was surprised when my Dad decided to buy our first color TV. He didn't just get a cheap one either. He bought a Curtis-Mathis color television. That company advertised it as being "the most expensive television set in America, but darn well worth it". Of course, these early TV's only had 13 channels and we could only receive two or three of those where we lived.

MILK

As I said, we lived on a farm and cows supplied our milk. I was never too good at milking cows. My job was usually feeding the hogs or chickens. We usually had a gallon jug of milk in the refrigerator and it usually had an inch or so of heavy cream on top. We churned our own butter. Our milk was not pasteurized, but we did strain it through a cloth. At least we had a refrigerator to keep it cold. Our ancestors had to let a container of milk down inside a well to keep it cool.

ELECTRICITY

Electricity did not reach the rural areas where we lived until about 1946. I was too young to remember the days before electricity. I would say that the coming of electricity had the greatest effect on how people lived. It made life so much easier. People could have running water, stay up later at night, watch television, and have all kinds of appliances to make life easier. We know how we miss it today when the power goes off. Imagine having to live like that all the time like our ancestors did.

VEHICLES

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I suppose the automobile changed the way people lived as much as electricity did. We can always watch an old western show on TV to see how people lived in the days before the automobile. Our main vehicle when I was a kid was a pickup truck which could be used for farm work and also used for other purposes. Finally, we decided we needed a car, and of course, we first got a used one. We had a 1946 Buick, a 1950 DeSoto, and a 1952 Studebaker (not at the same time). My Dad's first new truck was a GMC, but most of the time when I was growing up, he had Ford trucks. I think the first one with an automatic transmission was a Chevrolet. My first new vehicle was a 1966 Ford Fairlane 500 which cost \$2800 new. I remember the first time I drove a car with an automatic transmission. Some of the older folks didn't want the automatic transmission vehicles because they wanted to be able to push the vehicle when it wouldn't start.

TELEPHONES

It was probably the mid-1960s when we got our first telephone. We had a four-party line. If someone else was using the phone, we would have to wait until they finished or interrupt them and ask to use the phone. We were really moving up in the world. We had vehicles to travel in, a phone to communicate with our neighbors, and a television to keep us entertained. But we still didn't have air conditioning.

WASHING CLOTHES

I remember the days of having to wash clothes outside using a wash pot to heat the water. We used wash tubs and hung the clothes on a clothes line to dry. Most families had a certain day of the week they called "wash day" because it took about all day to get the job done. Finally, we got a wringer-type washing machine and later an automatic washing machine. We got an electric dryer, but on nice days, we still hung the clothes outside to dry. Just think about how our ancestors had to wash clothes in the days before electricity!

FIREWOOD

We always had a wood-burning heater in our house, so cutting firewood was something we did each year. We sometimes sold firewood to our neighbors. We were blessed to live in an area with plenty of hardwood trees. We also had plenty of rich pine we could use to help get the fire started. Our cook stove used butane gas and we also had butane heaters in addition to our wood heater. My grandmother had to cook on a wood stove.

OUTHOUSES

Some folks referred to them as the privy, the backhouse, the toilet, or the necessary. Some were a little fancier than others and some had two holes instead of one. A few people had one built by the WPA which constructed over 50,000 outhouses in Arkansas in a government effort to improve sanitation and eliminate hookworm in rural America. That parasite was common in rural areas usually entering the soles of the feet when children went barefoot in the summer months.

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We had a two-hole outdoor toilet until 1956 when we moved into the new house. Everyone in the rural areas had one in the days before electricity. It was a place where the old Sear-Roebuck catalog could be recycled and turning over outhouses was a common prank on Halloween night.

Even with all these “not so good” aspects of those days, there were plenty of good times. Folks seemed to be more neighborly back then and life was much simpler. We had no Walmarts when I was a kid. The Sterling five and dime store in Prescott was our special store in those days and we didn’t get there very often. We lived twenty miles from town.

Looking back, I am glad I had those experiences. I wish sometimes I could go back in time about 150 years and see how things were in this area at that time. I wouldn’t want to stay but a few days, though. Those “not so good” experiences in my life make me appreciate the easier way of life we have today and I suppose we will have many more advancements in the future. We have better medicines, faster and more dependable vehicles, more choices for entertainment, and many labor-saving machines to make life easier. Almost every home and most vehicles these days are air conditioned.

I think robots will be used more and more in the future doing much of the manual work, maybe even preparing meals in the kitchen. I suppose kids who are eight or ten years old today will someday be telling their grandchildren about the “not so good” old days of 2019 when people actually had to cook their own meals and when children rode a bus to school and studied out of something called a textbook.



DISASTER SONGS

I was rummaging around in a closet recently and found several old 78 rpm records that I think came from my grandparent’s house. They had an old Victrola with a crank on the

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side that my cousins and I used to play with when we were kids. The records are badly scratched and I doubt they would even play on a record player (if we could find one).

Many of these old records were about disasters or news events at the time they were recorded. One side of this record has a song entitled "The Ship That Never Returned". I don't think this song was based on any particular news event, but it was a very popular song back in the day. Several different singers recorded it. The record I have was by Charles Lewis Stine. You can hear a version of this song on YouTube by just typing in the name of the song.

On the flip side of the record is a song called "The Wreck on the C & O" by the same artist. This is about the wreck of a passenger train called "The Fast Flying Virginian" on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad which wrecked due to a rock slide in 1890. George Washington Alley, a member of a prominent railroading family, was on board and died while trying to stop the train.

Another record about a train wreck was called "The Wreck of Old 97" about a mail train traveling from Washington to Atlanta. The train had a reputation of always being on time, but on that day in 1903, the train was running about an hour behind schedule. The engineer attempted to make up lost time and as a result of excessive speed, the train derailed at a trestle in Virginia killing 11 men and injuring several others. Some survived by jumping from the train just before it plunged off the trestle. Many artists have recorded this song including The Statler Brothers, Johnny Cash, and Roy Acuff.

Another record we often listened to was one called "The Death of Floyd Collins" about a man who died in 1925 while exploring a cave in Kentucky. I wrote about that event in the June, 2003 issue. On the flip side of that record was one called "Little Mary Phagan" based on an actual event in 1913. Mary Phagan was 13 years old and was working in a pencil factory in Georgia. She was found brutally murdered in the basement of the factory and Leo Frank, the factory superintendent, was accused of the crime. Despite lack of evidence and witnesses changing their stories, Leo Frank was found guilty and sentenced to death. The governor later commuted his sentence to life in prison which caused riots and protests. A lynch mob removed Frank from his cell and hanged him in Mary Phagan's home town.

Speaking of ships that never returned, here is an article from *The Camden News* on the 20th anniversary of the sinking of *The Titanic*.

GREAT DISASTER RECALLED

The following new story appeared in the April 15, 1932 issue of *The Camden News*, marking the 20th anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

The greatest maritime disaster of history occurred 20 years ago Thursday when the *Titanic* struck ice and sank with 1516 passengers and crew. Survivors numbered only 711.

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The *Titanic* was the largest ship afloat. It was built at Belfast for the White Star line and launched March 31, 1911.

Its maiden voyage was its last. It left Southampton April 10, 1912, called at Cherbourg the same day and Queenstown the next. In the afternoon it started for New York with 2224 passengers and crew aboard.

At about 11:15 p.m. Sunday, April 14, a lookout rang a bell trice sharply, a signal to the bridge that an object lay dead ahead.

The order was given: "Wheel hard to starboard!" The engines were reversed—too late. The submerged portion of an iceberg skidded along the bottom of the ship like a huge can opener, slitting its bulkhead and bilge.

Captain Smith sent the carpenter to sound the well. He found two feet of water in the mailing room. Radio operators were sending 'C. Q. D.' and then 'S. O. S.'

Women and children were loaded first into the life boats, then men into available places. Some women refused to leave their husbands. They were drowned.

At 2:20 a.m., two and a half hours after the collision, the great ship went down, its captain at his post, the band playing "Nearer My God To Thee", and the steam in the boilers giving a ghostly farewell.

A TREMENDOUS EATER (from the 9-17-1891 issue of *The Nevada County Picayune*)

Johnson City, Tennessee has the champion eater of the country. This is one Clay Morris, a blacksmith, who is said by competent witnesses to have recently eaten at one sitting four loaves of bread, three chickens, three pounds of ham, five good sized yam potatoes, and five cucumbers, with a quart of gravy with the bread, and a pint and a half of beer with which to wash the whole down. The occasion of this meal was a wager between himself and his brother, Joe Morris, who himself ate two and a half loaves, two chickens, three pounds of ham, and four potatoes, but retired from the contest in seeing his relative's appetite apparently undiminished.

The winner declared the meal nothing unusual with him, and indeed seemed to suffer no inconvenience from his gormandizing, but enjoyed unbroken slumber for nearly fifteen hours after. He says his enormous appetite has been of gradual growth and is rather proud of it, though he is wholly unfitted for any work by it, and spends the greater part of his time lying down or sleeping.

At one time, however, Morris was considered a good workman and the strongest man in the county. Strange to say he is not fat in proportion to his height which is something over six feet, and weighs only 160 pounds, but he claims not to have known a spell of indigestion for over ten years, and though he is stupid in the extreme, is very vain.

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MEMORIES FROM GOOSEANKLE AND GUM GROVE

I received several letters from Mrs. Mavis Belisle (now deceased) in which she tells much local history of the Gum Grove-Gooseankle area where she spent the first few years of her life. Here is one letter she wrote in 2000 when we first started corresponding. She was living in a retirement home in Austin, TX at the time.

Dear Jerry,

My sister, Mildred (Griffith) Munn sends me your articles from the Prescott newspaper.

I'm the first grandchild of John Henry Griffith. My father was William "Will" Griffith and my mother was Gillie (Hall) Griffith.

Mother was born on the Hall place (later the Stone place). I was also born there in 1915. This was near Gooseankle and I attended my first school at Gum Grove until I was nine years old and we moved to Caney (Morris) where I went to school until schools were consolidated. I finished high school at Cale. I left there in 1934 and went to Memphis, TN where I received my RN nursing degree.

We had a home near Gooseankle and attended the Methodist church there. Our home was near the Nelsons—Esther, Lois, Ardle, Foy, Earl, Harold, Claudis, and Maxine Irvin (daughter of Henry Irvin) on the other side of our home. Our home was later sold to Jeff Barlow who married Ruth Irvin.

My mother went back to visit the Parkers when I was quite a young girl, but I remember playing with Aline and Roy McKelvy who lived in that direction. Other boys were Herman and Harland, I believe. Are you some of that family?

Do you recall some place near Ebenezer by the name of Zama? Mother had letters and cards that she had postmarked at Zama when she was a girl (born in 1891). I think they were from Linus Parker who she was engaged to who went to Texas to pick cotton and died there with typhoid fever. She kept these letters addressed to Gillis Hall, Zama, Ark.

We were neighbors to the Moores', Nelson's, Irvins, Plylers, Otwells, Henry Walters, Meadors (Lucy Griffith (my father's sister) married Luke Meador. I walked 1 ½ miles to Gum Grove school with these folks. Tallmadge, George Ellis, and Grace Griffith were along the road —also my uncles and aunt.

We had lots of fun but sometimes got to school with wet feet and frozen mittens to thaw out by the pot-bellied stove. We took turns by the stove to warm up. We took our lunch in buckets—sweet potatoes, fried pies, ham or sausage in a biscuit—sometimes apples etc.

I remember my first toothbrush (Colgate). We used a mixture of salt and soda to brush with—a black gum limb mop before that. I also remember my first airplane ride in 1919 about the time World War I ended. I was four years old and very excited. Also, my first automobile when I would have to jump out of the wagon and throw a blindfold over the

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team to keep them from running away with us. Also, my mother making kraut, lye soap, and hominy and all the fruits and vegetable she canned and pickles and relish. I remember the first radios with a set of earphones to listen with. We could only get two or three stations. If company came, the earphones were divided so each party could hold one piece to the ear.

Will close before I wear you completely out, but would like to know if you have any information about Zama.

ZAMA

Zama was the name of a post office which existed from 1887 to 1911. It was located on what is now County Rd. 47 about a quarter mile off Hwy. 299. The post office was in the store of John G. Purifoy and he was the postmaster.

The application for the post office at Zama shows it would serve about 200 residents. The name is somewhat unusual, but the government required new post offices to have a name that would not be confused with others with similar names.

A newspaper item in 1910 stated that John G. Purifoy was selling his home and moving his stock of goods to Chidester. That must have been the final curtain for the post office at Zama. It was only mentioned a few times after that date. A few years before, Zama had its own local news column in the paper and was mentioned as a point for the tax assessor to meet with property owners to assess their taxes.



Here is a faint postmark from the Zama post office in 1908.

RAINFALL RECORD

January – 5.9 inches

February – 5.0 inches

March – 4.0 inches

WORD OF THE MONTH

Gormandize – to eat gluttonously or ravenously (see page 6)