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I REMEMBER BLUFF CITY

By Warren U. Ober

“Bluff City is a town in Nevada County, Arkansas, United States. . . . As of the census of 2000, there were 158 people . . . residing in the town. . . . The racial makeup of the town was 27.22% White, 71.52% Black or African American and 1.27% Native American.” (*Wikipedia*)

I was born May 2, 1925. Though I was not born in Bluff City, I lived in or near “The Bluff”—as it was known to old-timers—from 1927 to 1940. During that time, the population of Bluff City, located midway between Camden in Ouachita County and Prescott in Nevada County, hovered around the 100 mark and was 100% White, except for two Native Americans, mother and son. Many African Americans, however, lived close by, within walking distance, on Arkansas Highway 24 or nearby county roads.

To the great amusement of just about every U.S. Navy yeoman who processed my file as I was reporting for duty at various stations and ships during World War II—“Hey, Joe, get a load of this: Can you believe it? *Smackover!*”—my birthplace was Smackover, in Union County, Arkansas, 41 miles to the southeast of Bluff City. It is said that the name *Smackover* derives from the French *Bayou de Chemin Couvert* (Bayou of the Covered Way). After the United States bought the area from Napoleonic France as a small part of the Louisiana Purchase, U.S. settlers moved in with their own pronunciation of *Chemin Couvert*: “Smackover.” Thus the Bayou de Chemin Couvert finally became Smackover Creek, and the bankside settlement Smackover.

My father, Andrew Clifton Ober, having transferred from the Railway Mail Service, came to Smackover, one of the early oil boom towns in the United States, as a postal clerk, not long before his and my mother’s wedding in early 1924. I have a tattered and cracked photograph taken on the front porch of a rather ramshackle Smackover post office building in which Dad is one of nine members of the staff

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standing in line: two White women, six White men, and one African American man, Eugene Warren, the janitor, standing at the foot of the line at a respectful distance from the nearest White.

Dad, as the new clerk at the post office, found Eugene Warren extremely helpful in showing him the ropes, and one day, after Eugene had done him yet another great service of some sort, Dad told him (only in jest, as he thought!), “Eugene, just for that favor, I’ll name my first-born son after you!” Later, when my father announced my arrival to his co-workers, Eugene asked whether he might drop by to bring his “little namesake” a Bible! When my father described the situation to my mother, Delilah (Upton) Ober, and sought her advice in finding some way out of his dilemma without offending his friend Eugene, I gather Mama laid down the law: a promise received in good faith is a promise kept. Thus, any plans to name me otherwise were shelved, Eugene brought over the Bible, and I am now—and always have been—quite happy to be Warren Upton Ober.

My paternal grandfather, Calvin Clifton Ober, the adventurous scion of a distinguished Beverly, Massachusetts, family, decided to strike out on his own with a sawmill manufacturer in Lowell/Chelmsford, Massachusetts. His job was to accompany unassembled sawmills sold and shipped throughout the U.S., assemble each mill, and teach the new owner how to operate it. According to family lore, Grandpa Ober arrived at Sayre (pronounced *Say-ree*), Arkansas, now defunct, about two miles from Bluff City and adjacent to the village of Reader, a Missouri Pacific railroad stop, along with an unassembled mill, and was immediately asked by the new owner to name his monthly salary back in Massachusetts. When my startled grandfather-to-be gave him an answer—Grandpa Ober was famously quick on his feet, and I never knew the sum he came up with in response—the mill owner, without blinking, offered to double that figure if he remained in Sayre to assemble and run the mill. Grandpa promptly accepted his offer, stayed in Sayre long enough to meet and marry Conia Meador, daughter of one of the three Meador brothers with neighboring farms near Bluff City. The Nevada (pronounced *Nuh-vay-duh*) County stream “Meadows Branch” was named after the Meador family, despite the sloppy spelling of some state cartographer. However, in my day no local knew the stream by that name; everybody called it the “Big Branch.”

When my grandmother Conia died shortly after the birth of my father, Grandpa Ober gladly accepted the offer of Conia’s parents, Andrew Giles Meador

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and Emily Virginia (Burluson) Meador, and left my Dad to be raised on the Meador farmstead—with its ever-flowing spring in its springhouse beside the Meadows Branch—and returned to Bernice, Louisiana, where my father had been born. During visits with my Dad to “Paw and Maw’s Old Place,” I could occasionally find, after a heavy rain, an arrowhead or spearpoint in a nearby corn or cotton field—evidence of an indigenous Caddoan settlement near the branch. The Old Place is now long gone, but my son Henry on a recent visit with me rediscovered Paw and Maw’s little spring, smothered under a heavy blanket of dry leaves.

My maternal grandfather, Percy Charles Upton, was born at Upper Arley on the Severn River, near Kidderminster, England. He had come to Nevada County with his parents, determined to become a farmer. When he purchased property for that purpose, he unwittingly became embroiled in a local feud. Here I quote from the [Prescott, Arkansas] *Nevada County Picayune* for Wednesday, February 26, 1890:

Friday afternoon about 4 o'clock, Mr. Percy Upton, living on the old Joe White farm, eight miles east of here, was shot down in cold blood, by parties unknown. He was cleaning up a new ground piling brush, etc., and his wife, who had brought him his dinner, was with him at the time. By means of brush heaps, party had crept up to within twenty-five yards, and while Mr. Upton's back was turned, fired a full load of buckshot, eight of which entered his back, two going through and lodging against the skin. He fell, and his wife [Martha (Crowell) Upton], who was so excited that she could not think what had happened, rushed to his side, and the assassin escaped without being seen, in the same manner in which he had come. . . .

We learn that a lawsuit about the place has engendered hard feelings, . . . [the Uptons] having received threatening letters, telling them to leave the country. Uptons are well regarded by neighbors generally, and forty or more men turned out Saturday to try and ferret out who did the shooting—all were indignant and shocked at the outrage. . . As we go to press, we learn young Upton is getting along well, but his chances of recovery are slight.

Unfortunately, the *Picayune* omits a significant part of the story: When Grandma Upton, daughter of a Confederate veteran who had spent much of the Civil War fighting in the Louisiana Red River Campaign, realized that Grandpa had

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been shot, she instantly threw herself over him as he lay on the ground and remained there throughout the whole episode. It would seem that the would-be assassin could not bring himself to murder a woman in cold blood. In any case, after remaining stationary on horseback in the heavy smoke from brush fires for several minutes, he finally rode away without harming my grandmother. That Grandpa Upton did at least partially recover is evident in the following passage from the *Nevada County Picayune* of Wednesday, April 9, 1890:

Mr. [Percy] C. Upton; the young man who was so basely shot from behind on Feb. 22, near White's Ferry, is now about well. He was in town Saturday, shaking hands with friends. Eight buckshot hit him in the back and his recovery is miraculous, but it is hard to kill a good solid Democrat like Mr. Upton.

Grandpa Upton lived most of the remainder of his life as the popular proprietor—either alone or in partnership—of a general-merchandise store in Bluff City, widely respected for his patience with on-the-credit customers. However, he was in constant pain from the buckshot wounds and, in pre-World War One days, he found relief in morphine, until he realized that he was addicted to the drug and managed to free himself from it. My mother, his daughter, used to tell how, while in the process of quitting cold turkey, he would dash home from his store across the road, draw water from the well, pour a bucketful over his head and face, and then hurry back to the store. In early 1927—pain from the wound, as he said, finally having become unbearable—he died after an operation, at his urgent request, to finally remove the buckshot. My grandfather always believed he knew the identity of his attacker, who, as Grandpa would say, suffered throughout his own life from rheumatoid arthritis “at least as much as I have done from his eight buckshot.”

Meanwhile, in oil-boom Smackover, my father and mother decided to return to their roots in Nevada County and try their hand at farming some of the Meador family acres. Bluff City's only physician was Dr. Whaley. My very earliest memory involves the birth of my sister, Mesilla, on August 13, 1927. I seem to recall that my Aunt Pearl (Upton) Carter explained to me that Dr. Whaley brought Mesilla to our newly-rented house in Bluff City in his little black bag. (My second earliest memory, in the spring of 1928, involves my efforts to assist my puppy, Tansie, and Mom's skittish new kitten to become friends. When, with the best of intentions, I brought them together, holding their necks rather firmly in the process, the little

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kitty lacerated my upper lip, leaving a conspicuous scar that in adulthood I've tried to disguise with what's now a very grey mustache.)

The old one-room DeWoody Schoolhouse on Arkansas Highway 24, between Bluff City and Caney Creek on the way to Prescott, became available for purchase when the new Bluff City Consolidated School was completed. My father immediately bought the old schoolhouse and had it partitioned, thus converting it into a quite decent residence, into which we moved from the rented house in Bluff City. The carpenter, a good friend of my father's, also built a neat little fenced-in barn in the back among the pines, with space to shelter two friendly mules, Ada, the steel-grey one, and Kit, the sleek brown one, as well as Mom's Old Jersey and a strutting game rooster with his little harem.

I have a vivid recollection of my very first day with Dad in the field. He was, as I remember, trying to raise cotton, and a friend with a truck had hauled his plow to the field beforehand. On that day I carried our two lunch buckets in my hands and a water-filled whiskey bottle in my overalls back pocket as I followed Dad and Ada and/or Kit—since farm tractors had not yet taken over the Nevada County scene—on the dirt road to the field. There I amused myself all day among the squirrels, crows, sparrows, and—once in a while—mocking birds and blue jays in the surrounding woods, while he was trudging up one row and down the other behind the plow.

My father's career as a farmer, however, was abruptly terminated by the juxtaposition of two events: the October 24, 1929, stock market crash that heralded the dozen years of the Great Depression—and the famous Arkansas "drouth" in the spring of 1930. He eventually lost everything but the DeWoody Schoolhouse and finally had to sell even that at a loss. At that point we moved back to a rental house in Bluff City. We eventually lived in a total of ten—yes, ten—different houses in The Bluff, plus one brief sojourn in nearby Reader, during the Great Depression. If Dad could save four bits a month in rent by moving to a newly empty rental house, we had to pick up and move.

Among all these houses, the DeWoody Schoolhouse, with its fascinating environs, was my runaway favorite before our move to Prescott in late 1939 or early 1940. For one thing, the Reader Railroad crossing was just around the curve down the highway from the Schoolhouse. This spur connected the oil and/or asphalt wells of Nevada County's Waterloo to the Reader Missouri Pacific station.

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The Reader Railroad's two engineers were Caddo Moseley and Vernie Walker. As I recall, each had his own particular whistle code for the highway crossing. Kids up and down the highway would listen carefully, as the train crossed Highway 24 making its way to or from Waterloo, to identify the engineer as "Mr. Caddo" or "Mr. Vernie."

My one outstanding memory of our short stay in Reader involves my discovery of a badly rusted bullet mold in our backyard while I was digging up dirt to fill my toy dump-truck. At the suggestion of my Great-Uncle Joe Meador, my Grandmother Ober's brother, I soaked the mold for several days in kerosene and found that I could finally open and close it fairly easily. After proudly crowing over my new treasure to all and sundry in the neighborhood, I carefully stored the mold with my stash in the barn loft. When I visited the loft again a few days later, I discovered that my bullet mold was gone. Since everybody knew from my loose lip where I stored my treasures, I was convinced—I think rightly—that someone who overheard me bragging about my newly operable bullet mold must have snatched it. I thus discovered the wisdom of thinking before blabbing. My chagrin at my loss was increased later, when I learned that, in addition to being not far from the Poison Spring Battlefield, Reader was on the route of Civil War Federal General Frederick Steele's retreat back to Camden after his futile attempt to go from Little Rock to Louisiana to support hapless Federal General Nathaniel Banks in the Red River Campaign. I realized then that my lost bullet mold must have been abandoned by either a Confederate or, more likely, a Federal, soldier during Steele's retreat.

Much later I finally came to understand the context of stories I had heard from the lips of "Uncle Lish" (Elisha Meador, born in 1851), my great-grandfather's younger brother, and his wife, "Aunt Net" (Antoinette, born in 1858). Even as a five-or-six-year-old I was impressed by their accounts of "Yankees" swooping through the countryside collecting all the horses and mules, cattle, and domestic fowls that they could round up and even confiscating household furniture and bedding. Eventually I realized that these were the Federal forces that had been sent down from Little Rock under the command of General Steele to assist in General Banks's stalled Louisiana Red River campaign. Southern forces (including my great-grandfather John Crowell) under the command of General Dick Taylor, son of former President Zachary Taylor, had fought the Northern troops east of Shreveport to a standstill. Steele's troops had got as far as Prairie De Ann—the French, before the Louisiana Purchase, had named the place "Prairie d'âne" (Prairie

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of the Donkey) near what is now Prescott. General Steele, spooked by the Confederates at the Battle of Prairie De Ann, beat a hasty retreat back toward Little Rock, pausing long enough to confiscate household goods and livestock and stopping off at Camden for a while after the Battle of Poison Spring near Bluff City. Uncle Lish's father, Andrew Jackson Meador (my other Confederate ancestor), fought, so I was told, in the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry, where the Federals, now on their way back to Little Rock from Camden, held off the Confederates while crossing the Sabine River on a pontoon bridge, which they promptly burned.

Two episodes are especially prominent in my memories associated with the old DeWoody Schoolhouse. Both may be seen as varieties of what the English poet William Wordsworth liked to call spots of time. Such moments, usually experienced in childhood—sometimes overwhelming, frequently ordinary, and once in a while actually banal—are seen by Wordsworth as shapers of one's adult being. As I look back today upon a long and checkered career, I'm strongly inclined to agree with Wordsworth.

My first spot of time occurred shortly after Dr. Whaley, still with his little black bag, presided at the birth of my brother, Kenneth, on February 9, 1930, at the DeWoody Schoolhouse. While my mother was recuperating, Dad engaged Aunt Callie, an elderly African American lady of our acquaintance, to prepare meals, clean house, and keep track of me and my sister during daylight hours. This was the first of a number of instances when, during family illnesses or other emergencies during those Great Depression years, dear Aunt Callie would come to our rescue.

Late one morning, while Aunt Callie was on duty a day or so after my brother's arrival, three of my best friends from up and down the highway and I were meeting in our gang hideout, a brand new concrete culvert in Highway 24, just up the hill between the DeWoody Schoolhouse and Mr. Lem and Mrs. Nannie Henry's house.

The Henrys were my favourite neighbors. Mr. Lem occasionally took me with him on his searches in the woods for "poke salad," the tender shoots of otherwise poisonous pokeweed, which, he asserted, would beat turnip greens or collards any time! Mrs. Nannie, when we were visiting the Henrys in season, would send me underneath their house—basements, of course, were non-existent in Bluff City—to find and consume at my leisure one of the deliciously ripened pears from the

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stock individually wrapped in newspapers and kept under the house in a corrugated cardboard box.

The four of us in the culvert-hideout were busily planning our day when I heard Aunt Callie calling me from the kitchen door: “Warren Upton, it’s time for dinner!” (Dinner was always at noon in Bluff City. The evening meal was, of course, supper.) I answered at the top of my voice: “Yes Ma’am! I’m on my way!” One of my buddies broke a momentary shocked silence in the culvert. “*Warn!*” he said. “You’re not ever, ever supposed to say ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’ to a nigger!” There was a quick murmur of assent from the other two.

Crestfallen, I made my way back to the house and silently finished my dinner. Then I went into the bedroom and was greeted by my mother. My infant brother was sleeping soundly beside her. I confessed to my Mom my inexcusable breach of etiquette: that I had said “Ma’am” to a nigger. She reached up, grasped my shoulder tightly, and said something like this: “*Warren Upton Ober!* Now you listen here! You’ve got to say ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’ to *any* grown-up—white, black, brown, or whatever—who deserves your respect! And that *always* includes Aunt Callie and her people. Do you hear me?” I said, “Yes’m, I do hear you!” And to this day I have tried to be guided by the principle behind my mother’s stern admonition.

Mama practiced what she preached. I remember one afternoon, probably a year or so later, when we visited our new African American neighbor down Highway 24 toward Prescott, just on the other side of the Reader Railroad crossing, to welcome her to the community. I seem to remember that Mom carried my brother much of the way, while my sister and I traipsed along behind. After our arrival, while my mother—with my siblings in tow—was conversing with our new neighbor on her front porch, I was getting acquainted with our hostess’s son, about my age, whose name I remember as Boyce.

Boyce and I observed that each of us had in the back pocket of our overalls a “bean-flip,” a slingshot consisting of a forked stick (of dogwood, I think), twin strips of rubber carefully cut from an old inner tube, a piece of shoe-tongue leather in which to place a projectile, and plenty of twine. (An older cousin had made mine for me.) The usual ammunition consisted of carefully chosen tiny pebbles or gravel bits, or, less frequently because they were dinner staples not to be wasted, dried peas or beans. When I told Boyce about how I used my bean-flip for target practice with tin cans, I learned that he made use of his for a very different, and far more

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serious, purpose: to shoot sparrows sometimes for the family dinner. He said that I'd be surprised to hear what a belly-filling meal for him and his mama and daddy a mess of six or seven pan-fried sparrows made, and he was certainly right: I was totally surprised!

Even more significant in my life than the spot of time involving Aunt Callie was a second one also linked in my memory to the DeWoody Schoolhouse. A derelict peach orchard, with its few straggly trees, somehow clung to life around the curve in Highway 24 just below our house, and I liked to play *Pioneers and Indians* there. I think it must have been on a 1931 summer day, while I was sneaking up on *Indians* among the trees, that I happened to look down and spy a tiny bird, no doubt having fallen from a nest above, peeping forlornly as it stumbled about in the tall grass below one of the old trees.

I've speculated since that moment in the orchard that it was a mockingbird nestling that I had discovered in the grass, since a mockingbird sometimes nests in a tree fork from three to ten feet off the ground. I cringe with horror to this day when I have to say that I raised my foot, carefully stepped down on the peeping nestling, and neatly ground the little bird into the grass. Why I did this I haven't the faintest idea: there are some, I suspect, who would see it as evidence of the existence of original sin.

As I looked down at the flattened body of the tiny bird, I was suddenly horrified at what I had just done. Crying all the way, I ran back into the house to find my mother. Through my tears I finally managed to explain what had happened. She quietly directed me to conduct her to the scene of my crime. She must have taken my sister and baby brother along with us, though I have no recollection of their presence. When we arrived at the scruffy old tree, we found the flattened little corpse lying in the grass where I had left it.

Then my mother said something like this: "Big [by that time I was "Big Brother"], I wouldn't be at all surprised if that little bird is finally going to be okay. It just may be unconscious. Let's put it up in the tree fork, where it can wait for its mama to find it, and maybe they can get back to their nest together. You won't do anything like this again, will you?" "No ma'am!" I answered. "I won't!" And to this day—in my 95th year—I have tried to avoid taking another creature's life—with certain (some would say equivocal!) exceptions, including not only biting or stinging

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insects (including no-see-ums) and certain rodents (including squirrels!), but also fish.

I must confess that I never completely justified to myself my love of fishing, even though I made sure that every fish I caught was fried and eaten! Nor was I ever comfortable in assisting my father to still-hunt squirrels in the woods around Caney Creek. Dad would stand completely still on one side of a tree that he had reason to believe harbored squirrels, while I would thrash about in the bushes on the opposite side, thereby chasing any panicked squirrels to within range of his shotgun. I rationalized my collusion in Dad's still hunts by reminding myself that every squirrel we brought home, like every fish I caught, was eaten! I can honestly say, however, that, even after my father presented me with my treasured second-hand .410 gauge shotgun on my twelfth birthday, I never shot, or shot at, a living creature.

After my mother carefully placed the crushed nestling in the tree fork, she walked back to the house, and I put my dog Tansie in my wagon and took up my regular station at the curve of Highway 24, absorbed as usual in watching the traffic. In addition to depression hoboes on foot, vehicles of every description habitually plied that road: highway graders, farm wagons, a few buggies, depression "Hoover wagons," Arkansas Motor Coach and Greyhound buses, school buses, Logan Grocer Company trucks, Colonial Bread trucks, and Esso, Gulf, and Shell trucks—even one tiny car that I finally learned was an English Austin!

There still lurked at the back of my mind the nightmarish doubt that the baby bird could ever be revived. After a while, I decided to see for myself whether it could have in fact survived my savagery, as Mom probably anticipated I might do. With ever-patient Tansie in my wagon, I trudged back to the peach tree, where there was absolutely no sign of the nestling either in the fork of the tree or anywhere on the ground beneath! Obviously (I persuaded myself), the nestling had recovered, the mother bird had found it, and the baby bird was now safely back in the nest with its mother! With the passage of time I came to believe—after I had become mature enough to cope with the idea—that my mother, anticipating that I would return to the peach tree for reassurance, had very likely returned to the scene, while I was at my station beside the highway, to dispose of the poor little corpse without my seeing her. By what must have been tacit agreement, neither of us mentioned the episode again.

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My mother did not figure in my third and last spot of time, which occurred one frosty winter morning just before the school day began at the Bluff City Consolidated School. As I recall, I was in Mrs. Blanche Martin's third-grade class at the time. Four or five of us early arrivals at school were outside trying to keep warm by tossing an old tennis ball back and forth on the packed-clay basketball court next to the dirt road to Reader. One of us—not me—spied what seemed to be a rumpled pile of rags in the ditch beside the road. When we all gathered around it, we saw that the rags were articles of winter clothing on a body lying stiff and motionless in the ditch. A closer inspection revealed that it was the very old and very frail African American woman who had for years lived alone in a tiny shack within sight of the school less than a quarter of a mile down the road toward Reader.

It was obvious that the poor old woman was dead. Perhaps she had fallen during the previous night while on an errand somewhere, had been unable to regain her footing, and had frozen to death. I never knew her name, but I had been told by my elders that she used to talk about her life as a slave before and during the Civil War, in which my maternal great-grandfather John Crowell and my paternal great-great grandfather Andrew Jackson Meador had acquitted themselves so honorably, fighting on the side of the Confederacy. As I looked down at the first dead person I'd ever seen, the realization hit me that I was staring at what was a human being very like Aunt Callie, but a human being who had started life and lived it for years as mere property. It was at that point, I think, that I began to see certain aspects of the Civil War in a new light.

After the disastrous 1929 crash and 1930 spring drought, my father had found a temporary job as a school bus driver for the newly built Bluff City Consolidated School. Somehow it was decided that I should begin first grade—there was no kindergarten—at the new school in early January 1931, even though I did not turn six until May. Our house was on Dad's bus route, and I could ride with him going and coming. Such an arrangement would have made perfect sense to my parents as a means of getting me out from under foot while Mom was busy with my two younger siblings.

On my first day at school, in Miss Belle Morgan's first-and-second-grade room, all went well until lunchtime. Then things began to fall apart. After I retrieved my dinner-bucket from the clothes closet and consumed my lunch, I got in line at the outdoor fountain for a drink of water. The "big boys" kept upstreaming ahead of me, but I finally made my way to the head of the line, had

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my drink of water, and strolled nonchalantly back to the classroom, where I was met at the door by an irate Miss Belle. While waiting at the fountain, I had not heard the bell summoning us back to class, was thus several minutes late, and was stunned to hear Miss Belle say in front of the whole giggling class that I would have to “stay in” during afternoon recess. I suspect that I set some kind of record for the new Bluff City Consolidated School: I had to stay in as punishment for my dereliction on my very first day in first grade! I probably set another Bluff City School record when I “failed” first grade, for my parents in the fall wisely decided that I would benefit from a full year of first grade, which, perhaps surprisingly, I welcomed, since Miss Belle and I had come to a full understanding, and I really did like her.

One particularly painful later episode comes to mind as I recall my time in Miss Belle’s second-grade class. My mother habitually sent me to school with a really nice dinner-bucket lunch consisting of a potted-meat sandwich and a fried half-moon pie of biscuit dough and prepared dried apples or dried peaches. As usual at noon, I picked up my lunch bucket from the clothes closet. After I had my sandwich, I bit into my half-moon pie, only to find that, instead of delicious apples or peaches, its contents were, as it seemed to me in my shock, a gooey and too-sweet mess. I concluded that some thief among my classmates must have snatched my pie and left this wretched substitute in its stead. I promptly threw it into the nearby garbage can. I must have broken my mother’s heart when I told her later what I had done. She quietly said only that she had had to wait to go to the store till Dad’s next payday and that she had thought of a “sugar pie” as a substitute. And, to my enduring sorrow, I had thrown her makeshift pie into the garbage can!

Belle Morgan was only the first in a series of excellent teachers that I was blessed with at the Bluff City School. During the Great Depression I doubt that a more dedicated or more capable cadre of elementary-school instructors could have been found anywhere in Arkansas than these Bluff City teachers: Belle Morgan (first and second grades), Blanche Martin (third grade), Vivian Moore (fourth grade), Loreen Lee (who happened to be my Uncle Joe and Aunt Lillian Meador’s daughter: fifth grade), and Helen Robinson (sixth and seventh grades). I owe these superb teachers an incalculable debt.

Even though my nine-year-old self simply adored my fourth-grade teacher, Vivian Moore, I can’t imagine today how even Miss Moore managed to persuade me to step out on the auditorium stage alone during family night and sing a solo,

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holding a guitar that I pretended to strum, but she did! She chose for me the “Spanish ballad” “Juanita,” written by Caroline Norton, a well-known nineteenth-century English woman of letters and social reformer. I confess that I still take pleasure in singing that song to myself when—I hasten to say—nobody else is within hearing range.

Miss Moore had said that I must have a sombrero and a red sash for my performance. My mother had no difficulty in finding material for a red sash, but the sombrero posed something of a problem. Fortunately, my Uncle Pat Carter had been trying to get rid of an enormous red straw hat with a turned-up brim in his general store for a couple of years, and I finally persuaded Mama to purchase it for me—at a bargain price—as my sombrero. Mrs. Olive Harvey of Bluff City kindly made her piano available in her home for Miss Moore’s and my rehearsals of “Juanita.” (The refrain goes like this: “Nita! Juanita! / Ask thy soul if we should part! / Nita! Juanita! / Lean thou on my heart!”) After my performance, everybody assured me that it was a great success and that I might have a brilliant future as a Hollywood crooner. Long afterward I continued to sport the big red straw sombrero with the turned-up brim that I’d coveted so long in Uncle Pat’s store!

I think it was my fifth-grade teacher, Loreen Lee, who introduced me to contemporary short story collections as well as to such authors as Charles Dickens, James Fenimore Cooper, and Rudyard Kipling, thus encouraging me to move on from *Wild West Weekly*, Big Little Books, and Tarzan of the Apes. And it was Helen Robinson who, as I recall, found funds, probably from her own pocket, to set up her own little sixth-grade lending library of delightful kids’ stories, such as *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Toby Tyler*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *Pinocchio*, all of them probably mail-ordered from Sears, Roebuck, or Montgomery Ward.

At times during those desperate depression years Bluff City teachers were paid with warrants cashable only at a deep discount. In fact, the situation became so desperate that the Bluff City Consolidated School was closed temporarily for lack of funds during (as I recall) the latter half of my seventh-grade year. Mrs. Vera Carter, a Bluff City housewife and former teacher, arranged with the local school board to set up a private “subscription school” in a classroom during that hiatus.

Later, after my father became a member of the Bluff City School Board, he and the other board members became embroiled in a classic no-win situation. The facts were never completely clear to me. The new my-way-or-the-highway

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principal of the Bluff City Consolidated School and a cocky 15-year-old high school sophomore—both of whom shall remain nameless here—soon found themselves on a collision course. One day, exasperated by the student’s frequent acts of misbehavior in morning assembly and elsewhere around school, the principal called him into his office and allegedly ordered him to bend over the back of the principal’s desk chair. Then, when the principal allegedly unbuckled his belt to give the culprit a “good whuppin’,” the student allegedly stood up and knocked the principal to the floor. Whereupon the principal allegedly arose, reached into his pocket, opened a switch-blade, and gashed the student’s forearm.

As the story goes, the violence ended at that point. The school board allegedly met immediately, dismissed the principal, expelled the student, and vigorously suggested to the former principal that he, with his family, should leave town immediately for his own safety. It seems that he did so. Meanwhile the student strolled about Bluff City, his forearm conspicuously bandaged, telling his version of the story to groups of his admiring peers. Before long, however, the school board found a new and more even-tempered principal, the student learned to behave himself, and life in school returned to normal.

My formal education was nicely complemented by a couple of other resources: 1) an informal magazine-reading group of Bluff City ladies—among them Mrs. Vedith Black (wife of Dad’s friend Mr. Brighton Black, the postmaster), my Great-Aunt Lillian Meador, and Mrs. Lucy Lee Byrd-McCorkle—a group to which I, as the lone male, felt especially privileged to be admitted; and 2) my weekly paper route, which not only facilitated my participation in the reading group but itself provided fascinating reading. I delivered copies of *Grit: America’s Family Newspaper*, with its fiction supplement, to several customers, including some of the magazine swappers, and often had the opportunity to pick up—and re-circulate, of course—one or more of the current magazines being swapped at one time or another, such as *Redbook*, *Bluebook*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s*, *Pictorial Review*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, or *Ladies’ Home Journal*. I especially remember with gratitude the times when Lucy Lee Byrd would say something like this: “Warren Upton, just wait a minute, and I’ll hand you a few *Life* magazines [my favorite of favorites!] that you can take along with you. Just bring ‘em back when you’re finished with them.”

Incidentally, I think it was Mr. Brighton Black, the postmaster, who told the story of the stagecoach passenger passing through Bluff City many years before—

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it seems that the post office served as the stagecoach station as well—who came in to warm himself briefly on a cold day, walked over to look at the “Wanted” posters on the wall, ripped off the poster for the notorious outlaw Frank James, crumpled it, threw it in the fireplace, and quietly watched it burn. As he re-boarded the stagecoach and proceeded to Camden, the loiterers around the fireplace suddenly realized how much the man resembled the illustration of Frank James on the “Wanted” poster!

My father loved baseball. Before he discovered his true vocation, law enforcement, he served stints as a professional umpire in the Kitty and East Texas minor leagues (as well as brief—but successful—periods as a salesman at a couple of local automobile agencies). Shortly after we moved to the DeWoody Schoolhouse Dad bought a battery radio and strung a wire antenna for it between two tall poles, with a ground wire, in the backyard. His chief motivation for taking such pains was the occasional broadcast of major-league baseball games, particularly the World Series, which he enjoyed with several of his cronies during those years. Reception was often uncertain, and I was occasionally sent outside to pour water around the ground wire, usually at one of the more exciting moments in the game. Through it all I came to love baseball as much as my father did. One classmate of mine, J. T. Turner—who saved up and got his ball, bat, and glove even before I got mine with the proceeds from my *Grit* route—and I used to enjoy playing catch and taking our turns in batting practice whenever our paths crossed. It was a sad day for me much later when my favorite team, the New York Giants, finally forsook the Polo Grounds and fled to the West Coast as the San Francisco Giants.

After driving the school bus briefly, Dad worked for a short while as a flagman on a Highway 24 blacktopping project near Prescott. By the time that job came to an end, he had sold the DeWoody Schoolhouse, and we had moved to another rental house in Bluff City. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt—bless his name!—established the Works Progress Administration (WPA), my father went to work under that program as sub-foreman in a crew improving certain county roads between Bluff City and Prescott. His monthly salary—as I recall rightly or wrongly—was \$44.44. Before long, however, he was appointed chief deputy sheriff and began commuting between Bluff City and Prescott, the county seat. When the Nevada County sheriff resigned in August 1936, Dad was appointed sheriff and served several months. His photograph, among those of all the other sheriffs since the formation of Nevada County, graced a corridor in the Prescott jail just outside

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the sheriff's office. Years later, Dad found his true métier as the affable and respected desk sergeant in the Texarkana, Arkansas, Police Force.

There was one particular trail that I traversed often in Bluff City, between the various houses we rented and Highway 24, barefoot during summers and wearing "plow shoes" (rugged boot-like shoes designed for farmers following the plow) during the school year. I walked that path almost daily during summer afternoons to pick up our mail, delivered faithfully by car from Prescott by Mr. John DeWoody, the "Star Route" mail carrier. During July and August the deep sand in the path was almost unbearably hot on my bare feet. I often tried to cool off my feet by resting them on strategically placed patches of Bermuda grass. Once, while I was browsing the "funny papers" in our mail-subscription copy of the *Arkansas Gazette* during my return hike from the post office, I absent-mindedly mistook a fearsome bull-nettle patch for grass and stepped into it barefoot. I'll never ever forget that experience! Nor will I forget that All Saints' Day morning when, walking along that trail on my way to school, I spied an outhouse toilet resting on the tin roof of the post office! It had evidently been carefully placed there by Hallowe'en pranksters the night before.

Living in Bluff City, I enjoyed the luxury of going home for lunch, and I often stopped by for fifteen minutes or so during the noon hour to visit with my Aunt Pearl Carter and listen with her on the radio to that great country-and-western band, the Light Crust Doughboys, plugging Light Crust Flour on radio station WBAP, Fort Worth. The Doughboys came through loud and clear on Aunt Pearl's radio, and they introduced me to one of the truly great country and western blues songs, "Trouble in Mind." I quote here the opening and closing stanzas, the heart and soul of this masterpiece: "Trouble in mind, I'm blue, / But I won't be blue always, / Cause the sun's gonna shine / In my back door someday. . . . / I'm goin down to the river / I'm gonna take me a rockin chair, / And, if the blues don't leave me, / Rock myself away from here." Over the years I have come to view "Trouble in Mind," with its defiant mingling of hope and despair and its haunting imagery, as a sort of Great Depression anthem.

After we moved back to The Bluff, the large enclosed area at its center that I always thought of as "The Pasture" became my haunt, initially for target practice with my shotgun or bean-flip in one of its ravines. This enclosure extended to the disused Baptist church building and grounds, across from the Bluff City Consolidated School, on Highway 24 leading to Chidester and Camden past the

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Bluff City Cemetery. (The Baptist church had long since lost its congregation to the Church of Christ on the other side of town.) The Pasture abutted the house and lot of an African American family just outside Bluff City. That corner of The Pasture in those days was notable for a tiny spring, probably long since dried up, that annually fed a rivulet when helped along by the rainy season. During the height of the dry season, however, the water seemed to disappear into the parched earth. I never did figure out how a few minnows and miniature crawfish could make an immediate reappearance in the replenished stream after the channel had been bone-dry for weeks!

Even more fascinating was my discovery that the lone African American family, whom I couldn't see and whose names I never knew, on the other side of the wire fence played records—on what must have been a wind-up phonograph—that introduced me to some wonderful blues tunes. I later figured out that some of them would have been recorded by such Arkansas greats as Big Bill Broonzy and Peetie Wheatstraw. I remember especially “I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town.” I've also been haunted by a refrain that I heard the anonymous lady of the house singing a time or two. Since I've never heard the words or melody before or since, it's conceivable that she herself was the composer. With my apologies for resorting to crude phonetic spelling to indicate rhyme and near-rhyme, it went something like this: “Baby, baby, I-wohnchew / To get up in the mornin / And find yourself a jahb. / Baby, baby, wy-dohnchew / Quit tellin me / That the times is hahd.” I'll never forget that quintessential blues passage.

Late in 1939 my father went to work for the Brewer Hardware Company, local agent in Prescott for International Harvester, as a salesman of International light trucks. It soon became clear that the demands of his new job would make it advisable for us to move from Bluff City to Prescott right away, in the middle of the school year. I was most unhappy with the decision because I didn't want to leave Bluff City, where I was personally acquainted with—and liked—most of its approximately 100 people and where I was greatly enjoying my first year of high school. Completely comfortable where I was, I feared I would be lost in what seemed to me the big-city anonymity of Prescott, with its 3,000 (!) population. Moreover, whereas my siblings' junior high school would be near the town center, Prescott High School on the city's outskirts would be an interminable walk from practically anywhere in town.

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My father—bless him!—didn't just tell me to suck it up; he told me that he would order a full-size Sears bike for me if I would promise faithfully that I would learn to ride it immediately on its arrival. I had never mounted a bicycle, and I had yearned for one for years, even though it would have been virtually useless in the sand, clay, mud, and deep ruts that characterized all the roads around Bluff City except Highway 24. I solemnly promised that I would learn to ride it right away, and Dad was as good as his word. He immediately ordered a \$21.95 bicycle from Sears, Roebuck as my 1939 Christmas present. The bike arrived unassembled at the Bluff City post office via Mr. John DeWoody's Star Route, and somehow, with frequent rests on the way, I managed to push, pull, or carry the entire box of heavy bicycle parts from the post office to our house.

When Dad returned from work in the evening, we assembled the bike and before dark took it to the hill past the old Methodist church, by then used only for Masonic Lodge meetings. I hoped to ride the bicycle to the bottom of the hill at least as far as the cotton gin on the right in the hollow. While my father was steadying the bike, I climbed aboard. Then—miracle of miracles!—I pedalled, perfectly balanced, downhill past the tiny abandoned pre-Prohibition pub on the left, with its beautifully lettered invitation on the still intact pane of glass in its front door: "A camel can go seven days without a drink. Who wants to be a camel? Come in!" On the right I breezed past Mr. Byrd's old store building and then the cotton gin, industrial center of The Bluff, at the bottom of the hill. I even found it child's play to pump all the way up the next hill! However, I had not yet learned how to "pull a U-ie" on a bicycle, and, somewhat crestfallen, I had to dismount and walk the bike all the way back to where my father was waiting, all smiles, at the top of the first hill.

Revelling in my new bike, I now had no problem with our moving to the big city. Moreover, occasional rides in the bed of the International pickup demonstrator that my father had charge of as a salesman turned out to be even more fun than riding in the rumble seat of the old Dodge, the first family car I could remember. And that bicycle was a real gem. It enabled me to get from home to school and back twice daily, since I usually hurried home during the lunch break. Not long after our arrival in Prescott I also began using my bike to deliver the daily afternoon—morning on Sunday—newspaper, the *Arkansas Democrat*. Soon a daily morning *Arkansas Gazette* route also became available, and I snapped it up. Thanks to my bike, for a couple of years I quietly enjoyed working under the radar for both of these great no-holds-barred Little Rock rival papers (now unified as the *Arkansas*

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Democrat-Gazette!), although I had to sublet my *Democrat* route on Sundays because of the conflicting morning delivery times. But my happy Prescott sojourn is another story for another time.

Thank you, Mr. Ober, for sharing these memories of Bluff City. I'm sure some of my readers who have connections to Bluff City will enjoy reading your article. —
Jerry

RAINFALL RECORD

I received 7.8 inches of rain at my house in March. That makes 23 inches so far this year. Looks like we may have another wet year, but this is Arkansas. We can go from one extreme to another very quickly.



Several readers had the correct answer for this one. It is a spring from a wooden clothespin. Very few people hang their wash outside on a clothes line anymore, but clothespins still come in handy for various things. We use them to fasten the plastic bags of cereal inside the box, to fasten a sack of potato chips, and to clip out-going mail to the mail box..

A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

I think we can all agree that the last few weeks have been one of the most stressful periods of our lives. We have had to remain cooped up in our houses for long periods of time and practice social distancing. We have had to deal with shortages of some of the basic things we need. Many have lost their jobs as our country was forced to come to a standstill because of something we can't even see. Thousands have lost their lives. Some of our medical facilities were overwhelmed with patients and were forced to operate without needed equipment. We hope the end is in sight for this pandemic as scientists work to find a vaccine and medicines that will help control this virus.

When this virus first hit, I remembered an article I wrote for the September, 2007 issue of *The Sandyland Chronicle* about the 1918 flu pandemic. You can find the article on the web site. Here is the last paragraph of that article:

I wonder if Americans these days would be willing to be quarantined in their homes for an extended period of time. Can you imagine the effects on our economy? We are

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accustomed to getting some antibiotics to help us when we get sick and they are wonderful medicines. But what if no antibiotic or medicine was available that would work? We would be in the same circumstances as those people back in 1918-1919. Hopefully scientists are busy working on new medicines because sooner or later, we could be faced with a health catastrophe even in these modern times.

When I wrote that in 2007, I didn't think it would happen on such a world-wide scale and spread so quickly. I'll admit I wasn't prepared for it as well as I should have been. I hope your family has survived this ordeal with minimal difficulties and will continue to remain healthy.

Our ancestors went through the Great Depression with all its hardships. Money was scarce and many people had little food to eat. The weather contributed to the hardship as the country experienced long periods of drouth and high temperatures making it hard to grow crops for food. Those who live through this pandemic will be telling stories about the time the country shut down and how it affected them just like our ancestors told stories to their grandchildren about how they survived the Great Depression.

I think we will long remember this period in our history when the covid-19 virus hit the world. Will we ever be comfortable again being in a crowded theater, concert hall, football stadium, a restaurant, or any place containing a large number of people? Will we continue to greet each other with a hand shake or will we come up with another less intimate way of greeting someone? Will we continue to wash our hands frequently after this pandemic is over? We hope this is not a seasonal virus that comes every winter and we hope that a vaccine will soon be found to protect us against it.

We should all pause to thank the doctors, nurses, first responders, and others who risked their lives to help save the lives of others. We also should thank the truck drivers and food delivery people who kept bringing needed supplies to our stores and the store personnel who kept the grocery stores open for us so we could get food. We have seen some people display compassion, faith, and courage while others displayed greed, selfishness, and indifference. Many fell into the dark pits of despair, worry, and anxiety. It affected all of us in some way.

Some good comes out of events like this. Being quarantined at home brought some families closer together again which, in most cases, was probably a good thing. We learned how to make things ourselves that we would normally buy. We learned to be less wasteful with things in short supply. Events such as this help us to get our priorities straight. We learn what is really important in life. There is a hymn in our hymn book called "Strength Through Adversity". The first stanza reads—"*For all the heartaches and the tears; for all the anguish and pain; for gloomy days and fruitless years; and for the hopes I've lived in vain. My heart sings a grateful song; these were the things that made me strong; I do give thanks for now I know; these were the things that made me grow*". Hopefully, we as a nation will be stronger after the trials we are going through and that some lasting good will come from it.

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RUBY BERNADINE WALKER MATHIS GILLESPIE

A MOTHER'S DAY TRIBUTE

Her Story – by Don Mathis

Roared to life in the 20s –
For a daughter of a square-dance calling man,
crippled hip took you a while to walk, to stand.
Tempered in the 30s –
By the economy of that era.
What made others weak strengthened you.
Forged in the 40s –
The home front, the war,
Showed you could do a little more.
Conformed in the 50s –
Birthing babies and raising kids;
What you had to do, with what you had, you did.
Tested by the 60s –
Revolution in the nation, the streets, the home;
You held your beliefs. You stood your own.
Resettled in the 70s –
Seeds all sown, kids are grown;
You and our father finally alone.
Expanded in the 80s –
You find more fulfilling work
And grow in the Lord and friendships at church.
Entered new roles in the 90s –
Retired, and widowed, and joys of grand-parenting.
And then, near decade's end, married again.
Now the decade of the new millennium –
Do you know where your life will lead?
Whatever? It'll be interesting, I believe.

20s - Bernadine was born Jan. 24, 1925. She didn't walk until age two due to a birth defect.

30s - Like many in the Great Depression, she learned to turn adversity to inventiveness.

40s - The support of civilians in WWII contributed to the global struggle for peace.

50s - The Baby Boom generation was part of this era. Mom contributed her part.

60s - Rebellious youth pushed the limits for many, Mom included.

70s - Empty Nest? Not Mom and Dad! They vacationed around the country and Europe.

80s - Mom was the church secretary for years. She cultivated thousands of friendships.

90s - No sooner had she retired, Dad died. But Mom found joy with new grandchildren.

2000s - The new bride moved hundreds of miles from family and friends – and thrived!

2010 - Bernadine moved to her heavenly home on Feb. 18, 2010.

XXX

(additional details - <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/55890337/ruby-bernadine-mathis>)

Her life in pictures (next page)

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