

Jerry McKelvy's
SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

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LIFE BEFORE RURAL ELECTRIFICATION

By Betty Thomas

We live in perilous times. The other day I read about an electro-magnetic pulse that could wipe out our electric grid and throw us back to the days before rural electric cooperatives came to our part of Nevada County. I really don't want that to happen for I remember those days.

Water—When we turn on a faucet with a “C” on it good cold water flows and flows until we turn it off. We take it for granted that the one on the other side with an “H” will give us hot water as long as we want it or until the hot water tank runs out. Before REA, all the water had to be drawn from a well if you lived beyond the city limits. Some wells were deeper than others and the well bucket might have to travel quite a distance before it could be drawn up and emptied. All the water for drinking, cooking, house cleaning, baths (no wonder one tub had to last for everyone's bath and maybe drawn only on Saturdays), laundry, water for livestock, chickens and pets had to be drawn—and someone had to remember to see that all those that could not draw their water for themselves had water. In late summer, some wells would go dry or get so low that there was not enough for all the family's needs and water had to be hauled from somewhere---then it became precious.

Washday entailed drawing enough water for the wash pot—usually a large cast iron pot that a fire could be built under to heat the water—and my mother used three tubs. She used some of the first water in one tub to scrub the clothes on a rub board to loosen the dirt and that involved soap. Then she rinsed the clothes in two more tubs to get the soap out. Lots of labor and water were involved. In summertime, I usually washed my dogs in the wash water before it was dumped out—sometimes it was carried to flower beds that Mother was trying to encourage. I recall that washing the dogs involved getting me very wet and the dogs rolling in the sand after and shaking the dirt all over me. So, I'm not sure the sum total of the damage was on the positive side. The clean laundry was then hung out to dry on the clothes line. These were steel wires stretched between posts in the back yard and there was a protocol for hanging—sheets facing the road, underwear next, and then the clothes next and were held there with wooden spring-type clothes pins; Mother didn't like the wooden pins with no springs. The pins were collected after each wash day for leaving them on the lines weathered them and they would mildew. The clothing had to be starched and Mother made it in a dish pan and carried it out to the wash bench. She starched all our clothes, the pillow cases, doilies, handkerchiefs, and anything she deemed needed it.

Of course, all this went on outdoors, both winter and summer. I recall coming home from school one day in the winter and Mother would have brought in some of the things to dry by the heater. The dresses, sheets, and Dad's pants would be frozen and would

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stand alone until thawed out by the heat in the room. Obviously, people did not get a “clean set of clothes” every day. Lots of folks couldn’t afford that many clothes, and besides, they had to be washed and ironed. After electricity came to our farm, one of the first appliances purchased was a wringer type washing machine. By that time, Dad had built Mother a wash house with a wood-burning heater beside the well shed. I think she still used the old wash pot for heating water because it held so much. An electric clothes dryer would be another twenty years in her future, long after the old wringer washer and two top-loading automatics had worn out.

Ironing the clothes took a day’s labor. Mother had what she called “flat work”. These were sheets, towels, underwear, and things that didn’t require starch. Yes, she ironed our underwear and the sheets. This was in the time before polyester, “drip-dry”, and “wrinkle-free”. She even pressed seersucker—you had to for the collars, and sleeves wadded up and big wrinkles formed in the rest of the garment. This was during a time that if the label did not say “pre-shrunk”, it wasn’t and even fabric you bought to make clothes from had to be wetted and dried before you made a garment or the garment might not fit once it was laundered. The starched things were sprinkled and rolled up overnight so they would be dampened throughout for ironing the next day. I learned to iron by doing the tea towels and pillow cases and things like that. The irons had to be heated on the wood-burning cook stove; she had three of different weights. I still have the small five pound one that I learned with. It stands on my hearth to remind me of the “good old days” that were days of intensive labor.

When I was ten or eleven, one summer Dad built an outdoor shower. It was a small enclosure with a door and slatted floor. He built a platform that was above the well and installed a pitcher pump over a 55-gallon barrel. There was an iron pipe that ran from the barrel downhill to the shower stall. He installed a pipe valve that turned the water off/on and hung an evaporated milk can from the end of the pipe. He had used an ice pick to puncture tiny holes in one end of the can and cut the other end completely out. He used a wire and simply hung the can over the end of the pipe. My chore was to climb up, prime the pump, and pump the barrel half full of water every morning so that it would have all day to sun heat. We all enjoyed daily baths during the warm months after that. Still didn’t get clean clothes every day though!

Refrigeration was a problem. People had ice boxes to put a large block of ice in to keep food cool and delay spoilage. There was a compartment at the top to put the ice in and under that compartment there would be others for food. The ice melted, of course, and the water had to be caught in a pan that sat under the ice box and the pan had to be emptied regularly; some people cut a hole in the floor and hooked up a piece of hose to let the water drip out onto the ground under the house—not many basements or cellars in our part of the country. My parents built our house in 1943 during wartime and were unable to find an ice box anywhere. Someone gave them a Coca-Cola drink box that had a lid that opened on each end and had a front that came all the way to the floor. The thing was so big it would have taken up too much space in the kitchen, so they put it in the woodshed that Dad had tacked onto the side of a storage building. It was shaded and open on three sides and Mother just let the ice drip onto the ground. I found some

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tadpoles in a spring nearby and caught some and put them in a jar under the drip. I wanted to watch them turn into frogs. Well, I forgot about my experiment until Mother found a little green frog in the butter. I didn't raise any more tadpoles. Sometimes, when the ice melted before more could be bought, Mother would lower a jug of milk into the well to keep it cool. You had to be careful in drawing a bucket of water to keep the bucket and the jug apart. One evening, Mother asked me to get a bucket of water. I was busy with some project of my own and didn't want to be bothered. I was told a second time, and in a fit of pique, threw the well bucket into the well, forgetting about the milk jug. It broke the milk jug, thus ruining the well water. My dad was working long hours—leaving home before sunup and getting home after dark. When he got home, Mother told him what happened. He didn't say a word—just went and got two five-gallon buckets and tied them one to each end of the well rope. As he lowered one bucket, he brought up a full bucket and he did that one after the other without a break until he drew the well dry. He then lowered himself into the deep, dark hole, and with only a flashlight, picked up all the glass from the jug off the bottom of the well. He pulled himself back to the surface with Mother's help. He never scolded me or said anything to me about it. I never forgot it and the horror of seeing my Daddy lower himself into that well. Precious water, indeed.

Ice from the ice house was acquired when we went to Prescott for shopping. It was the last purchase before we went home and was wrapped up to keep the heat out on the trip home. Doing this meant we had iced tea and Mother would buy a cake of yeast and make rolls for Sunday dinner. It also meant that we could have a Jell-O dessert and possibly there would be enough ice to make a freezer of ice cream. I have very early memories of my dad and my uncles turning the crank on the ice cream freezer and my cousins and I taking turns sitting on it to provide weight to keep the freezer upright. We would sit until the seat became too cold and then swap out. I also remember "ice cream suppers" when the ice and salt mixture would be put in a wash tub and people would sit around the tubs with different flavors of ice cream in each of several syrup buckets. They would turn the buckets back and forth in the cold mixture until the ice cream froze. They would have to open the cans from time to time to stir the ice cream so it would freeze evenly. Good times! For a brief period of time, we had an "ice man". After the war, Hoyt and Hambric Cummings bought a surplus Army truck and had ice routes. I loved that for we had ice all the time and not just for a few days after a trip to town. I knew of two families who owned kerosene-powered refrigerators they had bought before the war. I thought that they must be marvelous to own. As soon as my parents signed the contract for a power line, Mother put her name on a waiting list for an electric refrigerator at every store that sold them. Her name came up about the same time the power line was activated and she bought a Crosley Shelvador. It was one of the first refrigerators to have shelves in the door. I recall it had a bin at the bottom in front of the motor that she liked to keep apples in. I thought that thing was the best one ever made for she knew how to make ice cream in it. The freezer compartment was very small and one could have either ice or ice cream. It also had to be defrosted. I wonder how many young folks even know what that is.

Radios were still, in the 1940s, considered to be a major piece of furniture and television was something that we read about for "in the future". It we wanted to listen to

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the radio, it had to be battery-powered. You didn't let it just go all the time for batteries were expensive and sometimes unavailable. It was a luxury to listen to the radio all day when we got electric power. I saw televisions being offered in the Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs and begged for one and Dad tried explaining that we needed a station close by—not just electricity—for it to work.

My husband and I were trying to turn a closet into a half bath at the house my parents built in 1943, and my husband called me to the opening that originally opened from the kitchen to the old back porch and said, "This looks like it was hacked out by an axe". I looked at it and told him it probably was. In 1943, there were few power tools and even if Grandpa had one, something like that wouldn't work out there where there was no electricity. Every board had to be sawed by hand and every hole drilled by a hand auger (brace and bit) and there were no nail guns or power screwdrivers. My dad had a cypress tree on our property and hand cut every shingle for the roof. At that time, all building materials were hard to obtain and I remember Daddy saving every nail he pulled from the old lumber he got from tearing down two old buildings and straightening them. Of course, that had nothing to do with electricity, but the shortages caused by the war. Drive by any job site today and look at the power tools at work on the job. If the power line isn't there yet, you can bet there is a gasoline or diesel generator on the site. No one wants to go back to the "good old days".

I very well recall the day the electric came to our house. The house had been wired and bulbs put in the sockets. Wiring was rather simple for there were only two power receptacle and only one wall switch installed in the whole house. The living room had a wall switch where the living room light and the front porch light could be turned on; the rest of the rooms had a string from the ceiling fixture to turn on the lights. One stood in the middle of the room and whirled one's arms around in circles until it hit the string to turn on the light in the dark. I remember some folks extended the string to the light in the bedrooms to reach the bed and tied it off there so the string could easily be found at night. I had asked Daddy how I could tell when the electricity was finally hooked up. He told me how there needed to be a wire from one fixture to another and each day I checked as the school bus passed by the pole. One day the wire was THERE and I ran in a flipped the living room switch on. Mother asked me how I knew; she had wanted it to be a surprise. Our world had expanded.

An electro-magnetic pulse would likely destroy more than just the power grid, of course. The telephone systems would no longer work, nor would the internet. I'm pretty sure my car would no longer start and all the electronic gadgets we love and rely on would be trashed. I sure hope our scientists discover something to prevent the pulse before the nut-cases find a way to release it.

Thanks, Betty for sharing your memories of how things were before electricity came to our "neck of the woods". We lived just a few miles from where you grew up and I remember many of the things you mention in your article. We need to be reminded every so often of how things once were and learn to appreciate all the modern conveniences we enjoy. --Jerry

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RAINFALL RECORD

January—4.7 inches; February – 7.0 inches; March – 10.3 inches; April – 6.3 inches; May – 10.6 inches; June – 5.3 inches; July – 4.8 inches; August – 3.6 inches. That makes 52.6 inches for the year which is our normal annual rainfall and we still have four months to go. We also had a major snow storm in February.

EXCERPT FROM SCHOOL HANDBOOK

We hear a lot on the news these days about some teachers trying to indoctrinate their students with the teacher's political views. Here is an excerpt from the Prescott Public School handbook in 1911-1912:

“No teacher will be permitted to introduce into the school any sectarian views as regards religion or partisan or sectional views as regards politics”.

HOW TO BE HEALTHY

From the September 19, 1908 issue of The Nevada News

1. Rise early, retire early, and fill your day with work.
2. Water and bread maintain life; pure air and sunshine are indispensable to health.
3. Frugality and sobriety form the best elixir of longevity.
4. Cleanliness prevents rust; the best cared-for machines last the longest.
5. Enough sleep repairs waste and strengthens; too much sleep softens

Sanitary Requirement for Prescott Schools in 1913

It shall be the duty of school teachers to flood the school room with fresh air by opening windows and doors at recess and at noontime and at least once during each session of school and at other times whenever the air becomes close or foul. During cold weather the pupils shall be given calisthenics exercises during the times the windows are open.

Dry sweeping and dusting are condemned and prohibited. Dampened or oiled sawdust should be used when sweeping. Feather dusters shall not be used.

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Nevada County courthouse – erected 1911; razed 1964

Deaths in 2021

Bluff City Cemetery

Marchie Hutcheson 1-4-2021
Dorothy Herrington 1-10-2021
James Harold Harvey 1-15-2021
Marguerite Tomlin 1-23-2021
Abigail Rogers 5-13-2021
Perry Starnes 5-19-2021
James Pettit 6-25-2021
Norma Janette McBride 8-5-2021
Betty Henry 8-31-2021
Mollie Pruitt 9-21-2021
Frank Thurston Woodall Jr. 9-22-2021

Union Grove Cemetery

Melinda Loraine Vance 1-1-2021
Mattie M. Walker 8-6-2021
Jerome LaTodd Haynie 9-6-2021

Ebenezer Cemetery

Vernell McKelvy Loe 3-21-2021
Hesterly Jones 5-1-2021

Caney Cemetery

Ellen Sue Dougan 1-11-2021
Marcia Louise Rhodes 1-13-2021
Iris Charlene Wicker 3-17-2021
Mary Fern Overton 4-11-2012

St. John Cemetery

Dextra Alexander Sims 5-17-2021

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Living on a Low Budget A legacy of thrift -- by Don Mathis

My parents were raised in the Great Depression of the 1930s – they learned not to waste any resources. And that legacy was passed down to the next generation.

“Clean your plate,” I was told at dinnertime. “There are starving children in China.” As if that would improve my appetite. A better incentive to eat my vegetables would be the promise of desert.

In Dad’s effort to save on utility bills, his kids learned to conserve energy.

“Every light in the house in on,” my dad would exclaim, as he went from room to room turning off light switches and lamps.

As the 1950s ended and the 60s began, our family graduated from black cast-iron oscillating fans to air conditioning. And Daddy introduced a new spiel.

“Close the cupboards,” he would say. “Are you trying to air-condition the shelves?” Front door, back door, closet door, if the A/C was on, the door was shut!

Raising five kids kept Mom from seeking a paycheck, and an enlisted man’s paycheck was always stretched thin. Sometimes we had patches on our pants – but Grandma’s adage was followed; “Never put a patch on a patch.”

All of us kids wore hand-me-downs – except in December. At Christmas, new socks and underwear were always stocking stuffers from the grandparents. Mom told me in her old age that she never had to buy panties – until after her mother died. Such was my family’s legacy.

Daddy gave all of us kids haircuts in an effort to save money. That’s what his mom did when he was a boy.

Mom was a magician in the kitchen; she could make a meal for seven on a budget. We might have a smorgasbord of leftovers, but we were never hungry.

There were no vacations, no trips to Disneyland or Coney Island for my siblings and me – no matter how much we begged.

But every summer and every Christmas, the family would travel to Arkansas to visit Grandmother and Granddaddy, Grandma and Grandpa. It might take us 16 hours to drive from Washington, D.C., or a two-hour trip from East Texas – but that’s what was valued; time with family.

Nowadays, I turn off the air conditioner when I’m not at home. I drive a used car but it gets good gas mileage. On laundry day, I dry my clothing in the sun, just like Mom did.

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Most home repairs are do-it-yourself projects. I shop at the dollar stores and the thrift shops.

It's a family tradition. I may live on a low budget but my life is rich!

Second-Hand Poem -- by Don Mathis

I bought these designer shoes
only slightly used
from a local yard sale.

And the jeans I have on
were bought new for my son
but now they fit me well.

You can buy a new car
but you won't get too far
before it's like second hand.

So, you'll be miles ahead
to get a used car instead
and you can save a few grand.

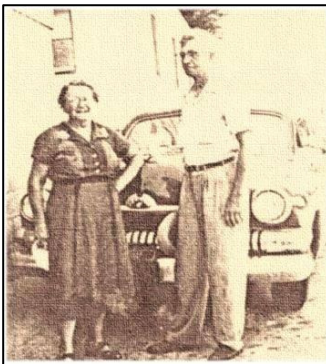
You never see me frown
at an item that's hand-me-down.
Thrift stores give me pleasure.

The quality of old
is better than gold.
The value is what I treasure.

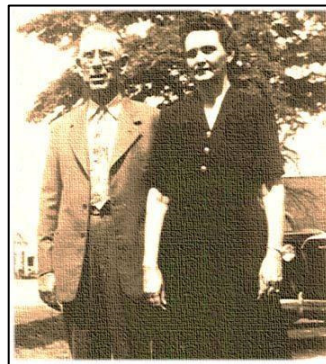


Don Mathis

Don's Grandparents



**Alice Hearnberger Mathis
and
Walter Eugene Mathis
(Grandma and Grandpa)**



**Thomas Jefferson Walker
and
Rose Dumas Walker
(GrandDaddy and GrandMother)**