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DAYS OF CAMARADERIE

by *Elva Howard Deeds*

The hot sun beams down on my sunburned neck
 The sweat's making tributaries under my arms
 My tongue is thirsting again for cool, fresh water
 Scratched hands once pretty in cotton pickin' gloves
 Now full of ragged holes made from sharp spurs on bolls
 Knees a'crying for mercy from kneeling on the plowed ground
 To rest a bending upright body—OH MY ACHIN' BACK!

In the twenties and thirties, in Western Oklahoma, schools were allowed a cotton-picking vacation of a few weeks in the fall. Extra help was necessary to save the bountiful cotton crop. Transient workers hadn't begun to trickle in, and able older children were called to the fields.

Results of these recesses weren't all bad, except for inconveniences to school personnel with interrupted plans, schedules, and gaps in the learning patterns. If there were complaints, they weren't heard publicly nor shared with radio broadcasts (no TV at the time). We didn't hear the words **child abuse** either, although there was some of it then. Some cotton pickin' teens might have felt imposed upon, but none griped about it among our cotton pickin' gangs. Surpris-

ingly, there was much camaraderie among us in the cotton patch. Out there, we heard singing, joking, and laughter with very little—if any—complaining. There was also a little “hanky panky” going on too, with bits of serious romance ending in trips down the aisle.

Cotton picking, in addition, had health benefits for restless children and teens. It was our physical education. Our appetites were strong for common foods found in lunch pails and brown paper sacks—pork-and-beans straight out of the can, wieners, loafed bread (light bread) still in its wrapper, an apple or orange and cookies or cake. All of it tasted delicious in the cotton patch. Fresh air and sunshine added to our good-health assets. Sardines from a can with crackers and homemade fried fruit pies were also delicacies.

But of importance during depression years, the extra income was welcomed, especially by large families. The money earned in the cotton patch paid for school clothes and shoes, paper, pencils, and books for school. Some families depended on the income earned in the fall to supplement their year-long food supply.

I was one teenager who benefited in several ways. My father was a salaried railroad section foreman, which I later realized was an asset in a small town that was

MISCELLANY

dependent upon agriculture. Our steady, secure income was rare in that farming area during depression times. Our status made it easier on my conscience when I plotted my future.

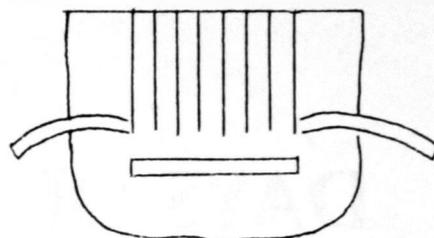
One day, shortly after we had graduated from high school, a group of us teenagers were "pulling bolls" in the cotton patch. I suddenly stood up and resolutely exclaimed, "This is my last fall picking cotton for a living! I'm going to college!"—which I did with much help from the Good Lord, a ninety-dollar loan from a banker friend, and whatever my family could spare. But my immediate ambition was strengthened by that old cotton pickin' work back home—a little money saved, good health, and self-confident enthusiasm for learning.

Since the thirties, cotton "gathering" has undergone some changes. Picking cotton by hand was tedious and slow. Each boll usually had five sections of the white fluff, requiring the full attention of one bare hand, a finger on each section to remove the cotton. Other than using both hands in unison, there was no good way to speed up the process. But hand-picked cotton was fluffy white and beautiful. It was easily cleaned and ginned, with a higher grade than with "boll pulling."

Consequently, most cotton came to be gathered by pulling off the entire boll, separating it from the stalk, with some of the stem and leaves still clinging. Some careful pickers made an attempt to pull away the hangers-on; but usually, the results were messy and dirty for ginners. Many farm laborers

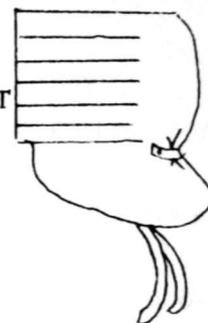
ELVA HOWARD DEEDS is a retired public-school teacher who lives on a farm near Sentinel with her husband, Eldred, who is also a former teacher.

COTTON PICKIN' BONNET



SPLINTS MADE OF STIFF CARDBOARD

THE "SPLIT"
OR
SPLINT BONNET



COTTON PICKIN' SACK

HEAVY CANVAS
2 OR 3 YARDS

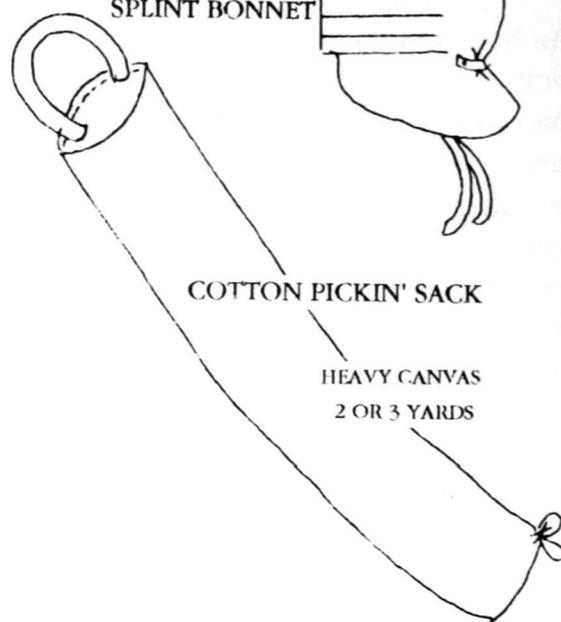


Illustration by Julie O'Reilly

moved into cotton areas and, for unskilled laborers, made good wages. Today, some farmers still use hand labor, especially where the crop grows tall and abundant.

For some years now, cotton picking machines called strippers can cover several acres of cotton in less than a day, leaving bits of white clinging to ugly stalks. Such a sight wouldn't have been acceptable to old-time cotton pickers. Work in the cotton patch remains more than a daydream or an illusion because I can still remember the discomfort of my aching back. ■