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A Closer Look

Dale W. Hill

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"Who is that?" I whispered to my uncle, as a semi-teenager barreled around the edge of the kitchen area. We were attempting to play a game of horseshoes among

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the rampaging feet of playful children and had shooed off several of them to a safe distance. We knew of most of the young faces, but this one was new to me.

Look

"I was going to ask you the same question," my uncle puzzled softly. "I figured the kid must belong to the grounds keeper."

The horseshoe was tossed, and I watched it turn one and a half times in a flat rotation to open up just as it hit the ground in front of the stake. It was a little too far to the left, although perfect otherwise. I'm sure my opponent felt cheated while I was struggling several points and a ringer behind.

The forceful adolescent then came running up behind us with an abrupt stop. My uncle and I strode to the other stake and retrieved our shoes, readying ourselves to take aim again at the forty-foot stake. My confidence was eroding under the pressure of incessant near-misses and close one-pointers with which my elder was subjecting me. All the while, the unfamiliar face's interest had obviously been piqued.

"Can I play next? That looks like fun, but I've never played that before."

To be honest, I was emotionally drained for the moment and welcomed the offer. A general rule-of-thumb for younger participants at a reunion should be to stay away from the horseshoe pits. I hadn't.

"Sure," I said gratefully. "You play him a while."

This get-together, the first "Cook Family" reunion on my mother's side in over a decade, was being held at Camp Sooner, near Pink, Oklahoma, which is nestled in the trees next to a sprawling meadow. The sign-in activities were taking place in the cafeteria/kitchen building, and

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we were struggling with our horseshoes next to the swimming pool.

"What's your name?" I asked. The kid quickly told me and then retrieved the horseshoes.

I turned toward the kitchen. A large family tree had been postered, and I wanted to see if this kid's name was on it.

The roots of the Cook family grew out of the sandy cotton soil where I was born—around Broxton in Caddo County, and where my grandpa had bought his stake for \$500 from a disillusioned landowner who had drawn the land from a lottery. I couldn't help but remember all of the reunions that we had had, usually around the Fourth of July, while I was growing up. The reunions back then were scheduled about every two years or when my uncle came in from California. My grandfather's death broke up the family and moved Grandma. The farm house was eventually sold, and the reunions stopped.



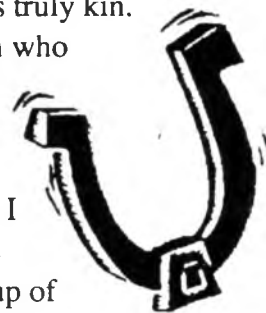
I grinned as I thought about the time that my brothers, uncle, and I went down the road to explore the haunted house. We were probably about the same age as the youngster who had taken my horseshoes. The night before,

plans had been made, and now we bravely forged up the road to our destination.

The door creaked as we opened it and moved in to explore. Hardly had the exploration begun when we heard movement up the stairs. Things began to

fall down the stairway, making eerie noises. Fear overcame reason, and we scampered back to the house, only to find out years later that our older uncle overheard our plans and hid in one of those rooms waiting for his victims.

I found the family chart and began to follow the lineages. Sure enough, there it was. The boy was truly kin. His father was my cousin who had died in a car accident. Since he hadn't arrived with his parents, we didn't recognize him. I was dumbfounded by the revelation. I grabbed a cup of iced water and went out to watch them play.



Why hadn't I recognized him? Should I have taken a closer look? As I watched, I could see his dad's facial features and many other family traits that I hadn't noticed when I had looked at the boy earlier. We had all suffered through his family's tragedy, and the thoughts were painful. The game ended.

"Let's play partners. I'll get a partner, and you play with your uncle.," I suggested. The boy smiled, feeling the warmth of acceptance.

"Sure! Sounds fun!" *

(DALE W. HILL lives in Washita, Oklahoma, with his wife, Marcella, and their four children. Besides serving as an elementary counselor in the Anadarko School System as his wife works at Grady Memorial Hospital in Chickasha, they also open their home as a Temporary Juvenile Shelter for Caddo County.)

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