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Back Then

—By Margie Snowden North

We were typical day laborers I suppose. We lived in a two-room shack, worked hard from morning until night (especially during “cotton season”); and though we always had plenty to eat, it might mean merely mush and milk for supper, or beans and cornbread, or Mama’s special potato soup. There was not often meat for our table.

Most of our friends had electricity and running water—but then, most of our friends weren’t day laborers. The closest we got to running water in the late forties and early fifties was when Mama would say to one of us, “Sweetie, run down to the wellhouse and get a bucket of water.” Electricity was something we only dreamed about.

We were limited in finances, limited in creature comforts and conveniences, but we were not limited in zeal and ambition. After all, we had some prose and poetry books that the school teachers had discarded, and we usually had a working battery-operated radio over which we could sometimes hear programs even above the static; and always we had laughter and dreams.

It seems as though most of our aspirations (and therefore our pastimes) centered around what we might now call “the arts.” Maybe in that way we were not “typical” of other day laborers. The four Snowden sisters aspired to be either film stars, singers, acrobats, writers, or ballerinas. I aspired to be all five.

No one had yet coined the phrase “no pain, no gain,” but I knew instinctively that pain was definitely to be my lot in life if I was ever to limber up as much as, for instance, Jane Powell, the actress-dancer who was my mentor. Ava Jean and Donna Mae, already in their early teens and “set” physically, assured me that as a preteen I was still young enough to be manipulable.

To this end, they would have me lie on my back and while one held one of my feet the second sister pressed my other foot over my head to touch that toe to the bed. We weren’t concerned about child abuse back then, or even misplaced pelvic bones. “The show must go

on” was our watchword—if unconsciously—and I was quite willing to do my part.

My skills as ballerina were honed often, usually out in the pasture where I could be alone. The music I could hear was beautiful beyond description. Sometimes I played the part of conductress of the orchestra—in between pirettes and the Dead Swan Act.

At home I attempted to enlist the aid of sisters to construct an “acting rod” because one destined for involvement in “the arts” had to have a place on which he could learn to balance, to hang by the knees and the toes (somehow, younger sister, Rose Marie, learned to hang by her heels also). Building acting rods was work, and the interest of the others would often flag before the structure was completed. Because of my siblings’

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declining interest, I built several alone. It was a continuing effort simply because my building skills lacked fine-tuning, and the acting rods—constructed of a piece of rusty pipe wired to long fence posts—never held up for very long.

We spent many hours (and dollars) taking photographs of one another. Somehow we knew that photos were essential for promotional purposes to those of our destiny. To this day I wonder why Mama allowed us to spend hard-earned money for film and processing, but maybe it was because she believed in our abilities as much as we did.

We were as adept at posing as was Jane Russell or Marilyn Monroe and knew just the tilt for our faces, that secretive look for the

eyes, the subtle smiles. I never failed to be a little disappointed at the results of my posing—the skinny body, the freckles, the teeth. The smile I had thought so subtle seemed instead to be an indication of some slight bout with indigestion, which, however, did not deter me. Optimism never failed me, and I was always sure that next time would be better.

Since Ava Jean was the oldest and prettiest, we decided that her photographs would capture the eye of the talent scouts who we were convinced were so hungry for new talent that they roamed streets systematically looking for pretty faces. Ava Jean dressed in

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her best blue shorts and plaid blouse and borrowed Mama’s wedge heels. We raked the chicken yard, and she leaned seductively against the side of the chicken house with the barest of smiles and that faraway look in her eyes. We never heard from the studios, but we believed it was because of some foul-up in the mail system.

In order to be ready should the call come, we consistently engaged in screen tests. We even occasionally implored little brother, Ransom, to participate; but it seems he never really felt a leaning towards “the arts” in the same way the rest of us did. Ava Jean was a good screamer (so was Donna Mae, for that matter), and one of our favorite scenes involved a woman who was lying unsuspectingly in bed only to be confronted by a killer armed with a knife. We all took our cues from Ava Jean, who thought it expedient to scream lustily, then to roll rapidly across the bed to escape, while uttering heart-rending pleas for mercy. I believe even yet today I could impress any talent scout who would care to observe my version of that scene.

When we weren’t limbering up, building yet another acting rod, or doing screen tests, we read books or stories. Ava Jean was the first writer in the family. Often we three younger sisters would sit breathlessly beside her as she scribbled the next page of her story. Even James Michener never had more loyal fans.

Just as we seemed destined to theatrical pursuits, we also were born to sing. At a very early age, I realized there was some magical method that caused voices singing different keys to blend beautifully. I would often suggest that some of us sing high and some low. But we were never able to achieve any harmony until Ava Jean took Glee Club as a seventh grader and learned that there were different singing parts called alto and second soprano. She taught me the alto part for “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and after that I knew automatically how to harmonize as we sang other songs. We entertained ourselves, Mama and Papa, Grandma Snowden, and probably tortured everyone else by singing “Mansion over the Hilltop” and “To Canaan’s Land,” among other old hymns.

In 1954, when I was in seventh grade—and we were temporarily located in Sanford, Texas—Ava Jean, Donna Mae, and I entered a singing contest. Up to that time, our total experience in singing for the public included one appearance as young children before a small church congregation. When I saw the impressive line of contestants that were backed up for what looked like a quarter of a mile, I was almost ready to call off our career as singers. But not quite.

Singing “Sorrow and Pain” with shy gusto and no musical accompaniment, we won First Place. Afterward, a zealous listener came to our parents and spent several hours outlining his plan for our success in the field of music. He left with a promise to call as soon as the details were worked out. I suppose he is still working on the details, and we expect the call to come any day now.

While considering our days as youngsters, I recall that we played our share of basketball, Hide and Seek, and Cowboys and Indians. But it was “the arts” that filled more hours for the Snowden sisters than any other entertainment pursuit. And even though we hung up our imaginary ballet slippers, mink coats, and diamond-studded evening gowns a long time ago, I doubt that any of us will ever abandon our penchant for nurturing dreams and lively ambitions for the future.

(MARGIE SNOWDEN NORTH, now of Sweetwater, needs no full introduction. Her many previous stories and poems have stirred nostalgia in the hearts of WESTVIEW readers for many years.) ✻