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## Sandyland Sanctuary

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# Sandyland Sanctuary

The Zielkes were a good Western Oklahoma farm family. From my earliest remembrance, we had always lived within a quarter of a mile from their farm. Being practicing Christians, they observed the policy of caring for their neighbors, and my parents also ministered to them. I can remember all the neighbors gathering at the Zielkes' during what everyone thought were Uncle Jacky's dying hours, but he lived on many years after that. I can also remember crying because sometime during those dark hours Mama didn't come home all night because she was sitting up taking care of Uncle Jacky so his family could rest. Although I was too young to understand, everyone in the community loved the Zielkes because a favor done for them was never left unreturned.

Looking back, I don't know how we could have existed without the Zielkes. Of course my parents filled in these details after I had reached adolescence. Although the Zielkes were sharecroppers just as we were, they always seemed to be more prosperous, and they even had a car. They made weekly shopping trips to the county seat and brought back supplies for us. I have heard in later years that maybe the money my parents sent along to pay for our purchases stretched a bit further in the Zielkes' hands than it might have otherwise. They also brought back longed-for treats for all four of the children in our family. We were much poorer than the Waltons and not nearly so talented.

As far back as I can remember, I always knew that Uncle Jacky and Aunt (we called her **Aint**) Ethel had six children already away from home, and the only

ones still in the nest were Bub, Dora, and Pearl. Throughout the community, the "girls" were called Dora-n-Pearl.

Bub, a deaf mute, was a good old guy, and he didn't seem to let his inability to hear and talk bother him at all. He could grunt, point, and make gurgling sounds. He loved all children; he and I were constant playmates. Bub was older than my dad, but it was no issue with me or with my playmate.

Our favorite games were marbles and horseshoes. And although he was a grown man, he thought nothing of rolling in the dirt with me as we dug our castles on our sandyland farms. He even got to the point — finally — that he could gesture at me and form the words "My Boy."

Dora-n-Pearl were also involved in loving and caring for the children in that small country community. Dora was a friendly, easy-going person most of the time, but she had a physical appearance that frightened little people. She had a large unsightly goiter that grew outside her neck, and she wore high-necked collars to try to conceal it. Everyone always wondered if there was a surgical procedure that would have corrected it, but as far as I ever knew, no one asked. She also wore more make-up than was necessary, and she dyed her hair red; but it always looked orange. The overly red lips appeared garish when the snuff spittle oozed from her mouth.

Pearl was a quiet, genteel Southern lady who was always tender, compassionate, and loving toward everyone — and especially her aging parents. She wasn't an outwardly attractive woman, but she never tried to put on airs, and what we saw was the real Pearl

— no make-up, no dye, no show. She was never a very healthy person; as a result, her entire family protected her from strenuous activities.

The highlight of my young life came on the day that the Zielkes asked if I could go into town with their family for the weekly shopping trip. Not only was that the first time I had ever been to town; it was also the first time I had ever ridden in a car. I soon learned that I was to experience two more firsts that I hadn't even anticipated. After the shopping was finished, we ate at a restaurant that specialized in family-type food service. Although the foods I ate were things I had eaten before — barbecued beef, fried okra, and corn on the cob — the novelty was the surroundings. What else nice could happen to me in one day? They also took me to a cowboy movie starring Gene Autry. For days after that, I wasn't still for a minute.

One of the saddest times of my young life involved another example of the way the Zielkes gave of themselves beyond anyone's expectations. Early one spring, my dad was trying to get one of our horses adjusted to the thought of working in the field after being lazy all winter. The horse bolted, balked, reared up, and broke Daddy's collar bone. Not only was Uncle Jacky soon there to drive Daddy to the doctor's office; he and Bub also did most of the farming for Daddy that spring.

Our neighbors weren't without their foibles, however. One of their eccentricities that made all of us laugh was the way all of them refused to tell their ages. One day Dad and Mom decided that the weather was too cold for

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my sister and me to be in the field with the rest of the family. Since they were pulling cotton for Uncle Jacky, they left us at the house with Aint Ethel. My sister Betty, five years older than I am, was always the inquisitive type; and she liked to allay her boredom by asking nosey questions. Sometime during the day, she drawled, "Aint Ethel, how old is Dora-n-Pearl?" Aint Ethel evidently had been asked that question many times, and she had a ready — but evasive — answer: "Oh, I don't know, Honey. I guess they ain't so powerfully old." The ages of all the family members were carefully guarded secrets never revealed until the obituaries were written.

Uncle Jacky and Aint Ethel had worked hard all their lives, and hardship had never kept them from trying to eke out a living from the soil. They had actually reared two families — the six who were away from home with families of their own at the time we were neighbors and the other three who never married and would continue to live at home with their parents. Those three weren't even considered oddities of their time, but they would be today.

I can still remember how those dear people looked, although it has been close to fifty years now. Uncle Jacky, as I recall, was a short, slightly stocky man who always walked with a springy step. I never saw him that he wasn't wearing a blue work shirt and bib overalls.

And I never saw Aint Ethel that she wasn't wearing an apron. She never worked in the fields during the years I knew her, so she was always daintily attired in feminine-looking dresses. She also stayed busy

taking care of her house and family. More than once, I ate at her table and enjoyed her delicious meals. And between meals, she often treated me to her hot homemade bread, cobbblers, and pies.

With the exodus of farmers into Western Oklahoma towns, we lost contact with the Zielkes because they managed to buy a small house in the little town about five miles away. For many years as I grew out of childhood, we saw our good friends only during infrequent visits in the little town.

Although I was only an adolescent, I soon came to the realization that the change from the farm to town life had a bad effect on the Zielke girls. Before long, they were alone. Uncle Jacky, Aint Ethel, and Bub died within a few months of one another, so the family circle had disappeared.

World War II had spread into our private zone; it even took my only brother. We were near an air-force base; Dora-n-Pearl — in loneliness, despair, and boredom — began going out with "fly boys" much younger than they were. At the time, the girls were likely approaching their fifties.



Illustration by Paul Rabalais

Always searching for acceptance, Dora — according to the town grapevine — became rather wild. Pearl seemingly remained pure and untouched by all those outward influences.

Somehow they survived; but Dora, that remnant of good Puritan stock, soon had to go to work at a laundry to help support herself and her younger sister. The family had always shielded Pearl, so Dora carried on the tradition.

So they lived on for the next thirty years together in the little white frame house Uncle Jacky had bought for his family upon leaving the farm.

It was there about two years ago that Dora departed this life. And it's there that Pearl lives alone today while going through the motions of living without family and with only a few friends remaining in that Western Oklahoma setting. ■

*LEROY THOMAS, the first person to earn a Ph.D. in English at Oklahoma State University (Class of 1970), is Editor of WESTVIEW and is the only remaining member of the original Editorial Board.*