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Pacts and Schemes

June A. Hale

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Pacts

And

Schemes

By June A. Hale

I can tell you about Oklahoma county commissioners from way back — from way, way back to the early thirties. At least I can tell you about one of them; and I guess enough time has passed now that it won't hurt to tell. Since the recent scandals, some folks now call the county commissioners "devils." Back then, one county commissioner admitted that he was a devil; and although I was only eight years old at the time, I was responsible for some of his devilment. The commissioner has long since taken his part of the shame to the grave, and it's time I confessed my part.

My family got hooked up with the county commissioner because Mama knew everybody in town, not only by name, but by history too. She and Daddy had moved to Prairieville when it was mostly a tent city, not long after Oklahoma became a state. Daddy built our house, helped to build the town, and then he died. But Mama knew all the folks in town and half the people in the county. She was the first choice of the rich folks when they needed housecleaning help or other day work. Not only was she a hard worker, but she was also conversant on any subject... with the rich and the poor. She walked miles every day getting day work or selling Avon. Yes, women sold Avon even back in those deep depression days; and all those wonderful folks bought from Mama whenever they could afford such luxuries. Mama loved to talk to folks, and there was something about her that made people want to follow her advice.

So it's little wonder that Mama got into politics — no, not running for office, but helping people who did run for office. They hired her during elections to campaign for them. The first politician Mama campaigned for was the county commissioner named E. M. Dickman. She walked from door-to-door all over town from Silk Stocking Showcase to Happy Hollow, convincing nearly EVERYONE — to vote for "Old E. M." she was such a convincing campaigner that Old E. M. got her help to put "his" men in the other offices. Each year there were more men that E. M. supported so they would support him; and Mama helped him deliver the goods — or at least to deliver the votes.

But mama knew all the folks in town and half the people in the county.

The money Mama earned during election time surely beat her income from day work and Avon sales. In a good year, there might be even enough left at Christmastime for a toy or two for us youngest children. But every cent came out of the candidates' pockets. Nothing came from the county office funds. The closest we came to getting anything from the county was from Jim Hale — no relation to us. Jim ran the commissioner's county garage, and he welded the cocking lever on a broken BB gun I had been given... and which I kept breaking. In fact, he welded my wagon and whatever other used and broken toys I was able to scrounge.

But please bear with me while I tell the whole story. Our house, which Daddy had built, had not only patched screens and needed paint, but the roof was leaking badly that year when I was eight. During a rain one day, as Mama and I placed pans under the leaks, I complained that we were getting more and more leaks. Mama acknowledged my complaints, saying, "If there are enough men running for office next election, maybe I can earn enough money to get a new roof. Maybe we could even get the house painted."



Photographs by Tony Neely

Not only was I irked at chasing leaks with pans, but I was also beginning to feel ashamed of our run-down house. I asked how much a roof would cost. Mama always had an answer for my questions; and she said without a thought, "Oh — a hundred dollars." Probably a hundred dollars would have bought a new roof in those days, but it may as well have been a million dollars. We did well to buy food. We got by on Mama's electioneering, day work, Avon sales, and by utilizing a big garden and chickens. We often had meager meals — but we never went without a meal. Many of our friends, especially those in Happy Hollow, weren't so fortunate in those days before Welfare or the Work Projects Administration.

Mama had taught me that God always answers prayers; though I never told her, I prayed that God would somehow let me find a hundred dollars someplace for a new roof and that He would let Mama get enough money next election to paint our house. You see, I had prayed before (also then unknown to Mama) for a pair of "engineer's boots." Engineer's boots were a fad then with the rich kids whose folks could afford them. After I prayed for boots, one day — out of the blue — Mrs. Brasier had given me a pair of engineer's boots that one of her boys, Frank or Gene, had outgrown. God had answered my prayer. The boots were used, badly worn; but God had answered my prayer. So I just knew He would help me some way to get a new roof on our house. I prayed that since the boots He had given me were used, surely He would give us a brand new roof.

As I walked to and from school each day, I looked in every ditch, every culvert, to see if there weren't an old suitcase, an old wallet, box, or can with a hundred dollars inside to buy a new roof.

Mama had taught me that God always answers prayers.

Well, the next spring we had gone to bed one night when a storm came up. We got up and set pans under the drips throughout the house. Then the wind began to blow, and it started lightning and thundering. Suddenly, it began hailing ... hard! The pans filled before we could empty them.

The hail found a window screen weak from age and rust and broke the window, spewing the glass across the room. Mama grabbed a quilt, and I helped her hang it over the open window to help keep out some of the hail and rain. During the lightning flashes, we could see shingles from the roof flying through the air. The pots and pans ran over as new leaks spewed water all over the rooms of our house. As the hail beat the shingles and the wind blew the shingles away, the rain poured in everywhere. Mama made a makeshift tent to cover one bed. Everything else in our house was completely soaked but the one bed, a few clothes, and some of the food we had managed to cover.

Finally the rain and hail stopped, and we went back to bed and to sleep. At least I slept; I don't know whether or not Mama slept. I doubt it. When we got up in the morning, she made biscuits with the flour she had managed to keep dry; and after breakfast, she sent me off to school as usual. As I walked to school, I looked back at our house and saw large, gaping holes all over the roof, more shingles on the ground than left on the roof. Hail was piled in drifts like snow. All the houses in town except those with the newest roofs were damaged. I was too stunned to look for old boxes or wallets stuffed with a hundred dollars as I walked to school that day.

When I came home after school, Mama was sitting in front of the heating stove crying. She hadn't moved from the front of the stove all day. When she turned to me as I came in, she discovered that her shins were badly burned from sitting near the stove all day. She had just sat there crying, not realizing that her legs were gradually burning, deeper than a severe sunburn.

I got some salve from the pantry and helped Mama put it on her shins. She tossed my hair and said, "Son, I have failed you children and failed God." When I asked how that could be, she explained, "After your daddy died, I made a pact with God. I told Him I wouldn't complain about my lot in life if He would just allow me to always have food for you children and soap to keep you and your clothes clean. I took too much for granted and must have thought this house your daddy built would last forever. God allowed the roof to be blown off to show me how presumptuous I was."

I asked, "Mama, what is 'presumptuous'?"

"Presumptuous," Mama said, "is being overly confident. I was too sure of myself."

Then I began to cry, "No, Mama, no! It's not your fault. It's MY fault. It's my fault."

I explained about my prayers for the engineer's boots and for a new roof. Then I said, "I wasn't happy with the boots that were used boots, so I wanted a brand new roof. God allowed us to lose the roof because I was presumptuous."

Mama hugged me harder than I ever remember being hugged. "No, it's not your fault," she said. "It's not the fault of either of us! It will be all right some way."

"How can we keep dry?" I asked.

"There will be a way somehow," Mama answered. "We have come too far now for there not to be a way."

And there was a way. We set about cleaning and drying things out the next few days, even though we had no idea how we would keep them dry. Mama said we were acting in faith. When I asked what faith was,

she said it was "putting feet to prayer."

"Putting feet to prayer!" Just then I realized that I would never find a hundred dollars for the roof. I began to think about how I could put my feet to prayer besides just cleaning and drying things out. My thoughts turned to plans, and my plans turned to schemes: devious schemes. Oh, Mama would never approve of schemes, and my best scheme was the worst.

That very day, I broke my BB gun again — purposefully broke it, to tell you the truth — and I took it to Jim Hale at the commissioner's garage to weld. As I figured, Jim asked how our house fared in the storm. And I told him, told him all about it — how bad it really was.

Then I acted like an eight-year-old philosopher and said, "Isn't it funny how things are? Jim, you are probably the smartest man in town. No one else is smart enough to weld toys like you can. But you aren't the richest man in town. You're the smartest but not the richest. Now, just think about my mother: she's the best 'lection campaigner there is. If it wasn't for her campaigning, Mr. Dickman wouldn't be your boss. In fact, she could probably campaign just about anyone she wanted to into the commissioner's job. But here she can't even buy a new roof."

Jim responded, "If I'm so smart, why can't I weld this cocking lever on your gun without it breaking?" My heart sank. Jim finished welding the lever, cooled it off, and put it back on the gun. As he handed it back to me, he said, "Maybe I AM smart enough to weld this lever so you won't have to break it again."

Hot dog! "Won't have to break it," Jim had said. He knew I had broken it on purpose. But I knew we'd have a new roof as well if Jim had signed a contract for the commissioner. "Won't HAVE to break it," he'd said. There's something conniving people recognize in each other without saying it outright. How gleeful I felt to share an unspoken plot with such an honest con-man as Jim, knowing full well he would persuade the commissioner,

"I took too much for granted and must have thought this house your daddy built would last forever."

As I walked home, I popped old cans in ditches with my BB gun and just couldn't miss. Never looked at one to see whether it had a hundred dollars in it.

I had traded faith for scheming, and I was proud — so proud (can you imagine?) to share the surname of such a crafty, artful, wiley person as Jim Hale.

The next day a truck with the County Commissioner's insignia on its doors backed up into our yard. The driver unloaded some roll roofing, some nails, and some tar for sealing the seams. The whole thing was a surprise to Mama. She never did find out that I had talked to Jim. The driver said nothing to Mama but "It's your'n. Hope you can fin' some way to put it on." And then he drove off.

Mama did find some way to put it on, or rather, the way found her. A dozen or so men from all parts of town gathered at our house on Saturday morning. Had the roofing job nearly half done by noon. they seemed to have a great time, kidding and joking while they worked. Mama killed a couple or so chickens and opened some jars of blackberries she

had canned and made a big cobbler. What a sumptuous dinner we had for all the men. The roof was finished before evening.

A few days later, Commissioner E. M. Dickman drove up in his car and came to the door. Mama started to invite him in, and then she said, "No, let's first look at the new roof God put on our house — and then we'll go in."

Old E. M. responded, "Why, it does look fine! Not as pretty as shingles, maybe, but looks like it won't leak. But Mrs. Hale, someone told me that it wasn't God that put that roof on. I was told that a number of men around town did it."

"Yes, Mr. Dickman," Mama said. "Some good men did come and put it on, but God gave it to me so they could put it on."

"God gave it to you? Why, the truck that brought the roofing rolls out here had my insignia on the doors. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Dickman," Mama said. "I noticed. and thank you. But I still say that God gave me the roof. I always say that every good and perfect gift comes from God — even if He does have the Devil deliver it."

Old E. M.'s mouth gaped open, and he cocked his head. When he caught his breath, he pulled his ear lobe, smiling — and said, "Well, this old Devil really came by to see if you would help me campaign in the election that's coming up."

Mama returned Mr. Dickman's smile and said, "I don't work for the Devil, Sir. But if the money is as good as it was last election, you'll be an angel. And I'll be glad to campaign for you."

Now of course, if I had that time to live over again, I'd... why I'd still lead old E. M. astray. ■

JUNE HALE, who has written about his native state Oklahoma for a number of years, makes his second appearance in WESTVIEW in this issue. A resident of Bethany, he is Programs Assistant in the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Visual Services. In his spare time, he's a long-distance bicyclist.

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