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The Color of Rich

By Kay James Hively



There's a richness in being poor. . .at least when the poverty is only money.

There was richness in being a sharecropper's daughter who treasured the hand-me-down blouse of an older sister and who delighted at the antics of a headless leghorn flopping around the backyard—that meant fried chicken for supper.

But the richest segment of those years was not gold—it was white, and it grew in long rows across the red clay fields. Cotton. . .cotton bursting out of a brown, crackly boll. Cotton piled loosely in the high side-boarded wagons rolling out of the fields on their way to the gin. Cotton on brittle stalks which marked the way for hunched-over pickers dragging their long canvas sacks up one row, around the end, and back down a neighboring row.

For a small child filled with the wonder of life and rich with curiosity, a cotton field was a laboratory of life. Life was riding someone's cotton sack, chasing grasshoppers, taking naps on the running board of the old car, sitting high on the tractor seat, and hitching a lift on the cotton wagon.

The sounds of the field still ring in my ears. The soft mumble of the cottonpickers as they worked side by side and carried on mundane conversations was a lazy humdrum.

The challenging debates of brothers who vowed to "outpick" each other gave a youthfulness to the atmosphere. The cooing of the mourning dove greeted the family as they shifted about at sunrise to gather sacks, gloves, and kneepads and hike to the "patch" to be gleaned that day.

But life was white only in October and November. The rest of the year, our poor richness came in other colors. Pink, I remember pink, I printed my name in the pink dust that covered the south side of the white frame house. The strong hot south winds whipped the red clay up off the fields and painted our house each year after the plow had turned under the empty cotton stalks.

But life was also black and yellow when the western sky threatened to swoop down with a twisted fist to bash the barn to splinters. The earth turned yellow in fear of the blackness which sent us running to the cellar where we lashed tight the door to our underground concrete storm haven.

Today the richness I had in poverty is only a memory that I left behind in the Western Oklahoma cottonfields. ●

KAY JAMES HIVELY, as a very young child, lived on a cotton farm near Blair. She spent her formative years in Rush Springs, where she graduated from high school in 1962. She is now a fulltime free-lance writer living in Neosho, Missouri. "The Color of Rich" is her first contribution to WESTVIEW.