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Etched In Memory

By Rita Rains

STELLA HOOD RAINS, age 2.

She lives now in a retirement home in Texas, a lifetime away from her Western Oklahoma roots. At the age of 88, she sits before an easel, staring intently at her first attempt at art, a painting of the half dugout that was once her home. She can still remember those early years as vividly as if it were yesterday.

Born in Texas in the fall of 1899, Stella Hood Rains was just a toddler when her family crossed the Red River into Oklahoma Territory. Her recollection of those years is indelible as only childhood memories can be. She remembers the three covered wagons filled with family and friends and the days of impatient waiting at Oxbow Crossing for the rain-swollen river to subside so they could safely cross.

Every day, the men attired only in their "long johns" would wade the muddy, red waters to test the crossing. When the time finally came, Stella found herself perched, along with her mother and several brothers and sisters, on top of the feather bed inside their wagon. Outside, she could hear her father shouting instructions to her older sister, "Whip 'em, Karen. Whip 'em," he yelled as they guided the horses and wagon through the rough waters to their new home in Western Oklahoma.

Isaac Parker Hood, his wife Eleanor Elizabeth Spencer, and their five children homesteaded a quarter section one-fourth mile wide and one mile long near Jester in the Plainview Community, in what is now Greer County. There they would add five more youngsters to

the family. Stella's most vivid childhood memories are of their half dugout home. It was dug back into the hillside, made of sod, tree poles, and buffalo grass. There were only two small rooms with dirt floors. She recalls that they lined the walls with white gypsum and newspaper and hung a cloth across the ceiling "so the bugs and snakes couldn't just drop in unannounced." She laughs when I ask about the outhouse. "Honey," she says, "the canyon was our outhouse."

As crowded as they were, there was always room for more. Visitors were a rare treat in those days and warmly welcomed. She remembers the excitement which always accompanied travelers, whether they stopped just for a meal or paused overnight in their journey. A trip into town was an occasion, "especially if we got to stay overnight at the wagon yard," she recalls. "When we got to town, we'd head straight for the yard and stake out our bunks for the night. Then Papa would give each of us kids a dime to spend in town. You wouldn't believe what all you could get for a dime back then."

The toys she played with as a girl were simple creations: buffalo bones and skulls bleached white in the plains sun, arrowheads dug from the canyon walls and floor, and corn silk dolls made from the husks of immature ears of corn. Her aunt, Annie Spencer, taught her how to quilt and crochet, skills she has honed to a fine art today.

Stella carried her lunch to school in a syrup bucket and recollects it was a pretty good weapon with which to fend off pesky little boys. She smiles and her eyes sparkle as she recalls another girlhood memory. In those days the classroom had a water bucket and dipper from which the teacher and students drank. It usually sat on an

empty desk in the back of the room. In Stella's case, it just so happened it sat on the desk between her and her best friend. One day they decided to see if they could tip the bucket over without being caught by the teacher. Quietly they rocked their chairs back and forth until the bucket fell spilling the water. After the giggles died down, the teacher's voice broke the silence, "Accidents will happen," she said, "but I don't think that was one." "I guess it goes without saying we stayed after school that day," Stella laughs.

A hailstorm in 1904 is graphically etched in her memory. "The hail was the size of baseballs," she remembers; "it was still on the ground two days later. We lost our livestock and our garden, but thank God, none of us were hurt." She doesn't recall seeing many Indians while growing up in Western Oklahoma but does remember the thundering cattle drives and cowboys who crossed Oklahoma from Texas into Kansas. She still can recall their neighbors of many years, the Andrew McBrides, the church camp meetings and Sunday singings, and the barn dances.

She saw the coming of statehood to Oklahoma in 1907, and in her mind's eye, she can see the brightly colored ribbons and badges the men wore and the jubilant parades and picnics. If you had told her then that in this same red carpet country she helped pioneer, her grandson would one day drill for oil and gas, she wouldn't have believed it possible. ■

RITA RAINS, a 1971 graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington, makes her first appearance in WESTVIEW. A resident of Western Oklahoma since 1978, she is a free-lance writer and also works as a Claims Representative for the Social Security Administration in Clinton.

