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Have I Told You My Bean Story?

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Have I Told You My Bean Story?

When someone talks about the hard times of these days or of other days in the past, my sister Lucille will ask, "Have I told you my bean story?" Over the years, my sisters and I have relived it with her so many times that it has become a part of our memories, too.

Lucille graduated at age 16 in 1932 from Bethel School southeast of Hollis. She wanted to go to what was then Southwestern State Teachers College in Weatherford in order to become a teacher. Times were so hard during the Depression on the farm that there just wasn't enough money to keep the family fed and clothed without the extra expense of going to college.

But Lucille was determined; she worked all summer chopping cotton, raising chickens, milking cows, and doing anything else respectable that she could to earn a few dollars. When she received a letter from a Southwestern college official saying she would be hired on the National Youth Administration Program, all of us knew that she could go to college. The Mitchell girls from our community were also accepted, so Lucille and her two friends were excited about going to Southwestern together.

That summer, Mama bought a bolt of pink sateen and began to sew Lucille's wardrobe. She made slips, panties, bras, gowns, pajamas, and a pink organdy dress.

The three girls rented a room in Weatherford and started classes at Southwestern in September. A hot plate was the only cooking equipment they had to use, and of course there was no refrigeration. After a while, the girls talked with the owner of a small grocery store nearby and got credit by the month. By being almost miserly with every penny, they were able to get by--with the extra home-canned food their mothers provided.

One winter day, the small grocery store burned, and the girls didn't know what to do. Only six quarts of green beans remained when all the rest of the food was gone. They had too much pride to write home, and it was two weeks until payday. They boiled the beans without seasoning and ate them twice a day.

Finally, Lucille wrote home: "This is my last stamp. If you want to hear from me again, please send a stamp." Right away, Mama sent a dollar bill, never realizing it meant food in their mouths.

Lucille said later that the dollar arrived the day the beans ran out. They bought bread for 5 cents a loaf and milk for 10 cents a quart to finish out until their NYA checks came. The kindly grocer rebuilt and helped them again.

Somehow they held on financially for two years and managed to get their teaching certificates. All three of them became well-known teachers in Harmon and Jackson counties.

The next time any of us think that our times can't get any worse, we need to think about my sister and her bean story. Then we'll know that we *can* survive and be somebody if we really want to badly enough.

An article about a rara avis of any era

By Maxine Wilhelm

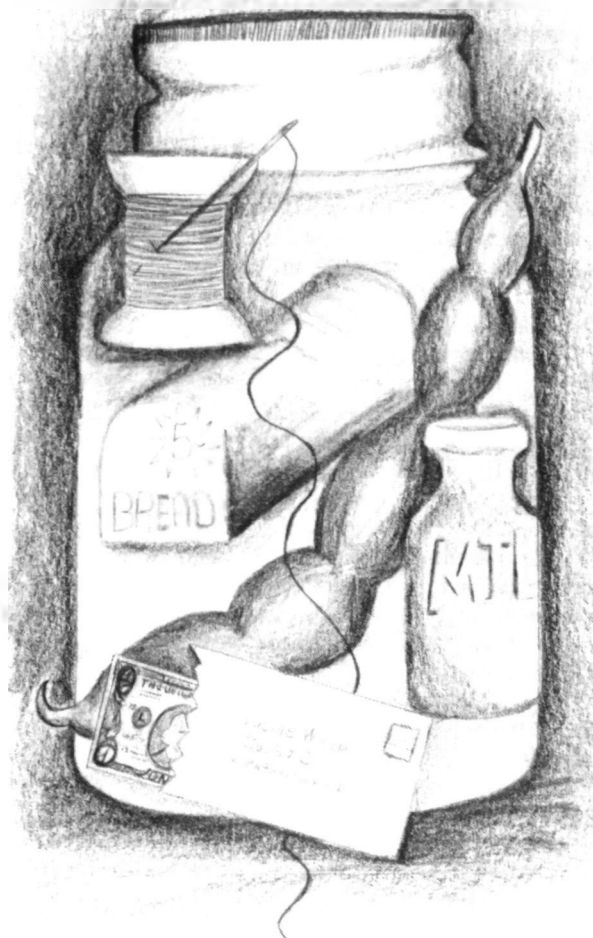


Illustration by Pat Kolb

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is based on the experiences of Lucille Martin Gunkel of Eldorado, Oklahoma.)