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Illustration by Kelley Doyle

Grandpa's Surprise

By Inez Schneider Whitney

Inez Schneider Whitney has lived in Arlington, Virginia, since 1943; but she was born and reared on a farm south of Custer City. There have been few issues of WESTVIEW without an Inez Whitney work.

It was a sultry Western Oklahoma afternoon. My mother, baby brother, and I were in our farmhouse with my Irish grandfather, Robert Chinworth Provines. He had arrived from Indiana the day before and was telling Mama the latest news about the relatives.

After a few minutes he paused, looked around, and then asked my mother, "Where's Edd?"

"He went out to help Bill Daley get in the horses. He thinks it's going to storm, and he's watching the clouds."

Papa was terrified of storms. He was sure that a tornado was lurking in every dark rolling cloud. Because of his influence, I shared the fear and have never been able to overcome it. Mama always seemed quite unconcerned but never refused to seek shelter if Papa thought it was necessary.

When I was older, Mama once said, "Before your papa and I were married, he made me promise to go to the cellar when it stormed. I said, 'All right, if you will dry the dishes' and he said he would."

I can see my father now standing by the kitchen table wiping the dishes as Mama washed them.

Every Oklahoma pioneer believed a storm cellar was a necessity and with reason. Tornadoes swept the open plains every year, destroying life and property.

Most of these caves were dug out of the ground and reinforced with sod, but my father had recently built one of cement. He feared that the sod dugout might collapse during a heavy storm.

"Well," Grandpa said, "that's quite a storm cellar Edd built. I believe that's the first cement one around here. He says he even put hogwire inside the arch over the top to strengthen it."

Just then my father rushed in the door, frantically shouting, "Hurry! Hurry! Come to the cellar. The storm is about to break. It looks like a twister. The cone keeps dropping down a little closer to the ground and it's headed this way."

There was a flash of lightning and instantaneous thunder, which meant the storm was upon us. My father picked up my brother, all of us grabbed our old coats that hung behind the kitchen door, and rushed outside and down the steps into the cave.

Bill Daley, the hired man, was already there. Papa gave my brother to Mama so he could let down the cellar door. He glanced around and then turned to Mama.

"Where's your pa?"

"Why I thought he was right behind us."

There were more crashes of thunder.

"I'd better go up and see what happened to him," Papa said. Just then Grandpa appeared at the cave door and started down the steps. What a grand entrance! He had changed to his best clothes. In one hand he held an umbrella, and in the other he carried his suitcase.

Bill Daley let out a guffaw. "Look at the dude!"

Everyone joined in the laughter.

"Pa," Mama said, "why on earth did you put on your good suit? And you're even wearing your Stetson hat!"

"Well, you came down here expecting everything to be blown away by a tornado, didn't you? I wanted all my belongings with me!" (first appeared in "Voices from the Past," THOMAS TRIBUNE, April 1, 1981) 