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Remembering Our Hired Hands



— by Inez Schneider Whitney

“Why do you have the hired hands stay through the winter?” Mama used to ask Papa. “None of the other farmers do. There’s no work for them except to help you a little with the chores--or talk politics or play cards. Besides, it makes a lot of extra work on me.”

Papa’s usual response was “Well, if I let them go, I might not be able to get help when I need someone for spring planting and later for the cultivating and harvesting.”

As far back as I remember, there was always a hired hand living with us. Besides wages, he got room and board. And what a good cook Mama was! She also did his laundry because he was just like a member of the family.

On long winter days, we sometimes played Rook--a popular game of the day. Often a neighbor or two would come in to play Pitch with Papa and the hired hand. They played just for fun and used matches instead of money. I didn’t know much about the game, but I remember hearing expressions like “High, low, jick, jack, and the game.” And then someone

was always saying “Bid ’em high and sleep in the street.” If Mama saw the preacher coming by to call, she made them get the cards out of sight in a hurry.

The time was the early days of the twentieth century. Postcards were often used for communication instead of letters. Money wasn’t plentiful, and the postcard required only a one-cent stamp. Besides, cards were more interesting. There were funny ones, sad ones, glad ones, pretty ones--all kinds. My mother saved in a huge postcard album every card that came. When one album was full, she bought another. I still have cards

sprinkled here and there, and many are from hired hands. Even after they left, the hands always kept in touch.

Quite a few of the cards in Mama’s collection are from George and Rye (Uriah) Pickens. They were teenagers; their father and stepmother operated a hotel in Custer City. Mama wished they would go the three miles to their home on weekends, but they seldom did because they didn’t like their stepmother. I was too young to remember those days, but I grew to know the Pickens boys well since over the years they returned for visits. George married Mabel Bruce, a neighbor girl, and Rye married a girl he met



Hello, inez.

How are you? I would
shore like taw see you. I
may come out there taw live
this winter. I gess you will
go taw school this winter.
your friend,
George Pickens

in Louisiana. George and Rye are gone, but I still hear from their widows at Christmastime.

Most of the boys' cards were from Arkansas and have dates from 1906 to 1918. George sent most of his cards to me--like this one:

"Hello, inez. How are you? I would shore like taw see you. I may come out there taw live this winter. I gess you will go taw school this winter. Your friend, George Pickens."

Rye's cards had a little more variety, as in this one written to Papa in 1908:

"Dear Sir, I will write you a few lines to let you know I am well and hope you are the same. how are all of you getting along? I haven't heard from you in a coon's age if he didn't live very long. I have been shucking corn. I got 60 bu. Monday. Do you need a hand? U.P.W."

A card postmarked Dallas, Texas, November 26, 1913, read: "Just arrived." One postmarked Fort Smith, Arkansas, six days later had this message: "I am back in the old berg again. Didn't like it in Dallas."

Evidently Papa didn't answer very soon as here came a card with printing on the front that said, "Get acquainted

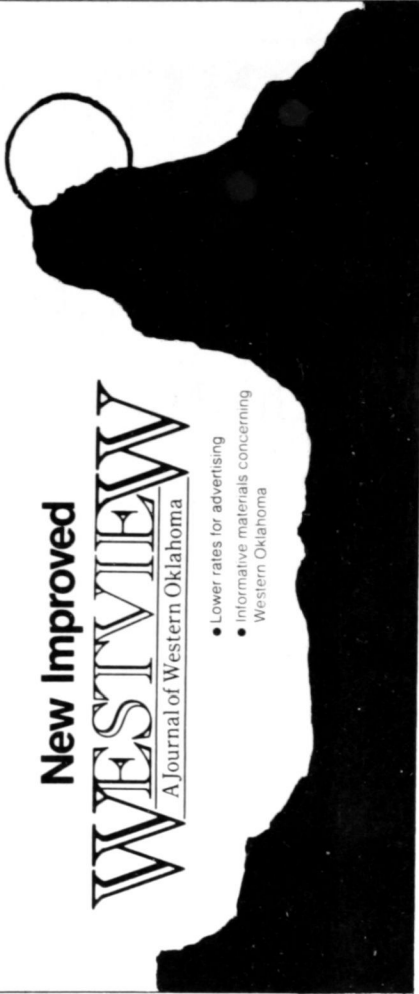
with a pen" and no message on the back except Rye's address.

Bill Daley was the most colorful character of Papa's hired hands. He was a real Irishman--short, heavyset, and thirsty for booze. His conversation flowed on like a cascading river. He hardly stopped to take a breath, and every remark was interspersed with profanity, which was upsetting to Mama.

The Socialist Party was gaining recognition in the political world, and Bill prided himself on being a member. He didn't understand the movement

continued on page 37





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continued from page 11

too well and just kept talking about how the time would come when all property would be equally divided among the citizens. He had been married to a grass widow who had a little boy, but the marriage didn't work out.

The time came that Mama had her fill of Bill, and Papa had to protect him. As usual, we went to town one Saturday afternoon. After we got home, Mama started supper. She was making one of her favorite desserts--Floating Island. Really upset, she called Papa into the kitchen. She questioned, "Do you know what Bill did while we were gone? He drank my whole bottle of vanilla extract just like he did before!" Mama always bought vanilla in a pint bottle from

the man who came around peddling Watkins Products, and the flavoring was 80% alcohol. "I wish you'd let him go," Mama pleaded.

"You'll just have to keep it hid out," Papa said. "What else can we do? He's a good hand. I don't want to lose him."

"I'll tell you something else he's been doing. He's been eating my eggs. I thought the dogs were sucking them, but it's Bill. I saw him go into the henhouse several times and come out with eggs. He breaks out the end on the fence and then shakes the egg into his mouth. The hens aren't laying too well anyway, and I need the egg money to buy groceries."

Bill worked for Papa off and on for a good many years. His cards had short messages like a "greetin'": "Well, Ed, i have got hear all rite and doing

bisnes. your friend" and "i will be back soon, Ed." All were signed W. B. Daley. They were postmarked 1909 or 1910, but he worked for Papa long after that. I know he was there in 1919 when my little brother was three. One summer he went north with a threshing machine crew. He married a widow he met in Kansas. Later his sister went for a visit and came back exclaiming, "I can't believe it! That wife of Bill's sure leads him around by the nose. When she says frog, he jumps; he also doesn't use bad language anymore."

We never saw Bill again; but as was the case with our other hired hands, he brought some vitality into our lives. *(first published in the THOMAS TRIBUNE--June 2, 1982)*



continued from page 8

understood that the early-day woman in Western Oklahoma was truly a super woman--a human dynamo fueled with dogged determination which undoubtedly generated a personal frontier optimism that never failed her.

For without such inner strength and faith, the pioneer woman could never have had the endurance to survive the prairie's harshness and heartbreaks--the floods and droughts, the hail and dust storms, the scorching heat and numbing northers plus the added terrors of smallpox, typhoid fever, diphtheria, and pneumonia--while living in primitive dugouts and one-room box shanties.

It's because of people like Gloria Bish Hetherington who strive to keep these powerful memories alive that we today gain insight into Western Oklahoma's promise first illustrated in our colorful past. *(first appeared in the SENTINEL LEADER--August 30, 1984, in the column "The Farmer's Daughter")*



Homesteading in Oklahoma Territory, a diary of Mary Henderson, can be purchased by sending \$31.50 (includes postage) to

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