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Grandma Higgins (1885-1977)

— by *Elsie Lang*

Mary Higgins' personality and the events that occurred during her childhood united to produce a unique individual: proud, stubborn, independent, and quarrelsome. She was a devoted Church of Christ member, completely intolerant of any other faith, and she never missed a chance to voice her opinions on this — or any other — subject. In fact, starting an

argument was her favorite pastime. At family gatherings, her voice could be heard above all others as she out-argued or out-shouted her seven children, their spouses, and her numerous grandchildren.

Born in Denton County, Texas, on August 24, 1885, Mary Frances Caskey was the first of three children to survive

journey to Oklahoma; and Mary, who was devoted to her father, said that she looked back as long as she could see. But she did not visit her father's grave again until 1969, seventy-three years later, when two of her children drove her to Gainesville so that she could place a marker on her father's grave. She said that the cemetery looked familiar to her, just as she had remembered it all of those years.

Mary's quick mind recorded every detail of the long journey to Oklahoma. Years later, she would tell her grandchildren what the countryside looked like when she first traveled over it in a covered wagon.

Melinda moved into a half dugout with Pleas and another brother, and they assumed the role of surrogate fathers for her daughters. Mary, who preferred the outdoors, worked in the fields and learned to ride horses and break colts as well as her uncles could. Even after she was married and had children, she liked outside work better than housework.

When Mary was nineteen, she married William Robert Higgins, who was only five months older than she. Starting out with nothing except their love for each other, the couple borrowed money to buy a farm close to her uncles' land. A four-room house with a trumpet vine-covered porch became their home, and here they struggled to keep themselves fed and clothed. Here their eight children were born: Clara, who died at age one; Eliza; Beulah Lee; Cleo; Lillie Mae; George; Delmer; and Elmo. The older children tell about one winter when they were unable to go to school until a more prosperous neighbor gave them some of her children's outgrown clothes to wear. Here Mary's beloved Will died of pneumonia in 1934.

When Will died, Mary was left to raise three teenage sons. Together they planted a garden for food, cut down trees for firewood, raised chickens for eggs, milked cows for milk and butter, and managed to survive the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl.

After her sons married and left home, Mary continued to live on her farm alone without modern conveniences until she was seventy. Then she decided to sell the farm and buy a house in Butler. Every day she walked to the post office to pick up her mail and sometimes to the grocery store to buy food. Twice on Sunday she walked to church. She planted a garden in her backyard and flowers in her front yard.

When Mary was eighty, she decided that she needed a "wash house" because she was tired of storing her washing



Mary Higgins' home near Butler, OK.

infancy. Four more sisters were born after Mary: Pearl, Lula May, and twin girls Lillie and Willie, but Willie was accidentally scalded to death at age two by Mary. It was Mary's turn to wash the supper dishes and she was angry because she, always the tomboy, preferred to walk to a neighbor's house for a bucket of milk. As she lifted the kettle of boiling water off the stove, she stumbled, spilling the water on her little sister who was crawling underfoot. She never forgot this incident, of course, but to her dying day she blamed her parents for making her wash the dishes when she was too young to be handling hot water.

When Mary was ten years old, her parents, Melinda and William Henry Caskey, decided to move to Oklahoma Territory where Melinda's brothers had homesteaded a quarter section of land in the Osceola community north of Butler. So in October 1895, Mary's parents, their

four daughters, and an uncle, Pleas Wilson, loaded their belongings into a covered wagon and left their home in Denton County. They had traveled only as far as Gainesville, a distance of some twenty miles, when Mary's father died of consumption.

The situation must have seemed hopeless for Melinda and her four small daughters, but the dead must be buried, so Melinda and her brother asked for the Church of Christ minister who recognized the name Caskey. He discovered that Melinda's husband was a nephew of the previous minister. With the minister's help, the Church of Christ congregation and the townfolk donated the money to pay all of the funeral expenses. Mary's father was laid out in the wagon yard and was buried that same evening, October 18, 1895, in Gainesville, Texas.

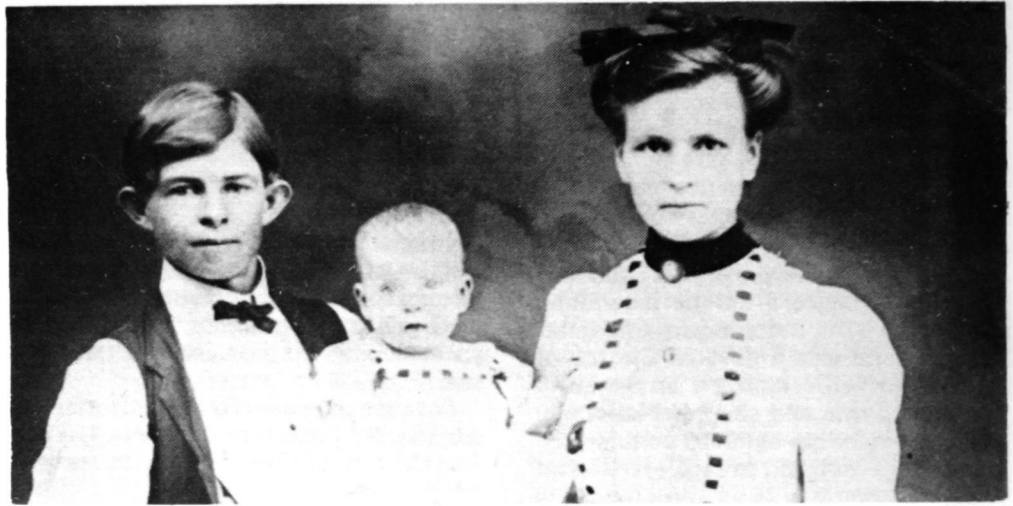
The next morning Melinda, her brother, and her daughters resumed their

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machine on the back porch. She kept mentioning the house to her sons and sons-in-law, but none of them took her seriously. So one day she walked to the lumberyard and ordered boards to be cut to a specific length. When the lumberyard delivered her order, she set to work nailing the boards together. Then she asked two of her grandsons to hold up the sides while she nailed them to a frame. After they had nailed shingles on the roof, she had a "wash house" to show her embarrassed children the next time they visited.

Her cantankerous actions sometimes backfired, though. Once when a son-in-

continued on page 28



Mary and Will Higgins and baby Clara.



(another Western Oklahoma story by our favorite story-teller in Arapaho)

Stranger-Friend

— by R. R. Chapman

One early fall day in 1903 a young man of about 25 rode up to our dugout door in

Custer County, Oklahoma, recently a part of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation.

The youth asked, "What is the chance to stay and get grub for the next week or so?" His blue suit showed considerable wear, but he was clean, except for the usual dust. He wore regular cowboy boots and spurs and a wide-brimmed Stetson hat. His voice was rather low and easy-spoken. His face had known a razor and was free of real dirt.

While he no doubt knew the hills and prairies, he didn't appear to be a working cowboy. He rode a good-looking grey pony and led another grey carrying a heavy pack. His saddle and bridle were good quality, finished off by a quirt and little maguey rope, with a yellow Fish-brand slicker tied on behind.

The stranger said he wanted only board, as he had his own bed and didn't care to sleep in the house. He declared, "I'm not too particular and have the money to pay my own way."

His request was granted; Dad seldom turned anyone away. Dad had traveled and knew what it meant to be without bed and board in a newly settled country of strangers.

The days turned into weeks. Still Joe (as we knew him) lingered in the area. He spent most of his time in Parkersburg, a new town on the new Rock Island Railroad near the Washita River. Parkersburg consisted mostly of twelve saloons, six or seven stores, and a cotton gin. It had quite a reputation for being tough for the few years it held sway at the end of the line before the railroad moved west up the river and Turkey Creek and on toward Amarillo.

Some evenings and stormy days Joe spent at our warm dugout, just visiting, playing dominoes with us or checkers with some happenby cowhand.

The only time I saw Joe make a quick move was when he and a range-riding youngster were playing a close game of checkers. Joe made a foolish move he couldn't change. The other player, through a wide grin, called Joe a disrespectful name Joe apparently had not heard. Before he realized it was only a silly joke, his hand darted quick as a snake's tongue toward a gun under the right side of his coat. He quickly saw he had almost made a serious mistake and joined in the laughter caused by his blunder, which cleared the board.

No matter the weather, Joe slept outside. We noticed he almost always moved his bed to a new location, regardless of where his ponies were staked not far away.

Joe was seldom gone long after dark. Soon after the sun disappeared beyond the red shaley hill, he would come riding in alone to where he had left his bedroll.

One day after he had been with us several weeks, at the place he sometimes called home, he came in earlier than usual. He rode by at a distance from the house, directly to where his packhorse was staked, without giving his usual signal. After tying his bedroll on the pack saddle with a diamond hitch, he stepped into his saddle and rode up to the door. Without explanation, speaking hesitantly, no smile, Joe said, "I am ready to go. If you will tell me what the bill is, I will pay what I owe. I may see you-all again some day; at least I hope so." With a flit of his hand, he turned and was gone. Thus, a friendly stranger passed into the land of somewhere.

Where did he come from? Where did he go? Was his name Joe? Mother said there were tears in his eyes as he turned away to ride over the ridge, away from the setting sun.

law called to say that he would turn in her homestead exemption when he submitted his, she informed him that she would take care of it herself. She evidently forgot and later had to ask him to pay her property taxes because they were much higher than the previous year. But she never liked to "eat crow"; so she made him sorry for saying, "I told you so." Each time the subject was mentioned, Mary would cut him down with her sharp tongue, refusing to take any of the blame.

By her mid-eighties, Mary's eyesight was failing and she had diabetes, which required a special diet and daily medication. When she forgot to take her insulin, she sometimes went into a coma. But she stubbornly refused to tell her children about her health problems, afraid that they would move her into a rest home. Finally, she passed out one day while she was ironing, burning herself on the iron

in her fall. Then one of her daughters took her home with her, but Mary was so disagreeable during her visit that the daughter had to promise to return her to her home as soon as the burn healed.

As Mary's health and eyesight continued to worsen, her children decided that she could no longer live alone. Yet none of them could live with her. So Mary was moved into Hodges' Nursing Home in Elk City where she lived the last five years of her life.

At first, Mary hated her new home, arguing vehemently with her children that she'd rather live in a tent by the side of the road. Gradually, however, she adjusted and enjoyed watching the ducks swimming in a pond located on the grounds. But she refused to watch television (probably she couldn't see the picture anyway) or to associate with the other residents who were, according to

her, having clandestine affairs. Nor would she participate in the group activities of the Home. For example, once when all the other people were busy shelling peas, Mary escaped to the duck pond, using the excuse, "They're afraid I won't see the worms."

Although her eyes and ears were failing her, Mary's mind was alert to the end, and she loved to entertain visitors with stories from her past. Once when one of her grandchildren saw a picture of Mary and Will in an album and asked a question about it, Mary suddenly bristled and said, "Once Fronie [Will's sister] accused me of putting flour on my face. I told her that I never wore face powder and I caught a better man than any of them did!"

Mary died at age ninety-one, but her spirit lives on in her numerous descendants who inherited her dominant traits, both good and bad.

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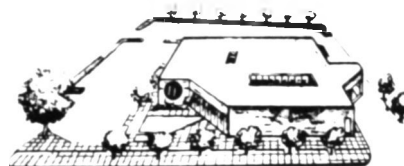
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