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## Homesteading and Afterwards

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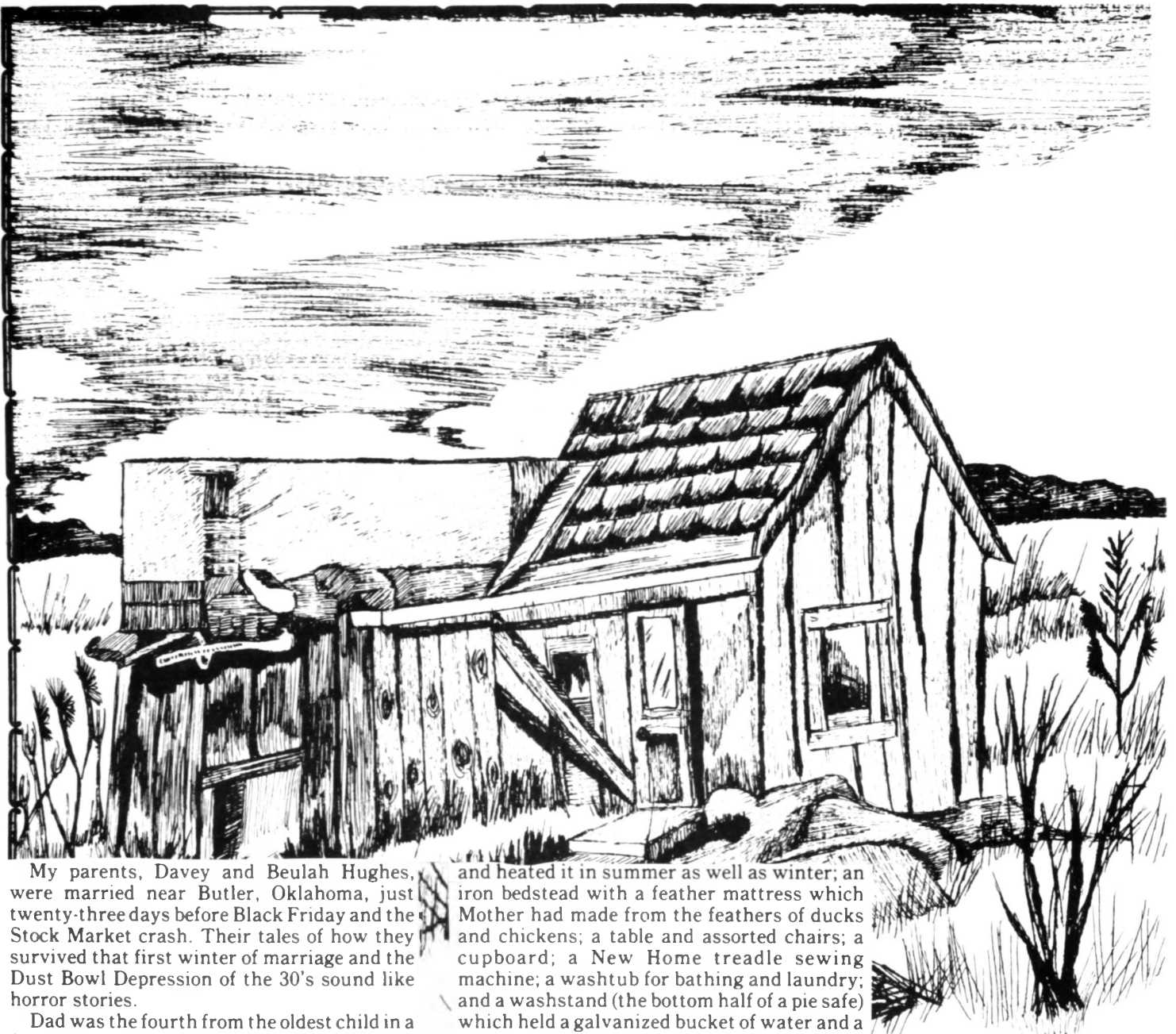
— a SOSU professor reveals that the life of the  
farmer-rancher was sometimes difficult.

## HOMESTEADING AND AFTERWARDS

— by Elsie Lang



David and Beulah Hughes on their wedding day — October 6, 1929



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My parents, Davey and Beulah Hughes, were married near Butler, Oklahoma, just twenty-three days before Black Friday and the Stock Market crash. Their tales of how they survived that first winter of marriage and the Dust Bowl Depression of the 30's sound like horror stories.

Dad was the fourth from the oldest child in a family of thirteen. Mother was the third child in a family of eight. Since times were hard and their families were large, they got little help from their parents. More importantly, they expected none.

Shortly after their marriage, they moved from Dad's parents' crowded house into a one-room clapboard shack (a shack by contemporary standards) which stood unprotected by trees on a rented quarter-section of land that sprouted mostly buffalo grass, sunflowers, thistles, and gyp rocks. To them, their first home looked like a mansion. The outside boards were also the inside walls, and many nights during the winter their breath froze on the bed covers.

Dad had managed to save a little money from selling the pelts of wild animals that he had trapped during the previous winters, and with this money, they bought used furniture and other things for their home: a wood-burning cookstove which dominated the room

and heated it in summer as well as winter; an iron bedstead with a feather mattress which Mother had made from the feathers of ducks and chickens; a table and assorted chairs; a cupboard; a New Home treadle sewing machine; a washtub for bathing and laundry; and a washstand (the bottom half of a pie safe) which held a galvanized bucket of water and a tin dipper for drinking, an enamel washpan, and a bar of homemade lye soap.

There was little money until crops could be raised and sold, and there was little food until a garden could be planted. Dad tells of shooting rabbits and quail as he rode Old Molly, his mule, through the snow to work. He was lucky enough to find a job cutting feed from daylight to dark for a dollar a day — good money then. The only problem was that the job lasted only until the crop was gathered in. Then Dad cut timber for firewood on a neighboring farm, giving the owner two-fifths of the cut wood.

Christmas that first year was bleak. Mother made a fresh batch of lye soap, and Dad drove her to Butler where she went door-to-door trying to sell enough soap to buy presents for both of their families. But everyone was poor, especially the townfolk, so she sold only twenty-five cents worth. With this money, she bought a large sack of candy which they shared with their numerous brothers, sisters, nieces,

ILLUSTRATION BY LINDA FICKLING



nephews, and parents.

Their menus that first winter were monotonous, but there was enough milk (Mother's family had given them a heifer), eggs, wild game, and sidemeat to keep them alive until spring when they could gather polk greens (Mother still remembers her craving for fresh oranges when she became pregnant with me, but vitamin C was not in their winter diet.). During their first summer together, they searched for wild plums, currants, and grapes to can — without sugar. Mother also canned vegetables from their garden, and they exchanged wheat and corn at the mill for flour and cornmeal. In the fall, they butchered a hog, salting it down so that it would keep during the winter.

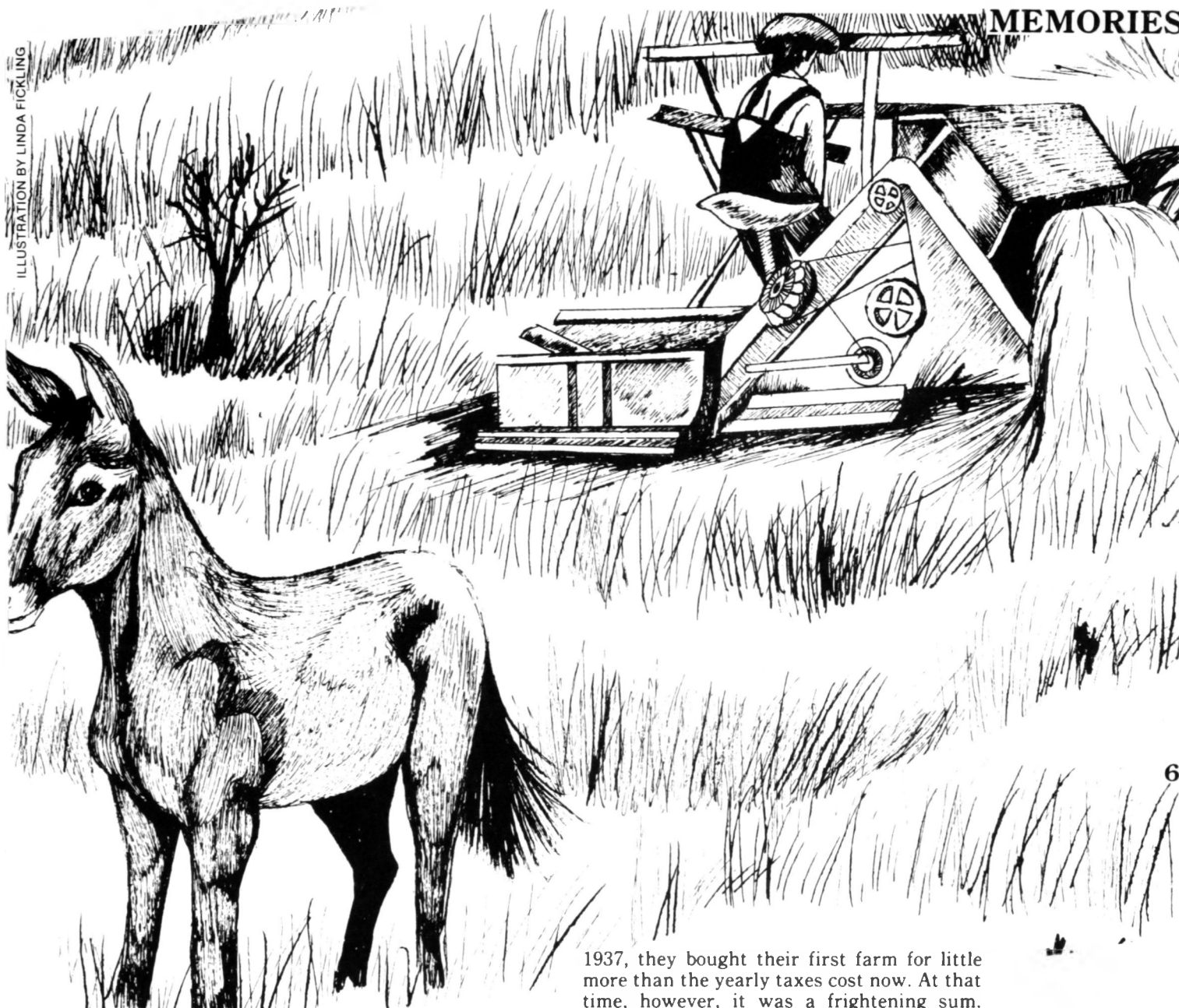
Crops had to be planted and gathered, either by hand or with the help of a team of mules or horses. Binder machines, pulled by five or six horses, required a minimum of twelve men to harvest a crop of wheat, and a large field took two to three weeks of good weather to harvest. This crew of men, usually unmarried boys of neighboring farmers who needed the money their sons could earn, had to be fed three meals a day. And many of the hired hands spent the night, sleeping on a wagon in the yard. To pay

the expenses of gathering in the first meager crop, Dad sold a wagonload of wheat (at twenty-three cents a bushel) and two coops of chickens.

Since there was no refrigeration, Mother prepared the food fresh each day. She often put freshly churned butter in a bucket and lowered it into the cistern to keep it from melting until dinner time, but she lived in fear that someone wanting a drink would dump the butter into the cistern and spoil their drinking water.

When she wasn't cooking or canning, Mother helped with the field work: chopping and picking cotton, building fence, cultivating corn and maize. At night, when it was too dark to work in the fields, she helped with the milking.

Washing and ironing clothes was another time-consuming chore. Buckets of water, drawn from the cistern, were heated outside in a black kettle to which lye soap shavings were added. The white clothes went into the boiling water and were stirred with a stick until they came clean. Then they were lifted out with the stick and were placed in a wash-tub until they were cool enough to wring out, rinse, and starch. While this batch was cooling, the next-to-lightest load of laundry went



into the boiling kettle and so on. After the last batch of laundry was ready for the clothesline, the rinse water was used to mop the floors in the house. Sad irons, heating on the cookstove, were seldom the right temperature. Straight off the stove, the irons scorched the garments; too long off the stove, they were useless.

During their third summer of marriage, in the middle of wheat harvest, their first child was born. Mother's sister had cooked the noon meal for the threshing crew, and at four o'clock that afternoon, Dr. Allen, who had driven down from Leedey, helped deliver me. The doctor charge \$25 for the housecall, and Dad sold a fat heifer and a coop of chickens to pay the bill. It is little wonder that they had only the one child.

By 1935, there was a market for cream. Mother and Dad stored the cream in a five-gallon can which was taken to town to be sold, and the money was used to buy staples that could not be raised on the farm. Occasionally, they bought a luxury item, such as coffee and cocoa or a can of Prince Albert tobacco for Dad. Mostly they saved their money, though, and in

1937, they bought their first farm for little more than the yearly taxes cost now. At that time, however, it was a frightening sum. Under their hard work and supervision, the 320 acres of land on Fox Creek was productive, and under President Roosevelt, the country began to come out of the economic depression.

As the grain prices rose, Mother and Dad used the money to buy more land and cattle. To their household furnishings, they added a telephone, a clock, a radio, and an icebox, and they replaced the wood-burning cookstove with a kerosene stove. But it was not until 1939 that they got electricity. And they had neither running water nor a bathroom until 1953, even though Dad had quit farming when he was thirty-five and had rented his land to his brother.

Now, oil wells dot the land where they started out, but they can never forget those years of struggling to survive. Mother still saves scraps of food to warm up and serve at the next meal, and she refuses to use the dishwasher unless they have company for dinner. Dad still cuts his own firewood to burn in the fireplace and raises a big garden for the hard times that he insists are just around the corner.