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GRANDMA'S LIBERATOR

— by Bob Spraker

“For sheer misery, no torture devised
by man could compare
with ‘wash day’ on that farm.”

“Grandchildren are life’s reward for growing old.”

I learned this much too late in life for it to be of any value to me, and I’m pretty sure my grandmother never found out about it at all.

Grandma was far too busy to reflect on such gentle thoughts. She had problems. She had the responsibility of helping my grandfather run a farm in Caddo county, a farm that was worked with horses and mules and sometimes with grandsons. She

further faced the necessity for being prepared to “Cross over Jordan” at the drop of a hat.

Grandmother was well qualified for what she did. She was built short and close to the ground, and I never once saw her waver in the western Oklahoma wind. She was a devout Christian, and the Good Lord provided her with what she needed. She knew perfectly well that this was because she had been saved and because she was willing at all times to do whatever was needed

to save anyone else she came in contact with. This was particularly applicable to grandsons.

When her grandsons were around, Grandmother had real need for a public address system and the Lord provided her with one. He built it into her throat and lungs.

Grandmother had a voice that could bring a grandson in from a quarter of a mile away. Many was the time that I arrived at her back door panting, tongue lolling and with my eyes bulging out of my head, to be told quietly, "It's time to feed the chickens."

It always seemed to me that her week started on Tuesday and built with intensity until the following Monday, which was wash day.

For sheer misery, no torture devised by man could compare with wash day on that farm. I visited there in summer and could only imagine how much worse it might be in the winter.

In the summer Wash Day began at the crack of dawn out in the back yard. Grandsons were hurled from their beds sound asleep with words like "Wood" and "Water" ringing in their ears.

The black iron pot was set up at some distance from the house. "So smoke won't fill the house," she said. This happened to be some distance also from the well and the wood pile which were sensibly located close to the house.

Many buckets of water and many armloads of wood later the sound of Grandmother's voice shouting — "BREAKFAST!" would echo across the yard one time, no more. Grandsons were expected to hear and to arrive at that table with clean faces, a clean soul and a hearty appetite.

Wash day lasted all day accompanied by great scurrying of grandsons in answer to the cry of "More wood!", "More water!"

I often stood and watched her cut the great chunks of lye soap into the black pot and wondered if anyone ever got "saved" enough to be spared wash day.

In my fourteenth summer visit to that farm, I decided that something had to be done. I had seen in a store in Carnegie, a wonderful device. It was a Maytag washing machine with a square gray tub just like the one my mother used in town except for one difference. This machine had a small gasoline engine that could be started by stepping on a foot pedal. Wonder of wonders! This thing would work on a farm where there was no electricity.

I laid my plans carefully. When the time came for the grandsons to visit I conducted myself in the most circumspect manner. I responded quickly to Grandmother's calls. I did everything I was asked and did it promptly. I even sat with Grandmother in the evenings while she read her large Bible at the dining table by the light of a kerosene lamp. When I thought the time was right I popped the question.

"Grandmother have you ever seen a washing machine?"

She looked at me and smiled.

"I think so," she said.

I put my arm around her shoulders.

"Grandmother, you need one,"

I said in a concerned and gentle voice.

Grandmother looked at me over her glasses and said, "Go to bed, boy."

The next morning was Saturday and I went to the barn with Grandfather and helped him hitch the team to the wagon. I rode to the house with him and jumped off the wagon at the back door. I knew Grandfather always went into Carnegie alone and there was no need to ask to go. Grandmother came out of the house and stood by the wagon wheel.

"Don't forget the washing machine, Melvin," she said, and I would have sworn she winked at me.

Grandfather nodded, clucked to the horses and drove away.

I was on pins and needles all day. Liberation was at hand! No more would I be slaving around all over the back yard for a full day just to get a washing done. In my mind I pictured

the neat gray machine sitting alone on the back porch quietly waiting for wash day when it's small engine would be started. This new mechanical slave would do the wash while I sat in the shade eating cold biscuits covered with chunks of butter and liberal quantities of brown sugar.

The equipment that my grandfather returned with was a little different than my dream machine.

To begin with it filled the entire bed of the wagon and left very little room for the other things my grandmother had ordered from town.

It was nearly dark when Grandfather drove into the yard. He parked the wagon near the house and unhitched the team. Grandmother called from the kitchen.

"Did you get everything, Melvin?"

"Yes."

"Did you get the washing machine?"

"I sure did!"

Grandmother came out of the house and looked at the load in the wagon then toward my grandfather's back as he took the team to the barn.

She made no comment but simply went back into the kitchen. At dinner she spoke once about the washing machine.

"I had a Maytag in mind, Melvin." she said.

My grandfather was enthusiastic in defense of his purchase. I could tell that he was repeating almost verbatim everything that the salesman had said to him.

Two wood tubs were definitely better than one metal one. Everyone knew how durable wood was, especially oak. There was plenty of room on the back porch for this rig. The whole machine consisted of a stationary engine about the size of a Shetland pony and a fifteen-foot long wide flat belt which drove a large iron wheel mounted beside the two large wooden tubs.

There would be fewer mechanical problems, he said, because the wringer instead of being infested with gears and machinery was a hand operated and would never wear out. then grand-

father threw in the clincher, all he had to do, he said, was to change the belt and run it in the opposite direction and he could saw wood with the engine!

My grandmother's only comment was, "Melvin, there is no wood here to saw. We buy it already cut."

Grandfather didn't go to church Sunday. He stayed at home. I was amazed at the answer my grandmother gave to inquiries as to his whereabouts.

"Has an ox in the ditch." she said to each who inquired. Everyone seemed to understand but me. I couldn't believe she would say such a thing. I knew full well that my grandfather didn't even own an ox. I knew further that he was at home at that very moment bolting that monstrosity firmly to the floor of the back porch.

When we arrived home from church, Grandfather had the whole thing all bolted down and hooked together. He read for a long time that night in a book entitled "How to start the engine."

Everyone was roused out an hour earlier the following morning because there was more to do now. Now we had to heat enough water in the black pot to fill the two wooden tubs. Then it had to be carried to the back porch along with enough more water to fill two large wash tubs for rinse water.

Each time I dumped a bucket of water into one of those tubs I studied that wringer. The more I studied it the more it became evident from the size of the handle and its height above the floor that it had been tailor made to be powered by a fourteen year old grandson. My grandmother studied the wringer too and a little later in the day she came to exactly the same conclusion.

Grandfather had no time to carry wood or water because he had to "PREPARE THE ENGINE!" After an hour and a half of tinkering and reading he announced that he was going to "START THE ENGINE!"

This required several people one of whom was a grandson to hold the

"COMPRESSION RELEASE." This was a spring-loaded valve located on the "CYLINDER HEAD." A fourteen-year-old boy by bracing his feet against something strong could push on this valve very hard with his thumb and thereby relieve the compression enough that a strong man could turn the engine over. The strong man, in this case my grandfather, would grasp the folding handle located on the large heavy "FLYWHEEL" and begin to crank. He would continue this until his body had reached terminal velocity then he would cry "Let her go!" At this point the grandson would let go of the relief valve and jam his sore thumb in his mouth while everyone hoped for the best. Sometimes the thing would start.

Grandmother used that washing machine for years. I carried water to it for years. Grandfather never sawed a stick of wood with it. Wash days were longer and more painful. Grandmother never commented on the machine except to say that since there were two tubs it was obvious that each batch was meant to go through two tubs of soapsuds before rinsing.

This meant of course that each had to be run through the hand wringer four times. Two washings, two rinsings, each hand wrung each time.

As I grew older I returned to the farm less frequently, but each time that I did the monster was there waiting for Monday morning.

When Grandfather died, I was not able to go to the funeral. So early in the spring I went to see Grandmother. She was well, she said, and everything was fine. No, she didn't need anything.

In a nostalgic mood I wandered to the back porch to look at the old machine. It was still there. And beside it was a neat gray machine with a metal tub and a wringer with balloon-sized rollers and down below a small engine you could start with a foot pedal.

Inside Grandmother was reading her Bible in the glow of a new electric lamp.

"Grandmother," I said. "You have electricity now. You could have an electric washing machine."

"I know," she said, "but I always wanted one just like that. Didn't you?" ■



"Grandfather had no time to carry wood or water because he had to PREPARE THE ENGINE."