

Memories - Richard Van Vacter

Story number one. Life, in rural Missouri, during the great depression.

My name is Richard. I was born in 1933 during the early years of the great depression. I often said I didn't know what it was like to be poor. My brothers, sisters and I were fed and clothed. Our Mother kept us clean, mended our clothes, doctored us with her home remedies when we were sick and generally kept us safe. The last of the eleven children in our family, Douglas, was born in 1943 during the midst of World War Two. I was number eight. Before Doug, and in the order they were born were Vivian, Dorothy, David, Donald, William, Marjorie, Robert, Richard, Ruth, Juanita and finally Douglas. With so many of us living at home it was not hard to keep track of us in our small four room house. When Doug was born Vivian, Dorothy, David and Donald were married and not living at home. David was in the Army. He met and married a young lady in California whose name was Mary Ellen. Mary lived with us for a while until she decided to join the Women's Army Corps (WACS).

In our home we had no running water. It had to be carried and hauled from a neighbor's house that was a little more than a city block away. For hauling, we had an old buggy, using only the front wheels and the shafts, detached from the body of the buggy. We sat a fifty gallon wooden barrel on the axel and tied it to the cross bar that separated the shaftss. Usually two of us, one a pulling and one a pushing, would take the makeshift

water wagon to the neighbors house, fill the barrel and horse it home. When not so much water was needed one of us would carry two, two and one-half gallon buckets, fill them and carry the water home. Water could have been piped from the neighbor's house to ours, but Dad never had the cash needed to purchase the water pipe, or was never inclined to take on the project. We had rain barrels placed at the end of gutters to catch water coming off the roof when it rained. After it had rained for several minutes we would dump the dirty water out, rinse the barrels and replace them to clean catch water. The women folks would use rain water to wash and rinse their hair, but most of it was used to water the cows and hogs, and on washday for doing the washing. We loved it when it rained because it saved us a lot of water hauling.

Brother Donald took the back axel of the old buggy and drove it into the ground like stake, and made sure it was slightly tilted. He took one of the remaining wheels and placed on axle. The wheel was about two foot above ground, with one side higher than the other. I would run, holding the wheel to get it turning fast, jump on and keep it turning using my body movement to power the wheel. That was our home made merry go round. One time I got it going faster and faster and couldn't slow it down. There was no one around to stop the wheel. Finally I leaned forward with my head close to the hub. I did it because I thought I was going to be thrown off, but to my surprise the wheel began to slow and soon came to a complete stop. I told my dad what had happened. He said that when I was leaning back I was feeding centrifugal force making the wheel gain speed. From that day on whenever I rode our merry-go-round I was careful to keep the speed under control by leaning back to gain speed and forward to slow down.

At bed time the couch in the living room made into a double bed. A rollaway bed was rolled into the kitchen. All the kids, as many as nine at anyone time, were crowded into the three beds. Mom and dad had a room of their own which also had a crib for the youngest. I learned in my early years what it was like sleeping at the foot of the bed. In the winter time there was a constant fight for the blankets. Many a times I woke up freezing cold while my older brothers were snuggled warmly under the covers they had pulled off me.

Mom was a genius at preparing meals to feed us all with only meager amounts of food items. Our meals were simple and satisfying, Everything was made from scratch. Most of our meals did not include meat. We had a large garden where we grew vegetables for canning. Potatoes and onions were stored in our basement for winter food.

We grew asparagus and sold it to local markets in one pound bunches. We had two cows that furnished us with all the milk needed for cooking and drinking, plus plenty of home made butter. We always had butter to spare that we sold to neighbors. For a short period of time mom would spend all of Friday night and Saturday morning baking dinner rolls (buns), twelve to a pan that the older kids would take out, in breadbaskets, and sell door to door. During the summer we would pick berries and cherries on a shared basis. Mom would can or make jelly out of the fruit we brought home. We worked to survive, we played, we went to church on Sunday, and had little time to worry about being poor. Our work was a team effort with Mom and Dad coaching and teaching.

Several of us were not satisfied with the work that was expected of us. Once in a while we would complain, but we learned that complaining about anything, especially work, was not tolerated. Most of us found jobs away from home by the time we were in our mid teens. The money we made was shared equally with the family up to twenty dollars a week take home pay. All we made in excess of twenty dollars was ours. As a teenager I spent a few years working for a commercial nursery nine hours a day, six days a week for fifty-five cents an hour a grand total of twenty-nine dollars and seventy cents a week. The field hands were paid in cash on Saturday evening after work. When I got home the first thing I did was give Mom ten dollars as my part for helping the family.

But that was not the only job I had during my teens. I worked for a few months as a bus boy. I worked in a lumberyard for several months. I clerked in a local fruit market, did some work on construction gangs. I washed dishes in a waffle shop where my Dad was a cook. For the most part I kept busy on various jobs from the time I was twelve. That is when my work life away from home actually began. But the job, as a teen, I remember most was when I spent three winter months as a seventeen-year-old working on a ranch in Nebraska.

I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Money during the depression was scarce. Dad had several jobs working as a janitor. He worked from six in the evening until six in the morning. One of the buildings he cleaned was for the Union Pacific Railroad. Since he was on the railroad payroll he was eligible to purchase groceries and other items from its

Home Supply Market. Home Supply was a company store for railroad workers. I know it was also available for Santa Fe and Union Pacific employees. If you did not have the cash to pay for your purchase, you could sign for it and have it deducted from your next check. Like in the song "Sixteen Tons" many railroad workers owed their soul to the company store. Most of our food staples were purchased from Home Supply and at a slight discount than what it would have cost from other local markets. That is how Dad provided for us during most of the depression. But when the war began he was able to get a job at a government installation that managed "K" rations for U.S. Troops. At that job he was making twice the money and just a little more than half the hours.

Dad and Mom decided we would move to a bigger house. About three miles from our little home was a house three times as big, sitting on a ten acre piece of land. It put Dad further away from his job, but it didn't matter to him. It was a step up from the way we had been living. The only problem was that we rented instead of buying. The people that owned it owned several properties. After several months in the big house we were forced to move to another home of theirs that was down the street a bit. It was still better than our little house, but a step down, and we were still renting. That too only lasted a few months. But while living in that area, five of us that were in school went to a small onerom schoolhouse. The teacher was teaching grades one through eight. She had about thirty students total. How she managed I will never know.

Dad decided he wanted to be closer to his work. He sold off the cows, and by that time we had three, sold our hogs, and moved to the city. That was early 1945 and by the end of

August the war was over and Dad was out of a job, so we packed up our belongings and moved back to our little home of four rooms and no running water. Now we were back where we started.

The great depression was over, but not for us. Dad took a job as a fry cook in a small waffle shop. Mom began doing washing and ironing for several of the neighbors. Kids started leaving home. When the dust settled there were only five of us at home.

Regardless of the difficult times we faced, we managed to survive and keep close ties with the whole family.

As for the job I had on the ranch in Nebraska, it was at that time a high light of my life. I was seventeen, an experienced laborer, at least I thought so. On the ranch I found I had a lot to learn. The work on the ranch was nothing like anything I had done before, except for milking the cows in the morning and evening. The ranch was twenty-five sections. There were five ranch hands, a foreman and a cook. Two of the ranch hands lived in a chuck wagon about ten miles from the main ranch house. One was my older brother Bill and a man we knew from St. Joseph named John. Their primary duties were to feed the cows that were used for breeding stock and the steers that would be marketed in the spring. Another hand named Herb fed the bulls and helped with the chores. My other brother Bob, the most experienced ranch hand, and I fed the yearling stock that numbered around fifteen hundred. After milking the cows we loaded the pickup truck with several sacks of cottonseed cake (cattle feed) and headed for the section where the yearlings were kept. When we arrived my first duty was to saddle a horse that was kept in a fenced

haystack yard. Then I had to ride out and gather the strays and bring them back to the main herd before we could begin feeding. I had ridden horses before, but not one trained for a cattle roundup. It was all I could do to stay on when the horse would move quickly to the right or left to keep the cattle going in the right direction. I soon learned to watch the cattle and move right or left with the horse. From the back of the truck I would open the sacks one-by-one and scatter the feed as Bob slowly drove the truck. After scattering all the feed we go to the stack yard, harness the work horses, hook them, four abreast, to equipment known as a sand-hill sled. The sled would be pulled next to a stack of hay and anchored. Then a cable would be drawn around the stack and the team connected to the cable and the stack would be pulled onto the sled. Bob was very proficient in handling the team. He would slowly move them forward to take the slack out of the cable and when the cable became tight he would yell for them to start and as soon as the stack was half on the sled he would pull on the reins for them to stop. By the time the horses stopped the stack was setting square on the sled. Then we hitched the horses to the sled, pulled it out of the stack yard. The team would begin a slow walk as Bob and I would pitch the hay off the stack to finish the feeding.

At the end of February 1951, Bill, the oldest of the three brothers, had a falling out with the foreman. The result of that argument was that he quit, but not just for him, for all three of us. So even though I didn't like it, I was out of a job. After my ranch job was quit for me I spent a few days in Nebraska before returning to St. Joseph.