

Memories of Growing Up in Beersheba

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I was a postwar baby born in 1947 to Elmer and Isabel (Scruggs) Thompson. Even in my youth, I was captivated by the history of the area. On my maternal side were the von Rohrs from Switzerland and the Scruggs, a Grundy County “First Family” with a patriotic link back to a cold winter spent at Valley Forge with General Washington. On my paternal side was Grandpa John Thompson who operated a blacksmith shop beside the old Stage Road in Tarlton, and of course, there was my great-great-grandfather Tommy Thompson, an early 1800’s “mountain man.” Shortly after I was born, my dad built our home on land purchased from the Tate Family. The property is on Grassy Ridge Road between Fahery Road and Stone Door Road and includes the “livery stable lot” from the Armfield period. The Nathan Bracken home was next door, just to the west. Early on, we sold milk to the Hunerwadels and the Coppingers.

Beersheba of the 1950’s was poor financially but rich in other ways. Many men, including my father, went north to find work. In fact, I entered school at McComb Elementary in Detroit, Michigan, only to return mid-year to the Panhandle School with Mrs. Mable Tate as my teacher. While some families had more than others, the difference was never so great as to break the bond that has always held us “mountain people” together. Looking back some sixty years later, I appreciate even more how the entire community focused on the simple pleasures of enjoying fellowship with their neighbors and basking in the glory of the mountains. As children, everyone was equal, and we all played together with exuberant enthusiasm.

My parents both had a strong work ethic that they were determined to pass along to me. Childhood was a mixture of work and play. The first chore that I remember in detail was keeping the wood box by the back door full. That meant taking my Red Flyer wagon to the woodpile, then loading and delivering the wood to the box by the kitchen door. By the time I was six, I had graduated to gardening tasks. After chopping down several of my parents’ most valued plants and complaining endlessly, my job became one of shelling baskets of peas or snapping string beans. To this day I have no taste for green beans.

Over time, I graduated from gardening to farming and later to helping Dad in construction. By the age of ten, my legs were long enough to reach the pedals on our Ferguson 30 farm tractor. The family owned a large field in Gross’ Cove in the Tarlton Valley and for several years I prepared the field for planting and then cultivated the corn as it grew. Somewhere around the age of twelve it was decided that I’d never be able to drive a nail without bending it, so training for electrical and plumbing work began. I’m forever grateful to my uncle, George Thompson, for his tutelage and patience. Not only was the work satisfying, but it served me well in paying for about one third of my college expenses.

In terms of community, the stores in Beersheba were always the center of activity for young and old alike. Some of my earliest recollections are of going to Henry Myers’ store on Saturday nights. Henry operated a very small store on Highway 56, less than one half mile west of Grace Chapel toward Altamont. While the adults talked, Henry would open a can of Vienna sausages for the two of us to eat while he drew cartoon characters on butcher paper. From about the same time, I recall going to Brown’s Store, on the site of the current Beersheba Market, with my parents while they used the community telephone to call my aunt in Detroit.

However, when it comes to memories and community social life, nothing can compare to Mitchell Hobbs’ small store which was then located on Highway 56 in front of the Black Cottage. This store was once operated by Claude Coppinger and had served as the Beersheba Springs Post Office. In addition to listening to hours of political discussions, weather forecasts and generally tall tales, it was there that I learned to play Rook while sitting on an upturned Coke bottle case in front of a potbellied stove. And given the fact that Grundy County had the last five-cent Cokes in the nation, there was no shortage of seats. During the summer months, children played hide-and-seek nearby while the adults filled the store porch and overflowed into the parking area. A visit to the store was a nightly ritual for many men of the community.

Play in Beersheba for a kid can be best described as unrestrained. There were generally two limitations: “be home by supper” and “tell us which direction you

are going,”—the latter being loosely defined in terms such as I’m going “towards the Stone Door,” “toward the Post Office” (meaning uptown) or “toward the Hotel” (where my father did construction in the winter months). I started out playing under the apple tree at home, building roads in the dirt and playing with a collection of small vehicles. As I grew, I graduated to a bicycle, and it widened my circle of travel and the speed with which distances could be traversed. Not only did it mean fun, it also meant profit through home delivery of the weekly Grit newspaper. This provided much needed cash in my pocket for those five-cent Cokes. But bikes were for fun with the ultimate bicycle thrill being to ride down the mountain without touching the brakes or handlebars. There I learned of the concept of terminal velocity long before it was presented to me in a college physic class. No one attained the same level of acclaim as Gary Brown after he descended the mountain on a bicycle without a chain as proof that brakes were unnecessary for the skilled rider. The ride back up was usually accomplished by holding onto a slow moving truck.

Perhaps the most memorable activity was the two or three winters in which we had heavy snowfall and ice. Several of us obtained classic Flexible Flyer sleds and then turned the Grassy Ridge hill into polished ice. Hour upon hour was spent racing, wrecking, and just generally having fun with Sanford McGee, Buddy Rogers, Gerald Hillis, and others. The cold seemed to worry our mothers more than it did us; after all, we were numb. Beersheba Mountain had great potential for sledding but the highway department was usually too quick to apply salt to the roadway.

Summer months were for bike riding and swimming. While many of the “Summer Kids” had access to the river at John Walker’s farm in the valley, we used the Tarlton swimming hole located behind the school and church. Low water flow generally restricted our swimming to June and July. Another summer activity for me was collecting arrowheads. Our farm, located where the Backbone Road descended to the valley in Gross’ Cove, included an Indian burial mound. After a good summer rain, I would walk the plowed cornfield looking for arrowheads that had been carried to the surface.

In my pre-teen years, Dad had introduced me to the woods and hunting. At about the age of twelve, he gave me a single shot, 22 caliber, target rifle that I still have and will pass on to my son. In my early teens, my cousin, David Rubley, and my friend, Sanford McGee, joined me in camping on T’other Mountain. We would borrow Dad’s pickup, (never mind I was too young to obtain a license) load up on Cokes, Vienna sausages, and pork-and-beans and head to either the Coppinger Place or the Watson Place to camp from Friday night to Sunday. The Coppinger Place is the site of the current Hobbs Cabin in the Savage Gulf State Park; the Watson Place was later destroyed, and the land was taken over by the timber companies. In all our years of camping, I do not recall a single successful hunt. We were campers and lovers of the outdoors, not the hunters that our fathers had been.

Before concluding, I am compelled to mention a friend and a man I so admired. While Beersheba has had many good men over the years, Uncle Elija King ranks high on my list. He was a good and gentle man with a sense of humor well hidden within a dry wit. He was respected as a hard worker. At one point he and his family lived on T’other Mountain and he walked each day to Beersheba to work at a saw mill. Departing before daybreak carrying a lantern, he would hide the lantern as dawn broke only to retrieve the lantern at dusk to light his way home. Uncle Elija understood “signs”, he knew when to plant and when to harvest. Once we were digging a ditch at the hotel to install a pipe when Uncle Elija confided in me that the “signs” were not right and we would not have enough dirt to refill the trench. He was correct; we had to haul dirt to bring the soil up to grade!

Growing up I attended the Panhandle, Beersheba, and Altamont Elementary Schools then graduated from Grundy County High School in 1965. I went on to earn an engineering degree from Tennessee Tech in 1969. Following college, I was fortunate enough to hold various engineering and management positions with ALCOA Aluminum, and Union Carbide Nuclear before joining TVA’s nuclear power program, from which I had to retire early in 1995 for health reasons. Regardless of the roads traveled over these years, strong bonds remained, holding me to my beloved Beersheba!