Center: *My Grandmother, Mary Jane Goodman Wright*
Back row: *My mother, Lona, and Osha*
Front row: *Clarance and Henry*

CHAPTER 1

Henry Boney

I AM BORN ON THE VANISHING FRONTIER

When I think back in 1998 over the 84 years of my life and try to make sense of how I became the person I am today, I am struck by the curious trick of fate that brought me into this world in the midst of one of this country's last frontiers. I was born on August 18, 1914, in an isolated farmhouse in the middle of the North Plains of the Texas Panhandle. My folks were pioneers in that area. My dad had homesteaded our 100 acres in 1906 in the midst of a vast expanse of empty wilderness where just 30 years before, cavalry soldiers of the U.S. Army had fought the last important Indian battle in Texas against a large force of Comanches in Palo Duro Canyon, just 25 miles north of the

Henry Boney at one year of age

farmhouse where I was born.

"Texas entered the twentieth century with its basic society a full two generations, or about 40 years, behind the development of the American mainstream," the Texan historian T.R. Fehrenback observed in his book, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. And this was profoundly true of that part of Texas near the present-day town of Kress where I drew my first breath 84 years ago.

I grew up hearing from Mom the incredible story of the tumultuous night in the winter of 1907 when, after a lengthy separation, she finally joined my father on the farm he had recently carved out of this inhospitable and pitiless wilderness. They had both been living earlier in Lott, Texas, a small farming town, where they had already started a family. My oldest brother Arvis had been born on December 12, 1901, and my older sister Gladys on May 16, 1904. Then in that same year the Texas government announced the opening of its Panhandle to settlers who wanted to homestead farms there. Grandfather Boney was the first in our family to settle in the Panhandle, arriving there in 1906. Shortly afterwards, Dad left Lott with his sister and three brothers in pursuit of his dream of a farm.

Dad, his parents, a brother, and a sister all ended up on farms on the prairie not far from the present-day town of Kress. Uncle Albert had a farm about five miles from us, but he continued to live in Lott, letting a tenant farmer handle his place. My brother Carvis and I sometimes worked there during the summer when we could spare the time from the busy schedule of chores at our own farm. My aunt Janie Boney Thomas and her husband had a farm closer to the town of Plainview, about eight miles from us.

Another brother, Lloyd, ended up on a farm outside Clovis in eastern New Mexico, while Uncle Herbert, the youngster in the family, went north to Amarillo where oil had recently been discovered. He found himself a job in the oil field there.

In the early winter of 1907 Mom received a letter from Dad informing her that he had acquired a farm on the prairie some 30 miles north of Lubbock and asking her to come there with the two children. Mom dutifully packed her bags, boarded a coach car on the Panhandle & Santa Fe Railway Company, and headed off to join her husband.

A blizzard blew in on December 16, the night of her arrival. The weather was dreadful—bitter cold with strong winds and driving snow. The train screeched to a halt in the middle of the dark prairie. Dad was waiting in his horse-drawn buggy beside the tracks. Mother disembarked from the train with her two young children in tow, while a porter handed down her several bags. Then the engine blew its whistle one last time, and the train disappeared into the darkness.

Dad's farm lay only four miles from the railway tracks, but the wind-driven snow made travel almost impossible that night. Even under the best of conditions the flat, featureless Texas backcountry was hard to navigate in the total darkness of a winter night. Dad soon found himself lost in the blinding snow. It took him all night just to travel the four miles to the farmhouse.

And there Mom discovered that their new "house" was really just a hole dug in the ground, covered by a board roof overlaid with sod. A hole had been cut on one side to let the stovepipe poke out. A hastily constructed wooden wall in front contained a door and window. The living quarters inside were small, just one room; I suspect it was no larger than 12 by 15 feet.

Mom used to say that their first sod house was cool in summer and warm in winter, but a single leak in the roof would send streams of dirty brown water flowing down over the blankets and bedding below. This became her introduction to frontier life in the Texas Panhandle.

However, just over a year later Mom had another, more pressing problem to contend with: my oldest brother Arvis had taken sick. Within a few days his condition worsened, the cold developed into pneumonia, and he died shortly afterwards, on January 18, 1908. My parents laid him to rest in a graveyard near the small settlement of Wright some four miles from our farm.

Wright later changed its name to Kress. At the time the Boneys settled the region, Wright was just a post office, school, and general store. In late 1907 the residents decided to relocate their town two miles farther south along the Panhandle & Santa Fe Railway Company line; they named the new town after a popular engineer on the railroad. Today, all that remains of the original settlement is a cemetery with six graves, one of which holds the remains of my older brother Arvis.

Kress developed rapidly, thanks to the railroad. By 1909 the town had grown to include two banks, several stores, lumber yards, a local telephone exchange, a telegraph office, several wagon yards, the railroad station, and a two-story, four-room frame schoolhouse. The population had swelled to 500 people.

The Panhandle was the last part of Texas to be settled. In 1849 a U.S. Army captain scouted the area and wrote later in his report, "This country is, and must remain, forever uninhabited." Virtually the entire area is flat, featureless, and treeless. A big sky looms over everything and dominates the landscape below.

No other part of the state boasts such extremes of weather and temperature. On August 12, 1936, the temperature reached 120 degrees in the shade in the Panhandle town of Seymour. And yet temperature drops of 40 degrees in a few hours are common. Hail, snow, rain, tornadoes, dust storms, and savage winds scourge the land. When I was growing up, during one of our frequent severe blizzards we used to joke, "The only thing between the Panhandle

and the North Pole is a barbed wire fence, and it's down."

The great cattle drives of the 1870s and 1880s, in which hundreds of thousands of longhorns were driven from the grazing lands on the Texas ranges to railheads in Kansas for shipment to the stockyards in Chicago, all passed through the Panhandle. This became the greatest man-controlled migration of animals the world has known. Within a quarter of a century cowboys drove more than ten million longhorns out of Texas. In 1884 alone, more than four million longhorns arrived in Kansas from Texas. Cattle moving shoulder to shoulder backed up for 40 miles on some of the trails through the Panhandle.

The single most dramatic event from this period was the battle between soldiers under the command of General Ranald Mackenzie and a large band of Comanches camped at the bottom of Palo Duro Canyon. This was the last stand of the southern Plains Indians. The canyon, a 120-mile-long crack in the tabletop-flat monotony of the prairie, had long been used by the Indians in buffalo hunts: The mounted Comanche warriors stampeded the galloping bison over its cliffs, some of which are 1,200 feet high. The Indians had been raiding outlying settlements and killing dozens of settlers, so Mackenzie and his cavalry launched a vigorous attack. On September 28, 1874, they located the Comanches at the bottom of Palo Duro Canyon. The soldiers discovered a trail leading down to the canyon floor. Most of the Indians and their families escaped; but Mackenzie's soldiers destroyed their lodges, their winter food supplies, and 1,480 horses. The fleeing Comanches were left destitute, and those who survived the cruel winter surrendered to the authorities the following June.

Today over 15,000 acres of the canyon form a state park. In 1988 my wife Jessie and I visited the site and enjoyed a fine performance of the musical drama *Texas* in the Pioneer Amphitheater.

Through song and dance, a cast of 80 actors brought to life the story of the settlement of the Texas Panhandle. We camped in the canyon overnight in our Airstream trailer.

In the first decade of the twentieth century Texas faced some serious challenges from its neighbor to the south. Revolution brewed in Mexico, with many important Mexican nationals using American territory for safe bases from which to launch raids across the border. The famous bandit-revolutionary Pancho Villa raided American towns across the Rio Grande, prompting President Woodrow Wilson to dispatch General John J. Pershing on a "punitive expedition" into Mexico in 1916 to capture Villa "dead or alive."

Of much greater import to the future of Texas was the discovery on January 10, 1901, of the great Spindletop oil field outside Beaumont in the southeastern corner of the state. Virtually overnight the field established America as the world's foremost producer of oil and secured for the country an almost unlimited supply of energy to fuel the tremendous industrial expansion of the first half of the twentieth century. Spindletop marked the beginning of the age of gasoline. Out of Spindletop and its successors came the automobile and airplane industries, improved rail and marine transportation, and all the comforts and conveniences of the age of petroleum. The modern oil industry (including such giants as Gulf and Texaco) and much of its technology were born at Spindletop.

It was against this historic backdrop that my parents settled the empty wilderness of the Texas Panhandle. John William Boney, my dad, was born on July 2, 1879, at the family farm near Butler, Alabama. They raised wheat and pulp trees for a paper mill which the family owned. When we visited there in May of 1998, I found in the woods on what had once been my grandfather's farm a grave of one of his daughters, who had died at the age of three. The Boneys had first arrived in America from Switzerland in 1738 and settled in

North Carolina. Over the next 200 years they migrated steadily westward—to Georgia, then Alabama, then on to Lott in East Texas, then to the Panhandle, and finally, in the 1930s to Southern California.

Lona Lee (Wright) Boney

Lona Lee Wright Boney, my mom, was born on May 7, 1882, at her family farm outside Lott, Texas. I know very little about her youth. We were too preoccupied with just surviving on our farm for her to reminisce. But I do know that her formal education was minimal. The Boneys owned a farm nearby, and I suspect that Dad and Mom met one Sunday at a Methodist church function. But they never told us children of the exact circumstances of their first meeting and subsequent courtship, whether or not their families approved of the match, and what the early years of their marriage were like.

Within a few years of Mom's arrival at the farm, Dad built a real house for our family. Friends and relatives helped with its construction, as was common on the frontier. This was a comfortable

one-story house with three small bedrooms, none of which had closets. Instead, we had shelves and pegs on the wall from which we hung our clothes. My older brother and I slept in bunk beds in our room. The kitchen, dining area, and parlor were all combined into one larger living space. I doubt if we had much more than 700 square feet in the whole house.

Of course, we had no indoor plumbing or bathroom. The well was a couple of hundred feet from the house. We had to carry into the house all the water we used for cooking, bathing, and washing. The water had a high chlorine content, which probably killed any bacteria but did give my teeth the mottled color they have had all my life.

About 100 feet from our farmhouse in another direction was the outhouse, or "privy," as we called it back then. This was a small vertical box with a door in front which we used as our toilet. Inside was a board with a hole cut in its center, set over a pit dug in the ground. We were too poor to afford store-bought toilet paper, so Mom hung an old Sears Roebuck catalog inside. We tore off pages and used those to wipe ourselves whenever we did our business. Many a time when nature called we had to run through pouring rain or driving snow to our privy.

We also had a windmill with a water tank nearby to supply the needs of our cattle. Dad built a barn for our cows and about half-dozen horses (which we used for plowing and to pull our buggy and included old Dolly, the horse I used to ride to school) along with a selection of chickens, pigs, and turkeys. Another building sheltered our machinery, wagons, and tools.

Once we moved into the new house Mom began having more children. Carvis, my older brother, was born on May 26, 1910, followed by a second sister, Maryle, on July 16, 1912.

I was the last child born to my mother. Grandmother Boney came over from her farm to help with the labor. Mom named me for her favorite brother, a kindly man who 15 years later after our move to the town of Levelland, became a better father to me than my own dad.

A doctor arrived the following day to check on the health of Mom and her new infant, driving his horse and buggy from Tulia, a small town located some 15 miles northwest from our house. The trip took him half a day each way. He pronounced both Mom and infant healthy. Dad paid him in surplus farm produce because in those early years we lived mainly outside a cash economy.

I was the baby in the family. And years later my brother and sisters insisted that the family always babied me growing up during those early years. No one in the family called me Henry; instead, I was "Son." That changed when I enrolled in school. But on the farm I was always "Son." And the family continued to call me that until my marriage to Jessie. She could not stand that nickname and put an end to it rather soon after our wedding.

One of my earliest and fondest memories dates back to when I was perhaps three years old. Mom would take me into our cotton fields each fall when we harvested our crop. This was hard, back-breaking, arduous work. It took about two months to bring in our entire crop. Mom would put across her shoulders the straps of an eight-foot-long sack which she dragged behind her, while she picked from the scratchy bolls the white cotton and placed it in her sack. After just one row she had as much as a 100 pounds of cotton in her sack. When it was full, she would empty it in a wagon parked at the end of the rows and start anew. I have a distinct memory of myself as a youngster riding atop Mom's bulging sack as she dragged it and me slowly along between the rows of cotton plants.

Cotton, along with wheat, was the major crop for this north-western part of Texas. The state has produced more cotton than any

other part of the country for most of the twentieth century; about half its yield has always come from the Panhandle area. In 1913 about two-thirds of the Texas cotton crop was exported to Europe.

Today cotton is harvested by machines that pull off the whole boll in which the fibers rest, rather than picking the fibers away as the crop was gathered by hand. But in my youth we still did it the hard way on our farm. Each fall Mom and all her children went into the fields to harvest the cotton crop. When I was older, my brother Carvis and I, along with some of the other boys at our school, would get permission to pick cotton for upwards of six weeks to help with the harvest.

The farm gradually became an all-consuming force in my life as I grew older and could handle more chores. By the time I was five, I joined my sisters and brother hoeing the crops of cotton and corn to keep out the weeds, cleaning out the barn, and feeding our animals. We usually had on hand 15 dairy cows we children had to milk twice a day, once at about five o'clock in the morning and again in the evening after supper. Carvis and I took turns on the separator to spin off the cream from the skim milk. The skim milk we fed to our pigs and other animals, but the cream we sold in town to provide a major source of income for our family. The money it brought would buy food, clothing, coal oil, and other things we needed. We also had to cover our payments to the bank for the loan on our property.

Another responsibility we children had was collecting the cow chips we burned in our kitchen stove. The plains around us had almost no trees. The only trees I ever saw during these early years were a few scruffy specimens that grew in protected areas at the bottom of Palo Duro Canyon 25 miles to the north. So cow chips became our fuel. After they had been thoroughly dried by the sun, they burned with a clean flame. But if they were still moist, they

gave off a terrible odor and little heat.

In addition to the hours we spent in school, we also worked for four hours each morning and four hours in the late afternoon and evenings doing the many chores required to keep our farm fully functioning. I was usually done by about eight o'clock which gave me an hour or two for my homework by the light of a kerosene lamp. This was pretty much our daily schedule for most of my first 15 years.

Our farm was largely self-sufficient. We raised almost all our food. In the fall we butchered hogs, rubbed salt into the slabs of meat, and hung them up in the smokehouse to cure. Neighbors came over to help with this unpleasant chore.

We also raised apples, pears, peaches, and plums in our orchard and grew a variety of vegetables in our garden. Mom put up some 1,200 quart jars of vegetables, fruits, and meats in the summer, enough to last us through the long winter and spring. We made our own lye soap, lard, and bacon. We also grew wheat in addition to cotton, took the wheat to the mill to have it ground into flour and cereal for our meals. About the only food necessities we absolutely had to buy in town were sugar, salt, and pepper.

My aunt Janie Boney Thomas (born November 26, 1893) recalled years later for *The Kress Chronicle* (July 1,1976) what it was like to make soap and do the laundry back in the early part of the century on her frontier farm:

"We always made our soap to wash clothes. We combined water, lye, and grease and stirred it until it thickened, let it set until it was cold, then cut it into chunks. It needed to 'cure' awhile for best results. Around a big wash pot in the yard, we built a fire (usually of cow chips) and heated the water in the pot. Clothes were rubbed on a board and then boiled in that pot with lye soap added. When they were thoroughly boiled and stirred, we rinsed them in

clean water and hung them on a fence to dry.

"Many times we starched our dresses with a flour-starch; then ironing was really a chore. We spent the entire day ironing. Irons had to be heated on the stove, so the house would become very hot. It would be hard to go back to doing things 'the way we used to away back when.'"

Growing up, I had three sets of clothing: one set of church clothes and two sets of everyday clothes for school and work around the farm. Some were hand-me-downs from Carvis. I also had a pair of high-top shoes and heavy cotton socks for farmwork. In the colder months we always wore long johns for extra warmth.

We bathed once a week, on Saturday, in a large galvanized iron tub set in the middle of the kitchen. Mom always cut my hair and that of my brother Carvis.

Our options for recreation were few. But no matter how barren the material circumstances of our life on the farm, we boys always managed to find occasions to add some fun to our long days of hard work. On Sunday afternoons Carvis and I often climbed on one of our calves for a wild ride around the corral. Or in winter we lashed on our ice skates for some fun gliding across the frozen surface of our pond.

One of my biggest treats as a youngster was to accompany Mom to the town of Plainview or Tulia when she needed to visit the general store. The general store of that time, for me at that young age of six or seven, held every bit as much wonder as a multi-acre shopping mall does for today's youngsters. The general stores in Plainview and Tulia stocked not only foodstuffs but also hardware goods, clothing, tools, and household appliances such as oil lamps, all crowded together under one roof.

But I always ended up in that part of the store where the shelves were crowded with large glass jars full of different flavors of

penny candy, my eyes wistfully focused on the jars with their different colors and flavors. If Mom had an extra cent or two in her dress pocket, she would let me pick out some candy as a special treat.

We children never knew then that we were poor. We always had enough to eat. And in general we were unaware of our lives being materially different from others in our area. After all, the other farm families lived under the same circumstances as ours.

Our entire family was aware of our precarious financial state. We just didn't have the money to do what we all wanted to do. We earned extra money—an allowance, if you will—by doing extra work on the farm. I saved my money and bought my first bicycle and also a pair of ice skates.

Some of my most vivid memories from those early years of my childhood have to do with the dreadful weather we often experienced. Blizzards, tornadoes, and droughts were common. Winters were very hard; we had really big snows in those early years. Some blizzards would drop up to three feet of snow on our yard. The wind would pile it along the fences into drifts that sometimes reached six feet in depth. The cattle had little protection. The winter of 1918-1919 was particularly bad. On November 11, 1918, a heavy snow began falling and continued off and on until March of the next year, never really melting. This proved a disaster for the cattle. Hundreds froze to death in the bitter cold.

We called the tornadoes "cyclones," and they usually arrived from out of the southwest, from the Rio Grande and the Gulf. We had no mountains to hinder their deadly passage across the Panhandle. We lost the top of our barn and our windmill to tornadoes that skipped across our farm. However, we never worried too much about the twisters, having learned early on that living in the Panhandle we had to take whatever came along.

I barely knew my dad and have few memories of him from

those first five years of my life. He was rarely on the farm, leaving all the daily chores to his wife and us children. He held a variety of jobs in the nearby towns of Plainview and Tulia. One of my few memories dates from 1918, when one day he drove his Buick into our yard and took me for a ride to see his sister who lived about five miles away. I have more vivid memories of our school principal who used a belt to whip me if I cut classes to play down at the railroad tracks. He taught us truant kids a lesson with a dozen lashes, but he wasn't a mean man—we deserved our punishment and never held those whippings against him.

Unlike Dad, Mom, on the other hand, was very attentive and nurturing toward us children. Circumstances forced her to play the role of both mother and father. She was a strong and independent woman, caring but tough at the same time. Devotion and perseverance were two of her most important characteristics that made a major impression on me as a boy.

Mom also had a rather dry sense of humor, but we were not a family that made jokes or told stories to get the others to laugh. We were a serious family, deeply religious. That's how we were raised.

If, as it has sometimes been said, work is love made visible, then this was very true of Mom. She was a stocky woman, weighing perhaps 165 pounds, and that was all muscle from her work around the farm. She wore her brown hair collar-length, and it had started to grow gray by the time we sold the farm and moved to Levelland in 1929. She wore glasses and needed a strong prescription for her lenses. I remember her in her ankle-length skirts with the toes of her farm boots protruding out from beneath the hems. On Sundays, for church, she always put on her face a little powder and rouge, but never lipstick because she disapproved of that.

Our kitchen had a large black wood-burning stove. There were four cooking eyes, a warmer for biscuits and bread and a huge

baking oven below. It was trimmed in gleaming solid brass. On one side was a water reservoir to make hot water for tea and coffee. We children always drank milk with our meals, but Mom's preference was for her "sun tea." She would mix some ground tea in water in a gallon-jug and set it on a fence post in the sun for a couple of days to percolate. Then she put it in the pond to cool. When she wanted to relax and take some time out, she would sit in her kitchen sipping a tall glass of her "sun tea."

Mom was a marvelous cook, especially in view of the limited resources she had at her disposal. We always had our biggest meal of the day at noon. That was dinner. Supper came about six and consisted of leftovers from our noontime meal. She always made all her own bread, rolls, and biscuits. Sometimes Carvis and I would take our .22-caliber rifles out into the surrounding plains and shoot a couple of rabbits for the dinner pot.

The most important meal of each week was always our big Sunday meal, and that remained pretty much the same throughout all those years on our farm. Mom almost always served us fried chicken, potatoes, vegetables, and perhaps a freshly baked apple pie. Sometimes we made our own ice cream, usually vanilla or strawberry.

The kind of frontier cooking practiced by my mother demanded hard work and enterprise. We were almost entirely self-sufficient. And people today will have difficulty realizing that all food preparation back then started from scratch. There were no shortcuts. At Sunday dinners, for example, we always ate fried chicken. That meant in the morning one of us, most likely my older brother Carvis, had to catch a chicken from the yard for Mom to fry in her big cast-iron frying pan on the top of our kitchen stove.

Mom always made Christmas a special time for us in spite of our limited resources. We had no tree, of course; there just weren't any around that part of North Texas. At school we made

decorations for the season to hang up at home. At home we had an exchange of gifts in the morning. These were always minimal kinds of gifts because we had so little money. We usually did not buy our gifts in the stores but rather made our own to give one another. The big event of each Christmas day was, of course, the dinner. Sometimes we had these at our house, but often we were the guests of another family from our Methodist church.

We were so isolated that Mom had to handle all our medical emergencies. The doctor was too far away and too expensive to call except in an extreme emergency. She had a variety of home remedies she relied upon. When one of us came down with a stomach pain, she had a bottle of "black draught" which she had bought at the pharmacy in town for just such a situation. It was a flavored syrup in a bottle. For all our respiratory problems, including pneumonia, she put a mustard pack on our chests. Those were so very hot! For our colds she gave us a medication she mixed from a little turpentine and lots of sugar to clear the phlegm out of our throats. For herself she might soften her chapped and windburned skin with a mixture of buttermilk and cornstarch.

Once my sister Maryle accidentally cut her foot. The wound became infected and developed into gangrene. Mom took her by train to a hospital in Temple, Texas, where she stayed for four weeks. The doctors there wanted to amputate her foot, but Mom refused to give permission. And my sister recovered with the full use of her foot.

Mom raised the talent of making do to an art form. On our farm she redefined what "woman's work" was. For her it meant everything from herding cattle, seeding our fields in spring and harvesting our crops in the fall, doing repairs on our buildings, and cutting up a slaughtered pig in addition to the more conventional woman's chores of baking an apple pie for Sunday dinner, sewing a

new frock for my sister Maryle or Gladys, and dipping our dirty clothing in kerosene to kill the fleas and lice embedded in them.

A single woman living alone with her children in the vast empty spaces of North Texas in the middle of a last frontier required a special kind of courage. I understand that now. But as a boy growing up in Mom's household I took her courage, self-reliance, and competence for granted. After all, Mom was the only woman I had really known in my boyhood. I suppose I assumed all women were pretty much like her. Only decades later did I realize how unique and special she actually was.

I suspect that Mom drew her strength in part from our isolation. This gave her an autonomy and independence she would never have found in a big city or even in one of the towns in the Panhandle region. Curiously, with the isolation of our farm came a freedom to solve our problems in any way she could. Thus, the farm was simultaneously both an imprisoning and liberating experience. But this wisdom comes from many decades of life experience. As a boy, I simply accepted our reality at its face value and never gave it another thought.

We were a deeply religious family. We attended the Southern Conservative Methodist church in Kress, about four miles away from our farmhouse. Our church dated back to 1907. All the local men, including my grandfather and Dad, pitched in to help build it, as they did on the schoolhouse later. Other denominations, including the Baptist and Presbyterian, used our church on Sundays as well. A visiting minister who was riding through the country would often be asked to stop and hold a service for one of the other denominations. First the church had no fence around it, leaving cattle free to lick paint off the building. Once, after it had been freshly painted, four cows died from lead poisoning. Soon afterwards the parishoners constructed a barbed-wire fence around the church with a

stile to allow them to enter the churchyard. The congregation numbered about 50 people.

We would always dress in our Sunday best and travel there by buggy or on horseback. Our pastor was a man named Shepherd. He had a daughter named Jo Marie, and I had a terrific crush on her. But I never asked her out. I was too shy, I think, but then I never had enough spare change to cover the expense of a date.

By the way, Mom's ambition for me was to be a Methodist minister. We often talked about that in our private conversations. Had I done so it would have made her very happy. But we both knew that we would never raise the money for me to attend the seminary.

The Kress school was located near the railroad tracks about four miles from our farmhouse. It was a two-story structure that had been erected in 1915, replacing the original two-story frame building. (One resident volunteered to tear down the old school and used the timber to build himself a house in town.) The total enrollment was about 130 students. Classes contained about 10 or 12 students each. The six lower grades were held in the first-floor classrooms, while the high-school classes were taught upstairs. We had no school buses then, of course. Students went to school by horseback, buggy, or foot. We walked when the weather was particularly pleasant. None of the teachers there impressed me enough that I remember their names today. At the end of one year I was held back a grade because I had missed so many days helping out on our farm.

One of the most important features regarding our life on the Texas Panhandle farm was our isolation. That part of the state was lightly settled then and continues to be so today. Our situation was made worse by the fact that we lived not on a main road but on a rural road that served only three farm families. It had virtually no traffic. That meant we never had strangers stopping by to ask directions and staying to share a meal and bring us news of the outside

world. We had one neighbor about half a mile to the north, but there were no other neighbors within walking distance. Our isolation was really quite complete. We children, however, never gave this situation a second thought. We always assumed that everyone lived like that.

Mom had no women nearby for her to converse with. Our neighbors came over only when someone was ill or there was another kind of emergency. Mom's only social activities during the week were the Sunday church services and her trips to Kress to sell the cream. Only on those occasions did she talk to adults rather than children.

We had almost no sense of events in the world beyond our immediate region. I don't recall ever seeing a magazine or newspaper at our farmhouse. The horrors of World War I, for example, completely passed us by. For four years enormous armies faced one another across zigzag lines of trenches running hundreds of miles from the Swiss border northward and fought for control of a no-man's land of barbed-wire entanglements, shell craters, rotting corpses, and minefields. That was a war of mass attacks that were no better than mass suicides, clouds of poisonous gas, and endless rain that turned battlefields into vast mud holes. On July 1, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, British forces alone suffered 60,000 casualties, with 20,000 dead. By mid-November when the battle finally played itself out in the mud, the British had suffered 420,000 casualties, the French 200,000, and the Germans about 450,000. The Somme front stretched for 12 miles. Never was more than eight miles of enemy territory gained.

But the thunder of the exploding shells and the screams of the dying and wounded soldiers never penetrated our isolation on the farm, where we labored each day in blissful ignorance of the horrors of modern trench warfare in far-off Europe.

On the other hand, our isolation saved us from the scourge of the great flu epidemic of 1918, which broke forth upon the world

in the months following the armistice that brought an end to the hostilities in Europe. The deadly influenza swept the globe like a modern Black Death, killing as many as 40 million people, far more than the 13 million battlefield deaths in the war. In the United States alone some 600,000 people fell victim. But we residents in the Panhandle were never affected. Our isolation saved us from that danger.

In 1917 Dad started working for a Buick dealership in Plainview. The company today is not a name associated with automotive distinction. But 80 years ago Buick was the financial pillar on which General Motors was created, and for a time it produced some of the most popular cars sold in America. Dad's best-selling model was a touring car. It had no windshield or side windows, but at 15 miles per hour there was no blast of air on one's face. And remember, at this time paved roads were rare in America. The Texas Panhandle was crisscrossed with ungraded and deeply rutted dirt roads over which the rare automobile crawled along at painfully slow speeds to avoid breaking its springs or an axle.

The year of 1919 saw major changes come to our family. First, my older sister Gladys married a man from Finney, a town near Kress, shortly after her fifteenth birthday. She had always been unhappy on our farm and despised the work that we to do keep our heads above water. Mom finally reached an agreement with her that if she handled all the housework, except for the cooking, then she would not have to do any of the farm chores. For several years she had been living in a state of quiet desperation, and she jumped at her first chance to leave the farm. She married Dave Finney, an older fellow, who worked as a foreman for the Panhandle & Santa Fe Railroad. There was no way she would have hitched herself to a farmer.

A much more momentous change came a few months later when Dad deserted his family and fled to Clovis, New Mexico,

where one of his brothers had lived since 1906. Dad had always been a womanizer. After Mom discovered this, she began to distance herself from him emotionally, I think. They also had a disagreement over the size of the family. After my birth, Mom declared absolutely there would be no more children. However, Dad wanted a much larger family and was unhappy with her decision. I suspect that may have been a trigger behind his decision to seek a new wife.

On one of his visits to Clovis to see his brother, Dad met a woman named Jessie Jones and soon found himself infatuated. She was a good deal younger than Mom and was eager to have a family. They were finally married in 1925, after Mom had agreed to a divorce. Eventually, Jessie gave Dad a total of six children (one stillborn).

When the time came, Dad simply gave notice and moved out. We were all in a state of shock. After the divorce, he never did provide Mom with any financial help toward the expenses of raising us children. He occasionally dropped by the farmhouse for a brief visit when his travels brought him back to Kress. But for the most part he kept his distance and silence.

The loss of Dad devastated me as a five-year-old child, a fact I did not realize until much, much later. I dealt with the pain of his absence by simply blocking out all my memories of him from those early years of my life. Even today I have only one or two weak memories of him from that period when he was still an integral part of our family structure.

The temptation today, had Mom been living now, would have been for her to see herself as a hapless victim of a shiftless and irresponsible husband. But this was never her way. She was no defeated woman, overburdened by care and imprisoned by fate on her frontier farm.

Mom took over the farm after Dad deserted his family, but this was simply an extension of what she had been doing all along.

After all, our dad had always spent most of his days in town at his Buick dealership or whatever other job he had at the time. Mom and the children were back on the farm. She oversaw the milking of the dairy cows and the selling of the cream in town; the planting and harvesting of our vegetables and fruits; the slaughter and smoking of the pigs and cattle for our own needs; the canning of fruits and vegetables for the winter months; the maintenance of the farm, including all our financial dealings; and the supervision of the education and other needs of us children. She orchestrated it all. She was a remarkable woman, indeed.

I have often wished that Mom might have kept a journal during those years on our frontier farm. It would make for fascinating reading today. But, of course, she was always too busy to allot even a few minutes of each day to journal-keeping. And her education was rudimentary at best. She cooked, sewed, butchered, and farmed, all the while living her life under unbelievably harsh circumstances at the time, including scourges that were Biblical in scale—infestations of grasshoppers, blizzards, tornadoes, extreme cold and heat, and drought. But at the time none of us thought our lot particularly hard. That was all we knew, and we simply accepted it as our God-given way of life.

In 1920 Mom took her first tentative steps into the twentieth century when she had a telephone installed in our farmhouse. Of course, in those early days the telephone was a very different instrument from what we have today. It hung on our kitchen wall, a wooden box with a speaking tube and a hand-held receiver. Like everyone else then, we were on a party line shared by the other farming families along our road. Some on the line liked to listen in on the conversations of their neighbors! To operate our telephone we had to pick up the receiver, crank the handle several times to get the attention of the operator at the switchboard in nearby Kress, and

then tell her the name of the party we wished to call. She, in turn, would connect us. The whole business of telephoning a friend or neighbor could easily take several minutes just to make the connection.

At about the same time, Mom splurged on a new Victrola phonograph machine that brought some music into our home for the first time. This had a large sound tube and played cylinders which held the music, not the vinyl disks that came along much later. We had to crank a handle to get the machine to work. Mom saved our music for the evenings, when she liked to put on a cylinder, sit back in an easy chair, and lose herself in the waves of music that swept over her.

Most farmers in the Kress area did not own threshing machines. Instead they relied upon one of several itinerant crews, each with their own machine, who moved from farm to farm throughout the Panhandle country. They would cut the wheat with a binder and tie the sheaves into bundles, which would then be shocked and hauled to the nearby threshing machine with its engine and separator. The engine furnished the power for the separator by means of large belts, and cleaned the wheat as well to prepare it for the market. The crews all carried their own bedrolls and often slept nights at the farms where they had spent the day harvesting the wheat.

In the late summer of 1927 I got a job with a threshing crew in Kress. They serviced the neighboring farms, threshing the farmers' wheat crops. I got some on-job training and learned how to drive the firm's small truck. (I don't recall even getting a driver's license. Back then I don't think one was needed!) My chief responsibilities required my keeping the crew in the field well supplied with drinking water and gasoline for their thresher. I worked at the job for two weeks for a pay of $2 a day. And, believe me, that was good pay back in those years!

About 1927 my older brother Carvis talked Mom into buying

him a used motorcycle. But this did not last long. He was rather reckless and managed to run his cycle into a fence, tearing himself up pretty badly while wrecking his machine.

Then Carvis convinced Mom to buy the family a used Dodge coupe (black, of course). That became his pride and joy. One day he ran off to Dallas in the car and found a job working as a bellhop at a hotel. When he finally returned to our farm, the family Dodge was pretty badly dented. So Mom took it away from him, and we boys went back to the horse and buggy for our transportation.

Next Carvis talked Mom into borrowing money from the Farm Credit Union and buying a large Moline front-wheel drive tractor, a combine, and an old truck. When he finished with our harvest in 1928, he went on the road to northern New Mexico with the tractor, combine, and truck to help the farmers there harvest their fields. These were always festive occasions, when the farmers and their neighbors got together socially to help one another out. A big feast was always provided by the hosting farmer at the end of the day. By sunset Carvis would be finished and ready to move on to the next farm where on the following day the whole operation would be repeated.

I accompanied Carvis. This was my first opportunity to see some of the world beyond the narrow confines of the Kress, Plainview, and Tulia area where I had spent my life thus far. I drove the truck. He made good money but gave me very little, so after a few weeks I struck out on my own and headed back toward our farm. I didn't have the money for a bus ticket, so I hitchhiked. Remember, I was just 14 years old at the time! My cousin also helped me out.

The end of 1928 brought momentous changes to our family. Mom decided to sell our farm. Now that Carvis was gone she had only Maryle and me to help her, and the three of us simply could not

operate the farm by ourselves. She quickly found a buyer and got a good price. Then in early 1929, with the help of some family and friends, we moved to the town of Levelland, where her favorite brother Henry lived.

Her timing could not have been better. Cotton, which had sold for 18¢ a pound in 1928, dropped to 6¢ in 1931, forcing many cotton farmers into bankruptcy. Later, in October of 1929, Wall Street experienced its worst crash in history, heralding the start of the Great Depression.

Then the Dust Bowl expanded to include the Panhandle area, as vast expanses of farmland lost their topsoil to the fierce winds that blew in from the north. We were safely settled in Levelland by then. But I often have wondered if some of those terrible dust storms that blew through our town, blocking out the sun and making life miserable for us, might have carried dirt from our farm near Kress.

Our move from the farm near Kress to the town of Levelland represented much more than a simple change of address. It meant that we, as a family, were transported from a primitive rural existence that was just a few short years away from being a frontier experience to a modern town comfortably ensconced in the end of the third decade of the twentieth century. This brought a series of radical changes to my own life.