

Forged in a Country Crucible

1936 – A typical year on the Farm

Chapter One – A Winter Morning Starts the New Year

I woke to the sound of the coffee grinder. It was below freezing outside but Dad had banked the fire the night before by covering the burning backlog with ashes. The only warmth during the night had been the heat remaining in the fireplace bricks and that generated by the bodies of two adults and seven children living in the house. I knew Dad had already started fires in the fireplace and the kitchen stove, because he always did that before he ground the coffee beans.

It was New Year's Day of 1936 and I was 15 ½ years old. I was big for my age, and I had been working in the fields since I was eight or nine and doing hard work since age 12. I had one sister and five brothers, all born after I was.

I slept in a room behind the kitchen in a weather-beaten farmhouse in Tennessee. We had no gas, no electricity, no running water, and no plumbing. The toilet was either out the front door, across the road and into the woods or out the kitchen door, behind the house and into the privy at the edge of the field. The Works Projects Administration (WPA) had built the privy for us in 1933. Before that, we went either into the woods or behind the barn.

I dreaded going to bed when the weather was cold. I had no way to warm the sheets except to lie still until my body heat warmed a spot; if I moved, I had to warm up another spot. Pioneer families put hot coals into a metal box and slid it over the cold sheets to warm them, but we had nothing like that.

I wore long underwear and a long-sleeved work shirt in bed. Mama had sewed the shirt, the pillowcase, and the sheets from cloth salvaged from empty fertilizer sacks. It was coarse, but I didn't mind because I had worn such clothing for years. The material was oyster white and had a tighter weave than brown burlap. Sometimes we bought flour in cloth sacks with red or blue patterns, but Mama used that cloth to make dresses and underwear for herself and my sister.

The fertilizer company printed the chemical analysis in big black numbers on the fertilizer sacks and we were never able to remove them. The cheapest fertilizer available was 2-10-2 (that's the chemical formula, the ratio of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium), commonly referred to as 10-2-2, and for years we used only that. A slightly more expensive formula was 4-10-4, or 10-4-4. Once, Dad and Mama were sitting on the front porch while the kids were playing in the yard. Dad said times must be getting better because last year all the shirts had 10-2-2 on them and now two of them had 10-4-4.

The old iron bedstead was spotted with rust. The homemade mattress was 4 inches thick and stuffed with cotton. It lay on a section of woven wire mesh that was attached to the bed frame by pull springs spaced six inches apart along each side of the metal bed frame and across each end. The patchwork quilts were stuffed with cotton batting.

I knew that either Mama or Eunice (my sister) would be up soon and making biscuits and thick, white gravy—the standard morning meal for the family. Soon I would have to get up and wash my face and hands for breakfast. My bladder was full but I did not want to use the slop jar (chamber pot) under the bed because I would have to empty and wash it later. So I lay in my warm spot and thought about the year ahead.

We expected to plant 20 acres of corn, 10 acres of cotton, five acres of hay, and five acres of miscellaneous crops such as watermelons, potatoes, sorghum cane, and peanuts. We had a half-acre plot reserved for a garden and 10 acres under fence for a pasture. We did all the planting, cultivating, and harvesting with manual labor, using two mules and a few basic farm tools. Dad used to say he farmed the way an Irishman played the fiddle, by main strength and awkwardness. He was Scots-Irish, so he was poking fun only at himself.

I knew I would be busy in January and February going to high school, cutting firewood and cook wood, repairing fences, cleaning stables, and spreading manure for fertilizer. In March I would be following the two-mule turning plow after school and on Saturdays, preparing the land for planting. High school ran from early September to late May.

In April we would plant corn and Irish potatoes, and in May we would plant cotton and several other crops. During most of the year, some crop would need planting, some would need cultivating, and some would need harvesting. There might be a week or two of slack time in August, after the last cultivation ended and before the harvest of the sorghum cane began.

I wondered if there would be enough rain to produce a good crop—some recent years had been so dry the land produced very little. I wondered if there would be enough money to pay for the seed, feed, and fertilizer we would need. These were Dad's worries but I shared his anxiety. He always hoped to have enough money left at the end of the year so he wouldn't have to borrow to put in a crop the following year. So far, it had never happened.

My parents thought it was important to own the farm rather than to sharecrop. But mortgages were risky because the entire balance came due each year. Most borrowers paid only the interest and renewed the mortgage for another year. If the mortgage holder insisted on all the money, the borrower was in trouble and might have to move.

Since Dad and Grandpa had owed their mortgages to the man who sold them the land, they worried he might not let them renew at the end of the year. So they had gone to the Commerce Union Bank and refinanced their mortgages to pay off the original mortgagee,

Cullen Bass. I heard my dad say some time later that they had dodged lightning because Mr. Bass had decided to call in some of his other loans and would not renew them.

Compared to some we were poor, but I was happy. Since my parents were buying the farm, we didn't have to move frequently as some sharecroppers did. Dad said we were better off than people who lived in town and had to live out of a paper sack. We always had food from the produce we grew. It was rarely elegant, but it was wholesome.

We were quietly proud of our independence and our parents taught us the satisfaction of earning a living by hard, honest labor. Dad said we could look anyone in the eye because we kept our word and paid our debts. We had been through some hard years, but we were thankful for what we had.

The Nashville Tennessean newspaper had recently run stories about a German named Hitler and about the possibility of a war in Europe. That was disturbing news, but I had farming and high-school algebra to worry about and that helped take my mind off what was happening thousands of miles away.

Finally, I got out of bed, retrieved my overalls and my denim jumper jacket from a nearby chair, and dressed quickly. It would have been too dark to see inside the privy, so I hurried out the front door, crossed the road, and relieved my bladder beside a little path in the woods. That was closer and more convenient. When somebody said he had to go out, nobody thought he was looking for fresh air or sunshine.

Someone I knew told me a story about a farmer who went to visit his cousin in the city. They showed him how their indoor plumbing worked, and that afternoon they cooked and ate barbecue in the back yard. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," he said later. "They eat in the yard and pee in the house."