

# 65 Acres

By Miss Janet L. Hughes

Sixty-five acres was all it took for Mamaw and Papaw to sustain themselves and grow a crop of city-born grandkids. I miss those days. At four years old I knew something big was happening. The adults around me were crazy busy with activity I did not understand. All that activity was the establishment of the 65 acres as the retirement farm, and hand-built, two-story homestead for Mamaw and Papaw. They had just finished four decades of working life, including the last eighteen years living on the land, and working the cattle on a rich man's 17,000-acre ranch.

During my time on the 65 acres I hand fed my future hamburgers and steaks, stole my scrambled eggs from ornery hens, and wrestled the earth for the vegetables I ate for lunch and dinner. Countless stars winked at me keeping watch while I drifted to sleep. Countless sunrises greeted me as I lay in the bouncy upstairs black-iron bed. Only enough room in that nook of the upstairs south bedroom for that bed to fit. That mattress had more peaks and valleys than the Texas Hill Country. It was awful.

As clear as yesterday is the twinkling dance of the early morning heavy dew that blanketed the clearing between the back porch and the stand of Post Oak trees in the east. How many times did I nervously wiggle my way between the strands of the barbed wire fences? I never quite got the hang of it. I learned to catch catfish at the stock tank with a bamboo pole, piece of string, and a minnow impaled on a hook. The water level of the stock tank nestled in the stand of Post Oaks was always one of the first topics of discussion when we arrived from the big city. Took my life in my hands more than once trying to avoid bones in my cornmeal covered catfish.

I'll not delve into the details of my trips to their outhouse, or the coordination challenge concerning the use of a chamber pot. However, I must give praise to their Sparks Springs 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent Church perched atop the rise in the dirt road for its uptown outhouse. Ladies side was three holes across, for three butts at time, with not a shred of privacy.

Hours and hours were lived in the kaleidoscope of lawn chairs snapping beans and shelling peas. The melody of conversation joined the waving sheets and towels on the clothesline keeping the tempo of passing time. I learned young there were much bigger things that kept tempo as well. Those 65 acres were nestled in the middle of a shallow north/south valley. So many, many evenings I was rapt in wonder watching the lightning show and colors of the thunderstorms grow in intensity. The sky was my silver screen. Towering storms traversing the Red River Valley 60 miles north were my motion picture. I once stood still next to Mamaw long enough to witness a full moon rise against a bank of clouds in the west at sunset; a known omen for a long sleepless night of intense stormy weather. Oh, the relief after sunset waiting for the subtle kiss to caress me as the night air coming from the north down the valley chased the warm humid air away. I can feel it even now.

I don't recall a single conversation amongst us city cousins wondering why the chicken house was to the left all by itself, the barn, called The Lot, was way back in the Post Oak trees near the well house, and why were there so many piles of mysterious things surrounding the school bus? It never dawned on me to wonder why an old school bus was a storage shed in the first place. Each known or mysterious thing no matter where it was 'stored' had purpose and utility to that generation. Things were 'stored' everywhere without seeming rhyme or reason. As I got older and traveled to faraway places, I came to understand we Lone Star citizens specialize in Texas-country-messy, not Amish-pristine. Why that is, is one of life's mysteries.

My seemingly timeless experiences on the 65 acres spanned more than two decades. Then, the tempo of time stopped. Mamaw and Papaw passed. The times spent with aunts, uncles, and cousins at the 65 acres became a different same, and for a short while only a memory. I believed all was lost, but I was mistaken. Me, lil' sis

Donna, and cousins Gilbert and Richard are the four of eight grandkids raised in the city limits by former country kids. The love Mamaw and Papaw had for us became our sliver of the 65 acres.

A recent day came when city-cousin Gilbert and wife, precious Sheri, poured a home foundation on his sliver of land. In an instant the tempo of time resumed for ALL of the 65 acres. I've only seen photos, my looking glass to the future. Gilbert enthusiastically asked his aunt, my mother, "Did you notice my mailbox?" Just having a concrete slab poured doesn't count. You don't have a stake in the ground until you have a mailbox. What an endless walk for little legs to accompany Mamaw on the quarter mile caliche drive from the main house to the highway. Though young, I knew it was a highway since it had painted stripes and not just a black top. We'd reach the end of the drive, then embark on a balancing quest to cross the cattle guard. We would dutifully look both ways for sparse traffic, and then run across the two lane highway to the mailbox. Whatever was in the mailbox was no concern to us, it was the journey.

The new slab is lacking walls, but has two white rocking chairs, side tables to match, and a TV tray made of wood. The best part is the view of a new meadow that did not exist before. That meadow was never my playground. It was thick tall grass, choking underbrush, and snakes back in the day. One time only I rode on the back of the riding lawn mower with Uncle Preston, Gilbert's dad, while he mowed Mamaw and Papaw's pasture. I saw spiders in the tall grass the size of my palm. I was done.

Penny and Oliver have their names proudly painted on an old wooden plank hanging on the fence. They happen to be goats. Nothing got named by Mamaw and Papaw, but Dot, Bud, and Frisky, the back porch dogs. All other critters were fair game for the kitchen table. Sheri has a real garden fence, not the barbed wire Mamaw and Papaw had. The fence is adorned with terra cotta pots growing cactus, and mysterious things holding dried gourds. I'm not sure what to do with the garden fence sign stating "We don't rent pigs." Come to think of it, I haven't seen any pigs in the photos.

The Lot has acquired two stars and stripes. One is brightly colored folk art, the other proudly waves. There's a giant sunflower holding its head high above The Lot gate. What a happy looking place. Would my future hamburgers and steaks have tasted better back then?

There's more than one outdoor living room fashioned from a kaleidoscope of lawn chairs, something brand new to the 65 acres. One is for visiting, the other for roasting marshmallows. How strange to think one would set a fire for reasons other than burning trash. On a few occasions I got the privilege to set fire to the 55 gallon steel drum, but only when the wind was just right. It would not have made sense to Mamaw and Papaw to sit around a fire pit to visit. You sat around a camp fire when you were actually camping. Firewood on the 65 acres was lit in the stout red brick fireplace when the seasons turned.

There's a red orange metal bed frame and wash tub planters with green growing things gracing the shore of the stock tank, oh, and two pink flamingos and a plastic-light-up-yard-Santa. The catfish never had it so good. All the known and mysterious things in the photos are not 'stored,' but 'placed.' They are no longer for purpose and utility, but reminiscing and celebration. No longer is the place Texas-country-messy, but Texas-rustic-shabby-chic. The 65 acres today are not meant to sustain, but abide. I can see Mamaw and Papaw smile.

Gilbert and Sheri spoke to the aunt with great elation about future family gatherings. They are the source of new life on the 65 acres. Their vision of the future encompasses the loving memories of the past, the here and now establishing themselves, and the future memory making of our extended family. They have flung wide the welcome mat, and made it known to the family that gatherings and holidays are once again in play. They can't wait. Me either.

It has been decided that our first official holiday family gathering is this coming Easter. I could not escape the significance. Could there have been a better holiday? Nope. To think we will celebrate new life on the 65 acres on the very day we remember our Savior. He, in eternity past, envisioned how rising from the dead would

make real His power to gift each of us new life out of our fallen past, provide endurance in our present struggles, and a make confident our hope in our future if we choose Him. That power He put in play is love, just as Gilbert and Sheri have put in play their love for the past, present, and future of our family. We will celebrate, make memories, and resume keeping the tempo of passing time with yet another different same on the 65 acres.