

The night was dark and cold. What was left of it anyway. On Thursday morning, we woke up at four thirty before the alarm went off at five, anxious to start our day. There was breakfast and chores to do before we made the journey to Centerville, Iowa. It takes a little over two hours to get there, but the scenery kept us interested, and coffee from a thermos kept us alert. As the sun peeked over the horizon, we were well down the road, watching for deer and turkey.

The back seat was empty for the first time in years, and I wished it could have been different. This time my Aunt Jean didn't get to go with us. Twenty years ago when she knew we were going on a vacation to visit her sisters she called me and asked to reserve the back seat. When she declined to go this week, she said she'd miss pestering Harold. For sure he missed her. I'm not as observant at their game of "I Saw The Deer First." Harold usually wins the first go around with Aunt Jean coming up a close second. One time Aunt Jean was determined to come out the winner. She declared she saw a deer first. It was dead on the shoulder. Harold told her she couldn't count that one. The deer had to be alive. She accused him of making up the rules so he could win.

Cousin Lawrence was watching out the window when we arrived in Centerville. Before we had a chance to get out of the car he and Aunt Liddie were coming to greet us. Aunt Liddie opened the garage door so we could store the trunk full of fruit and vegetables in the cool we'd brought with us. A few weeks ago, Aunt Liddie said she'd like to have enough apples to freeze for pies, but she hadn't been shopping. We had more than we needed. I asked if she wanted a bushel. She said that was a great plenty. We took her three bushel. In half filled feed sacks the amount was deceiving. Half of the apples were yellow delicious anyway. They're still green so hopefully she'll have the red apples worked up before she has to start on the yellow ones.

We sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee for awhile, checked out their new flat screen television and then went to Manhattan Steak house to eat. I always take pictures in front of the place when we're there in the fall. A display of corn shocks, mums and pumpkins make for a nice background. Guess we were a couple weeks too early this time. All I could find for everyone to stand beside was a silly looking duck with a story to tell. Seems a Chicago gangster once hid out in the area and even applied for a marriage license in the Centerville Courthouse. He was killed two years later in a shootout at Milan, Missouri where he'd been hiding from the law.

After lunch, we traveled south of Bloomfield and shopped at a newly opened Amish Discount Store. I couldn't find anything I wanted, but Aunt Liddie had a small box full of goodies. South on highway 63, we drove to an Amish grocery store we go to every time we visit. This time I went wild buying Jello, a sack of each flavor of bulk Jello to use with fruit. Also, I bought four dozen can lids in a sack. Not sure which is going to run out first my empty jars, the canning lids or my enthusiasm for the job. Either way it will be good to know I've finished my fruit canning project.

We enjoyed the visit which seemed much too short, and after one last cup of coffee, we had to leave. Dark comes early now. Harold had to get home if he was going to gather eggs before the chickens went to roost.

The following story was in Aunt Jean's share of a book I wrote for my mother's family titled Digging Up Brights and Bishops. I didn't put the book on the market, because I thought only our family would be interested. However, I have started a version of this book with stories and pictures about the advancements that made a difference in our lives from the early 1900's to the 1950's when I was a kid in Vernon County, Missouri. Things like going from a wood ice box to electric refrigerator. A wash board and tub to a wringer washing machine. That book will be on the market soon. So here is another story about me picking apples with my Aunt Jean and cousin Debbie.

It was in 1980's when Jean, Debbie and I decided we were going out to Art Allen's Apple Orchard east of Belle Plaine and pick apples to make money.

I didn't think that job through as thoroughly as I should have so I made a good candidate for Murphy's Law. What could go wrong did. Art Allen was tickled to have the help. I can see why now.

We began by filling our baskets from down falls on the ground the first day until Mr. Allen came along and catch on to what we were doing. He said we had to climb the tree and get the good apples. Those were the ones that made him money. He showed us how to pluck the apple stems off the limbs in just the right way so next year he'd have a good apple crop. He pointed to where some of the wooden step ladders were sitting among the trees. I didn't mind carrying a ladder over to the tree, but I'm afraid of height so climbing the ladder as high as I could go wasn't a good thing for me.

But eager beaver I was so I went through the trees after the ladder. When I tilted it toward me, I didn't realize how top heavy the ladder would be. I lost my grip when the ladder came at me and bent my thumb backward farther than it was ever suppose to go. In just a short time, my thumb was three times bigger than it should be and throbbing.

Debbie Showers, good sport that she is, offered to climb up the ladder to pick so Jean and I let her. The apple crop was good that year. The limbs drooped to the ground. Jean and I could easily picked what we could reach.

The next day, the ladder was in another spot so I went after it again, making sure to be more careful this time. At least I thought I was going to be. As I carried the ladder I tripped over a stick in the grass and the ladder whammed me in the shin. Ouch! I sucked up the pain and managed to limp on over to Debbie.

For outdoor women, the days were beautiful fall days, crisp and dewy, to start with then the sun put just enough heat in the air that we warmed up. Now is where I tell you the ladder I chose had a false bottom at the top. The bees hibernating in that ladder top warmed up to with Debbie sitting on it. Next thing we knew, darting buzzers was flitting all around us. Debbie screamed as she came down the ladder and grabbed her legs one place than the other. The bees had crawled up her slack legs. She was in misery and making the bees really mad. One of them came at me and stung me on the cheek.

There was an old man high in a tree a few apple trees away. He saw what was happening and he yelled at Debbie, "Get out of those pants."

Jean and I agreed with him.

Debbie said, "I can't take my slacks off in front of that man."

"Take them off," yelled the man.

Jean looked over in the next row at a yellow delicious weighed to the ground with apples. A good place to hide. "Go behind there, Debbie, and get rid of the bees."

Meanwhile, Jean and I were moving over to another tree without the ladder to get away from the angry bees. Debbie came back out, smarting in various places but she shook loose the bees. All of a sudden, the boss, Mr. Allen, showed up in his golf cart and wanted to know what the commotion was all about.

I told him about the ladder being full of bees, and Debbie was stung several times. If he wanted proof he should just look at my cheek. It was swelling up even as we speak. The old man came very close to me to study my cheek with his jaws working back and forth. He said with sincerity, "Chewing tobacco is good for bee stings. Stand still and I'll spit on that sting."

"No thank you," I replied as I backed behind Jean.

Now that I know the story about curing Short's snake bite with chewing tobacco perhaps that old man had the right idea. At any rate when I limped into the house that night, I took inventory. In three days I'd sprained a thumb, bruised a shin and had a smarting bee sting that disfigured my cheek. I'd had all the apple picking I wanted so I called Jean and told her I quit. That was the only job I didn't stick with. I so admired Aunt Jean and Debbie for sticking out the season that fall. Now that's what you call hearty Bright stock. I'm not sure why I didn't inherit the genes but oh well.