



When my mother was seventeen and needed a mastoid operation, it was paid for by Grandmother's painting of the doctor's wife. Portraits were not her strong suit and the family was not happy with it- until their little dog barked at it in recognition- and licked it. They were then convinced it was a good likeness.

Grandmother was such a wonderful, unforgettable character, our mother's mother, I must record some of my memories of her. She was Ellen Ida Mathis Bright, teacher, poet, artist, mother and homemaker, born in Lebanon, Tennessee, May 12, 1868. With her family when she was 15, like many another Southern family, after the Civil War, went west to settle in new lands, came to Central Texas in covered wagons. My grandfather, two years before they married, travelled along with them. He was William Gustave Bright, age 21, and was not happy at home after his mother died and his father remarried. His stepmother had red hair and was unkind to little Gus and his brother- so Grandpa didn't like red-headed women the rest of his life.

Grandmother's father was William Henry Mathis- Mathis being a form of Mathews- of English origin- fought in the Civil War and brought back his copy of the New Testament- given him for his breast pocket- with a Yankee bullet buried halfway through it.

Ellen's mother was a Jerden and her mother was a Duke- probably part of the later-to-become famous Duke tobacco family of North Carolina. There were three brothers, Joseph, Jacob and George- and her two sisters, Nettie and Emma. Ellen, being the oldest and Aunt "Emmie", the baby, she and Grandmother were always close friends, with their families. This closeness extended to the 2nd and 3rd generations- we were always good friends with Aunt Emmie's children. They were older but loved us because we were Aunt Ellen's grandchildren. They grew up on a farm near Florence, Texas, not far from Georgetown, just north of Austin where my mother and her siblings lived. We never met Aunt Nettie who lived in West Texas with her family- but we knew Aunt Emmie, Uncle Joe, Uncle Jake and Uncle George. They were the dearest of relatives, the men, gentle giants, all of them.

The summer that Earl and I were seven and eight we spent with Grandmother -and Grandpa. Uncle Jake and Uncle George were there for awhile to build on that wonderful sleeping porch which extended the length of the house on the east side. That little house, much larger after the new addition, had three rooms downstairs and a bedroom up some steep and narrow stairs, with a tiny bathroom which, looking back, seemed to have

2.

been an afterthought. It was between the sleeping porch and the kitchen. At the north end of the porch was the well, our water supply, close to the kitchen, in front of which was the dining room where we ate all our meals. In front of the dining room was the sitting room where we never sat- and a front porch with a swing where we often sat.

The sleeping porch was connected to the kitchen by a short hall, to the side of which was the afore-mentioned bathroom. An outhouse provided sanitary facilities. The front of the sleeping porch boasted a settee and two cushioned chairs- for company visiting on a hot day. Back of these were our beds.

Grandpa was away as usual in his horse and buggy, selling fruit trees to the German farmers. He was a star salesman for Ramsey's Austin Nursery. The Ramsey family starred in all the important functions of Mother's growing up in Austin with her two brothers and a sister.

Grandpa came home every week or so for a few days, then he was off again on his sales route. I think he got along better with his customers than he did at home. He disrupted our pleasant routine. Suddenly, Grandmother's attention was taken from us to attend to his needs, and washing his clothes was one. The wooden, hand-cranked washing machine was set up outdoors near the washpot, where the water could be heated. Earl and I liked to operate the hand-cranked wringer.

Dan Webster, the horse- all Grandpa's horses were named Dan Webster- in order of their appearance, Dan Webster 1, 2 and 3- when one died the next one appeared- had to have special attention- fed, watered and turned out to pasture- then hitched up again so Earl and I could have a ride to town in it. At home we had an Apperson-Jackrabbit, an elegant car for its time. I remember the fold-down seats in the back- to accommodate all of us. This was 1922 and Grandmother was still driving her 1918 Chevrolet touring car Uncle Hobbs had given her. He had the Chevrolet agency in Austin. She spent almost as much time under it as she did in it- and in this position once- at the other bigger house- a salesman came by and, assuming that the cover-alled legs belonged to a man- spoke to her as such- she had a deep voice and on the phone was often mistaken for a man. She answered him from under the car so when she emerged, got to her feet and he saw she was a woman, he was so shaken he left rather hurriedly.

Back to Grandpa and his home visit- water had to be heated for his bath after which with much road dirt gone, fresh clothes and a shave, he was ready for a relaxing time with his grandchildren, and a good meal. Then he wanted to read his newspapers and catalogs- and catch up on his mail

3.

for he always kept in touch with his brother John, back in Tennessee. He and John were descendants of John Bright, the British statesman.

Early in Ellen and Gus's married life they had a general store in Wichita Falls where Indians came in and sat on the floor for hours at a time. Later they earned teachers' certificates and taught school. I remember hearing about this period when Uncle Hobbs was one of Grandpa's pupils and he showed great favoritism one day when another boy was hit by Uncle. Grandpa asked, "It didn't hurt much, did it?"

Their home that summer of Earl and mine's visit was near Paige, Texas, south and east of Austin, on the way to Houston. From Paige, where the train stopped, south down a country road to the big frame house where the renters lived- a German peasant family who spoke little English and worked barefoot in the fields together, taking their baby boy and his older sister in charge of the baby- who was laid on a quilt under a big shade tree. Lunch was in a bucket nearby and water in a jug.

We passed this house that belonged to Grandmother and Grandpa- then farther down a sandy road to the little house that had been reclaimed from years of neglect- and made into a comfortable home for them. There was a barbed wire fence around this house to keep out the cows- which were led out to pasture every morning after milking. Earl and I would fetch them in the evening. I remember one of them getting into the sorghum patch and over-eating, dying later from bloat.

While Grandpa was at home- and after he had a good meal, and newspaper and mail read we were commandeered to play dominoes with him. He was a sharp player and always won- but it gave us some inter-action with him. He was an affectionate grandparent but nothing to compare with Grandmother who never gave us money as he did but gave us so much more, herself.

She gave to all who needed her services or sympathy. One Saturday morning we all scurried around doing chores and getting ready for Sunday early so we could go to town in the afternoon. We were dressed and ready to leave when this poor woman and her three little ones arrived, unexpected. She needed Grandmother's help to make underwear for the children- on her sewing machine. The woman had none and knowing Grandmother to be a capable and caring person, showed up on her doorstep when things got desperate. Earl and I were designated sitters while the two women sewed up the cut-out pieces of cotton nainsook which was used to make underwear. I remember my sharp disappointment at not getting to go to town and I am afraid I showed it for the woman mentioned it to Grandmother who reprimanded me gently.

4.

A large sandy, open ground separated the house from the barn and chicken house from which we heard loud squawks one night. Grandmother knew what that meant- a copperhead in the hen-house. She got up, lit a lantern and got a hoe. Next morning this big snake was draped over the fence, minus his head.

I remember climbing up into the bins that held the bran and chops to feed the cows and dipping up in a bucket enough for their feeding, then watching Grandmother do the milking. At home milk came in bottles left on the front porch early in the morning by the Metzger Dairy milk man.

Grandmother cooked on the little black iron, wood-burning stove, breakfast and dinner- supper was whatever was left over from dinner. All the work on that farm, Grandmother did. I don't remember Grandpa doing any farm work, but he was a conscientious worker in his field and always brought home his earnings. They went to church when he was at home and he always sat up front near the preacher, agreeing with him audibly from time to time throughout his sermon. They were devout Methodists.

There were blackberry thickets in the woods near this little house and we would be given lard buckets and sent to pick enough for a blackberry pie for supper. I remember wearing long sleeves and a sun bonnet- to protect arms and face from the thorns. It didn't take long to half-fill several buckets.

Once- when we first arrived from the train Grandmother had us change our clothes and hoe the weeds out of the corn patch on the west side of the house. We enjoyed this as it was such a change from our routine at home. We would be rewarded with a trip to the swimming hole- which was a good-sized creek west of the cornfield about a ten-minute walk from the house. Keeping fit was important to Grandmother as was modesty for she had sewn black sleeves and long black stockings onto her bathing suit. The creek area was a long winding waterway where tall trees shaded the water, and grapevines overhung the swimming area. It was great to get in that cool water on a hot day. When we got back to the shady sleeping porch Grandmother made us a cool drink of her own home-made grapejuice. This was mixed with the cool well water and some sugar. It tasted wonderful!

After supper we sat on the porch and listened to the summer night sounds- and far in the distance we sometimes heard the singing from a negro church. Sometimes a German family would visit in the afternoon- from the little community of Grassyville where Grandmother taught in the one-room school. For this Grandmother put on a pretty summer dress and her white shoes

5.

and stockings. Out of the kitchen "safe" she brought a layer cake with caraway seeds in the icing- which the visitors particularly liked, and glasses of grape juice.

After milking in the evening, the cream separator- a noisy contraption- came into use. Next day Earl and I churned, taking turn about. We liked the resulting butter and buttermilk- with our dinner, but found churning a bit boring after awhile. It seemed the butter would never come. To keep these two items cool, they would be lowered into the well til needed. We had to drive into Paige if we wanted ice to make a freezer of ice cream for Sunday dinner. This was wrapped in an old quilt for the drive home.

I remember Sunday Church services in the little Methodist Church- a small frame building up on stilts. The windows had no screens so the reed fans not only cooled us but kept the bugs at bay during the service. Afterwards Earl and I didn't want Grandmother to linger too long visiting because we were always hungry and knew fried chicken, mashed potatoes and cream gravy were waiting for us- also black eyed peas from the garden and sliced tomatoes- and the ice cream! I marvel, looking back, at all Grandmother did in the course of a day.

Once she was called on- by the county agricultural agent- to teach a class of young negro girls to can tomatoes- for their gardens were overflowing with this produce. A stove was set up outdoors under a tree and here the processing took place- in big pans of boiling water- the tomatoes all peeled, left whole, stuffed into half-gallon jars and put in the water bath for the specified time, I remember how pleased they all were, saying goodbye and thanking Grandmother as they left.

At one point in our visit, Aunt Janet came and she too, slept with us on the sleeping porch. There was a long canvas shade on a wooden cylinder covering the main part of the porch- which could be lowered in case of rain or when the sun was too hot in the morning. In front of this was the wash stand with a big china bowl and pitcher- and a place for towels and wash cloths to be hung above or stored below behind the closed doors. There was a storm one night and the canvas shade was lowered all the way to the floor behind the wash stand to keep out the rain. The wind blew so hard it made the heavy canvas and wooden cylinder blow the wash stand over and broke the china bowl and pitcher. Only the floor got wet but the drama and noise of it all, and Auntie's frightened voice made such an impression on us.

After Auntie went back to Desoto Mother came and brought Randolph, our

6.

baby brother. I will never forget how she looked, holding him, as she stepped down from the train- so fresh and lovely in her dark flowered dress- about calf-length as the fashions were in 1922. Her hair was encased in a scarf of a particular type- just for your hair- in lieu of a hat. She was a breath of city life and beauty standing in front of us- we were so glad to see her and Randolph, a gentle child- we all adored him- and he was my special doll- for at home I made a costume for him and pushed him down the sidewalk in my doll buggy. I also took him to the Rialto, the neighborhood picture show to see Tom Mix and Ruth Roland- on a Saturday afternoon- and was teased by the big boys. When I think about it today, I can't believe all I put him through without his objecting.

Other memories of my visits- very special- I must include: One, Grandmother's teaching in that one-room school, mentioned earlier. This I only heard about for we were never there when school was in session. Her German pupils- whose parents spoke only broken English at best- had to take part in the regular monthly Friday night recitations- to show their parents all they had learned in that week. They were shy and didn't want to perform but Grandmother never took "no" for an answer. To achieve her goal- and sometimes to see that they looked good in the process- she had to take extreme measures. That sometimes meant crawling under the school house and dragging out the most reluctant pupils so she could give them a haircut, no doubt badly needed- and sanctioned behavior- by the parents who loved and respected the teacher. She could do this because she loved them. Everybody felt Grandmother's love. Her love did not require an object. Like the heater heats, she just loved. She never looked up to anyone, nor down on anyone. To me that is true greatness.

I like to remember some of the trips in her little Chevrolet- especially crossing the shallow but wide and rocky creeks on our way to Austin. Down the embankment we crawled onto the free-flowing rocky water- then up the other embankment onto the sometimes, barely discernible road.

When I was 14 Grandmother and Grandpa were living in Giddings- farther south and east from Paige- on the road to Houston. Grandpa decided to run for County Treasurer. He was a respected citizen- but running for any office against a German! He was soundly beaten- but that is not the part I remember best. It was those barbecues- political gatherings where the candidates made speeches and all the people gathered to intermingle and listen- and eat! In the small country communities the German

8.7,

barbecues were at their best. I remember the long trenches that were dug- the fires built on the bottom and the half-carcasses of beeves suspended above them- and the whole covered with canvasses and left to cook all night. The slow cooking made that wonderful aroma that assailed our nostrils before noon the next day. The German farmers' wives brought big round loaves of home-made bread and huge jars of home-canned pickles. More than that would have been superflous- but there probably were other things. That was my introduction to barbecues. How could I forget?