

Planting Corn

by Cynthia Raxter

My dad grew up along the French Broad River in Brevard NC, on a dairy farm. He was the oldest son of 14 children - born 1921. They farmed in the spring and summer and logged in the winter.

He said down by the river the corn field was so long, he'd plow down and back, and he'd have to have a biscuit. Twice again and it'd be time for lunch. After lunch six more rows, and it was time to do the milking and get the chickens in.

When the days were long in the summer - like now - he'd get another row or two in before dark.

He wasn't plowing with a tractor - they worked mules. There was one Ford pickup on the farm to haul milk to town. (Daddy said he never had to mow ditch banks - his sisters - my aunts kept them cleaned out learning to drive.) All work was done by hand and with draft animals.

With mules you don't say, "Stop!" "Go!" "Turn right!" or "Turn left" - you say "whoa and giddyup" (which we all hopefully know from watching Bonanza!). To turn right you say "gee." To turn left, "haw."

"Gee and haw" was significant again just a few years ago:

I was home in the mountains, washing dishes with my mom. My dad was in the den. And my Jack Russel, Rascal, sneaked in despite the "no dogs in the house" rule.

Daddy wanted to read the newspaper. She wanted attention. She kept trying to jump in his lap and he kept fussing, "Rascal get off of me!" "RASCAL you're messing up my newspaper!" "Stop it girl!!!"

After about five minutes, I looked at my mom and rolled my eyes and wiped the soapy water off my hands. Jack Russels - the more excited you get the more excited they get! And my father was past red-faced mad.

"Daddy Daddy Daddy! You have to say 'Rascal down!'" Rascal immediately stopped spring-jumping off the ottoman, and plopped her little bottom on the rug, and looked at me! "Okay Mom! WHAT WE DOING NEXT?"

This just made my father madder. "What's wrong with saying 'Get off of me!!!!'???"

How could I explain this? "Daddy, Rascal doesn't speak English. It's like... like... the mules on the farm... to go right or left..."

He finished my sentence, "...you say gee or haw!" He laughed. "You've taught her some English words! She's does what you say... Well! Most of the time!"

I laughed too. And realized for the first time in a long time, me and my father were talking - not just butting heads.

From then on when I was up home, I was showing Dad Rascal's new tricks. Then he'd take her to the feed store or the post office and show the fellers. Those years - me, him, Rascal - before Parkinson's took over... well... that time was golden.

Later, I started telling stories to children. The "gee and haw" stories and one more always seemed to be told together. Finally I realized, this last story was when my dad and his father learn to talk to each other - not just butt heads:

My father was planting corn in that long cornfield. Two kernels in a hole - a hand-width apart. Two kernels in a hole - a hand-width apart. Two kernels in a hole.... Can you imagine how long it would take a 10 year old boy to plant that field of corn? He got about halfway across and he dropped the bag of seed.

It was 1931 - the Depression - and they still had to spend money to buy seed corn.

Corn doesn't breed true. Field corn will cross with sweet corn. When it does, your field corn will rot in the silo, and your Silver Queen will be too tough to know.

Give my dad credit - he was only 10! "I picked it up... well, most of it." And what kernels were left he covered over and ruffled up the dirt so none would be wiser.

But we all know what happened. Spring! "And the sun comes out and dries up all the rain...."

When Papa walked in the barn my dad said he knew he was in trouble before Papa even spoke. "Come with me, Calvin."

Across the farmyard and the old farm road and over the fence into that big old cornfield. And, there. In the middle. A hundred corn plants were growing up in a wad.

Daddy said Papa didn't whoop him, he didn't chastise him - he just looked at him and said real quiet, "Calvin, learn yourself good: no matter where you go and what you do, your sins shall find you out."

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