

A Family of Florida Sharecroppers

By **William Alvis Proctor**

I was born William Alvis Proctor in High Springs, Florida, on October 26, 1927, and as a boy I was known as "Billy." When I reached adulthood, I became known as "Bill," but many of my relatives still referred to me as Billy.

I was a boy when my father, Oscar O. Proctor, and my mother, Minnie Bell Camp, moved to Clearwater, Florida. Dad worked for the Atlantic Coastline railroad and was transferred to Clearwater. I was their third child, with my brother Oscar Eugene being the oldest, and Laura Katherine, the second. While in Clearwater, my twin sisters, Juanita Nell and Lorita Bell were born in 1931

I think it was 1933 when we all moved to Pedro (pronounced Peed-row), Florida, to take care of my elderly and sickly paternal grandparents, John R. and Laura Proctor. Incidentally, the community was named by Mexican sharecroppers and migrants, after Peter Perry. The name Peter, meaning "Pedro" (pronounced Paid-row) in the Mexican language, was adapted by the predominately white population, but with a slightly southern pronunciation. Peter Perry's grandson, who was also named Peter, married one of my dad's sisters, Lorena Proctor.

When we moved to Pedro, we lived in a sharecropper's house, and Dad sharecropped for a Florida Sharecroppers friend of his named John L. Remington. From that location, my Dad could farm and look after my grandparents, who lived only a few miles away. In 1935, we had to move in with them because their health began to worsen. While living there, we grew tomatoes, cotton, field peas, tobacco, green beans, corn, peanuts, velvet beans and pea vine hay. They both died the next year in 1936.

John R. and Laura Proctor owned an eighty acre farm in Pedro, and the farm became Dad's after their death. We lived there until 1944, and it became a period in my life that will forever remain sacred to me because of the wonderful memories that were born there. Those memories are the basis for this story, in hopes that the good Old days" will remain forever in the minds and hearts of my children and grandchildren.

In 1943, while still on the farm, Dad went back to work for the railroad in Wildwood, Florida, which was about ten miles from Pedro. I was sixteen years old at the time, and I farmed our last year there growing corn and pea vine hay for the cows. Dad sold the eighty acre farm for \$2,500 in 1945, and we moved to Summerfield, Florida, about five miles away.

I remember one time on the farm, however, when I was just fourteen years old. I was out plowing the field with our mule and mare horse, when I heard an airplane flying overhead. Back then, it wasn't a common sight to see an airplane, and they were always very interesting to me.

While slowly plowing the furrows, I looked up at the plane, and noticed that its motor had suddenly cut off. I immediately stopped the team just in time to see the plane begin to fall from

the sky. It began failing end over end, and I just knew that it was going to crash right on top of me!

I left the team standing there, and ran as hard and fast as I could to get out of the middle of that field! Then to my surprise, I heard the plane motor start up again, as it pulled up and regained control I went back and started plowing, and the same thing happened again!

This time I only ran a few yards, and looked up as the motor cranked up again! Later, I found out that it was just a stunt plane practicing, but it sure scared me half to death! I had never seen anything like that before.

I recall a time when Dad sold "Ol' Henry," one of our mules, and bought a work horse named Delia. Since she was just a work horse, he didn't know if she had been broken to ride. One day, Dad put our old 'McClellon' army saddle on her back, and proceeded to ease up on her.

I think that they were both surprised at what took place next! Like an explosion, Della bolted and bucked with every ounce of fire that she could muster up, and Dad flew one way, and the saddle the other!

The old belly girth that held the saddle on had come apart, and that's why Della bucked the saddle off, too! That didn't stop my Dad, however. He then put a tight rope around her belly so he would have something to hold on to, and took her out in the middle of a freshly plowed field. Being in that plowed field would tire her out if she started bucking again, not to mention bein' a whole lot softer to land on!

By putting a "twist" rope on her nose, it sort of paralyzed her and took her mind off of what he was about to do. Dad said, "Billy, go get the cow whip! When I get on her and she tries to stop bucking, you take that cow whip and pop her on the rear!" We did this until old Della couldn't take it anymore, and decided that lettin' Dad ride was a heck of a lot easier than bucking! My Dad was only five foot seven and weighed about 165 pounds, but to me he was a giant of a man!

The Heroes, The '2 Holer', & The Sugar Cubes

Life in Florida was much different back then. When I look back at those good old days, I now realize that we were very poor, but we never knew it. We were Florida 'Crackers,' and we had everything but money. Everyone else that we knew were just the same as us. My brother, sisters, and I were happy children, and we just knew that we had the best parents in the world. Life was hard like the work that we had to do, because we were just poor dirt farmers.

Mom and Dad showed both discipline and love, and since I was "all boy," I got to experience a little of both from them! I remember once when Mother saved my hide when I got caught for drinking some cheap wine, and broke my glasses in a fight! I think that my Dad's tongue-lashing, however, was worse than getting a "whippin!"

Our farm house was very old. It was made of wood, and had wood shingles for a roof. We had a front porch across the front of the house, and the back of the house had an "L" shaped porch. Dad

built a wooden walkway from the back porch out to the water pump. Just off of the back porch was a room that had a fireplace.

On one Saturday morning, Mother, Dad, and my sisters went to Ocala to shop, and Gene and I stayed home. Gene was then twelve years old, and I was nine.

We were sitting on the front porch around mid-morning, and for some unknown reason, we decided to go around to the back porch. As we walked around to the back and on to the porch, we heard the crackling sound of fire.

Looking up, we saw that the roof on that back room had caught fire from sparks from the fireplace! We grabbed two buckets, and Gene climbed up the ladder and on to the roof with a bucket full of water. He threw the bucket of water on the fire, and then ordered me to fill the other bucket from the pump. I brought the bucket of water to the corner of the house, climbed up and handed it to him! We repeated this as fast as our little legs could go. until the fire was finally out and smoldering! Needless to say, we were hero's when Mother and Dad got home!

The first few years of our farm life as I recall, were without electricity and plumbing. We had kerosene lamps for light, and a "Number 2" pitcher pump on our well for water. I'm not sure why they called it a "Number 2" pump, but I guess it must have been because of the size of the pipe coming out of the well. Then there was the other necessity in life, the "2 Holer" outhouse.

The two things that stand out in my mind the most, were getting those wonderful electric lights into our home, and the joy of getting a brand new "2 Holer" outhouse with a real concrete floor! My, did that cypress wood and new concrete floor smell good! When those electric lights first came on in the dark, it seemed to me like the heavens had opened up and shown down on us! I heard that it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt that had made all of this possible in the late 1930's.

During the week we worked very hard, but on Saturdays, Dad and Mother took my sisters to Nelson's Grocery Store in Summerfield. Sometimes, however, they would go to Ocala to shop. Dad would buy hog and cow feed in sacks that had flower designs, and Mother would make my sisters clothes out of them.

Our family came from a generation that was known as the "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or just do without" people! If we wore a hole in our shoes, we would put a piece of cardboard in them. As time went by, and the hole got too big, Dad would glue rubber soles on our shoes. If our clothes got holes in them, Mother would sew patches over them. If our farm plow or wagon broke down, we would fix it with hay baling wire.

Mother, with all of the family's help, canned our corn, tomatoes, beans, and peas, but on Sunday mornings and evenings, we went to church. If it was summertime, we would make homemade ice cream in a wooden, one gallon churn during the afternoon. Our "Ice Man" delivered ice to us twice a week, and we kept it in an icebox since there weren't any refrigerators. The icebox was where we kept our meat, butter, and milk.

Mother cooked on a wood stove, and later advanced to a five burner kerosene stove, where two of the burners were under the oven. She had a "safe cabinet," or Pie Safe, that had a screen on the doors and sides. This is where left-over food that would keep without refrigeration was kept until the next day.

Once when I was about ten years old, I remember standing on a chair looking into one of Mother's kitchen cabinets looking for something good to eat I found a box of sugar cubes, and thought to myself, "She'll never miss just one!" I put that sugar cube in my pocket and walked innocently away. Later, I ate it and it was so good! Next week, I went back for another, and continued until that whole box was empty! When I realized what I had done, I knew that Mother was going to find out and immediately know it was me!

I knew that I had to get that box of sugar cubes replaced, and soon! I wrote down the exact name of the brand, and saved up my money. One day while at school and during my lunch period, I went down to Nelson's Store and bought the right box. While riding home on the school bus, I hid that box of sugar cubes under my coat. When I got home, I slipped into the kitchen and replaced those sugar cubes. Mother never knew what had happened!

Sunday Afternoons, Open-Range, & Chicken Thieves

On Sunday afternoons, kids on the farm spent much of their time playing games, since there was no television. Some of the games that we played were called Sand-lot Football, Cans, Hide and Seek, and Hailey Over.

Sand-Lot Football was basically the game of football as we know it, but was played on a lot with mostly sand and weeds. The game of Cans was similar to Hide-And -Seek, but each player had a stick called a "stick 'n can:" There were three cans stacked up on top of the other, and everyone hid from the person appointed as "it" The hidden players then tried to sneak back and knock over the cans with his stick before being caught by "it."

Hailey Over was a game where the players were divided up on each side of the house. The ball was then thrown over the house. If someone on the other side caught it, that person would sneak around to the other side of the house with the ball, and try to hit the other player without them knowing it. If a person was hit, he then had to go over to the other side's team until no one was left on one side of the house.

Gene and I made slingshots, kites, and softballs, and we used tin cans or gourds as a football. We made Lorita and Juanita play sand-lot football with us! Our kites were make of newspapers, and we used a mix of flour and water as paste to hold it together. Palmetto limbs (short, scrub palms) were used to make the cross braces, and strips of old bed sheets were used to make the "tails."

When Sundays were over, we went back to farming and taking care of the livestock. We had two milk cows from which we had milk, butter, buttermilk, and clabber. Buttermilk came from the milk after the butter was churned, and clabber was thickly curdled milk that had "gone sour." Clabber was used to make bread, or to stir it up with syrup to drink. Mother always made plenty

of biscuits and cornbread. I remember making a meal out of biscuits, or cornbread and milk! We always had a large garden with all kind of vegetables.

In the wintertime, when it seemed to be the coldest, we had what we called "hog butcherin' time." The cold weather would always keep the meat from going bad too soon. We had pork shoulders, ribs, liver, ham, fat-back, bacon, sausage, pigs-feet, and hogshead cheese! The fat-back and belly were cut up into pieces about 2" by 2", and Mother would cook it down in the big iron kettle outside in the yard to use as lard. Lard, or the fat from hogs, was grease that we used to fry everything. We smoked ham, sausage, and shoulders in the smoke house, but had white, unsmoked bacon, too. This was salted down and preserved and later used for frying or for cooking in black-eyed peas, mustards, or collard greens for flavor.

We had no heat in the wintertime except for our fireplace. We sat in front of the fireplace to shell peanuts to be used as seed for the next year's crop. Dad used to get a little irritated with me, because he said that I would eat about half of what I shelled! Keeping warm with just a fireplace was a little tough, so later on Dad closed it and installed a pot-bellied wood stove in its place. The wood stove would put more heat into the house. On one cold night, while I was taking a bath in a Number 3 galvanized tub, I can remember trying to get warm by standing close to that stove. I stood so close, however, that I burned my stomach pretty bad. Boy, was that ever a close call!

Our old cane mill was used to grind the sugar cane that we grew. Our mule, Old Tobe, did a lot of the work for us, however. The cane was placed between the two large steel rollers, with Tobe walking around and around squeezing the juice into a fifty-five gallon drum. The 'juice" was then placed in a one hundred gallon kettle with a wood furnace beneath it. The juice was then cooked until it got thick and turned into cane syrup. Boy, that was especially good when mixed with peanut butter!

Back in those days, the country side was still open range with few fences to keep the cows in or out. Cows roamed freely, but had their owners brand, or special "cut mark" on their ears. The brands or marks were registered in the county courthouse, and were the legal identification of the cows.

We always had chickens as well, and the young roosters were used for our meat. The pullets or young female chickens, were usually allowed to grow into hens, and therefore we had plenty of eggs. When we had more than we needed, and since money was always in short supply, we would trade our eggs at Nelson's Grocery Store. In exchange, we would get the other necessities of life such as rice, grits, and flour.

I recall that we occasionally had chicken thieves, hog thieves, and cow thieves back in those days. One night, as I remember, our chickens began cackling and creating such a ruckus that I woke up in the middle of the night. I pulled on my pants, grabbed my shotgun, and took off to the chicken coup as fast as I could run. It wasn't chicken thieves that time, but only an opossum, or "possum" as we called them. Possums like to steal chickens, too, but this one got shot while he was trying to enjoy his last meal!

Farmers used Number 8 birdshot in our shotgun shells to shoot thieves in their backsides in those days. They weren't trying to kill them, but just make them regret being in the wrong place, at the wrong time! If they were shot on your property stealing your possessions, in those days the law would allow it.

The moss man, the peanut boys, & my rich relatives

Being open-range with few fences, we gathered firewood from everywhere. Loading it into our two-horse wagon, we brought it home for use in the wood stoves. We used my Dad's two-man crosscut saw and axes to cut the wood to fit the fireplace or pot-bellied stove.

Cutting wood for the cook stove was different, however. We had to cut down a pine tree into approximately eighteen inches in length, and then split the eighteen inch sections into smaller pieces about the size of the middle of a baseball bat.

Aside from splitting the wood for Mom's cookstove, Gene and I would go out at night in the moonlight and cut wood to sell for "spendin' money." I remember that it took about three or four hours for the two of us to cut and split a "strand" of firewood. A strand, as I recall, was wood stacked about four feet high, and about ten to twelve feet long. We loaded it up in the wagon, sold it, and delivered it for the grand sum of \$. 75 cents to \$125 per strand!

In the late 30's or perhaps 1940 or 1941, Gene and I would collect scrap metal, aluminum, and copper from around the farm, or everywhere else we could find it. We sold it to the "Scrap Metal Man" who came around every so often. He sold it to the Government to be melted down into guns, ammo, and tanks. We were at war with Germany and Japan at that time, which was known as World War II. The war with Germany ended on May 8th, 1945, and Japan on September 2, 1945.

There was another way that we made spending money, and that was by gathering Spanish Moss out of the trees, and hanging it on a fence to dry out. When it dried out, we picked all of the small sticks out of it and sold it to the "Moss Man." In those days, moss was used to stuff furniture, cushions, car seats, and mattresses. I can't remember exactly what we got paid for the moss, but judging from what we made from selling firewood, we probably had to pay the Moss Man to haul it off for us!

When I was six or seven, and Gene was nine or ten years old, I can remember Mother boiling and parching peanuts for us, which she put in little bags, and then in a low cut box. On the box, she wrote what was in it. She then took us to Ocala and dropped us off at the downtown square. I stayed close to Gene as I yelled out "Fresh boiled peanuts, ten cents a bag!" It seemed that most of the people bought their peanuts from me, because I was younger. Gene got mad at me and always tried to lose me, but he never did! Through the years, I was always there to aggravate him!

At our school in Summerfield, we played six-man football, basketball, and softball. At home, we had peanut boiling parties and pound parties, where everyone brought a pound of something good to eat, and we had the parties around a big bonfire. Most of the kids in our rural community

would be there, and we played games. Life was much simpler then, and everyone knew each other and their families. We had great times together, and to us life was good.

Sometimes when I think back, I think that maybe we had it a little easier than most. I say this because I remember that Mother had a "gas" washing machine with a wringer. Most people had to wash their clothes by hand using a washboard. Saturdays were always wash day, and you could hear that motor running all day long! It sounded like a lawn mower does today.

Television, of course, wasn't around back then, and we didn't see one until the 1950's. We did have a battery powered radio, however, and we listened to programs such as Fibber McGee & Molly, Amos & Andy, The Shadow Knows, and many more. One of our favorite times was listening to the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night!

Thanks to my Mother, we always had a good Christmas. There were always five little piles around our tree from "Santa." I remember one Christmas when I was around eleven years old and Gene was fourteen, we got one 26" inch bicycle to be shared by both of us. I didn't know how to ride it' so I insisted that Gene tow me on the handlebars. After all, half of that bike was mine!

He reluctantly agreed, and we rode down our hard rock & slag-graveled road. We had ridden only a few hundred feet when my foot slipped off of the front fender, and into the spokes! We flipped over, and Gene and I and-our new hike were scratched up pretty bad! Now if that wasn't enough, Gene really told me off big time!

We had alot of fun in the summer after the crops were harvested and the canning was done. The hogs were butchered now, and it was time to play! I went to visit my first cousin, Marion Camp, who lived in Mulberry Florida. His parents, Ernest and Bessie Camp, ran a dry cleaning business, and to me they lived in "the city!" I thought that they must be rich, because they lived in the city and owned a dry cleaning business! As most everyone in Florida knows, Mulberry was a small place, but my little eyes saw it differently. At a later time, Lorita and Juanita would go there to visit Uncle Ernest and Aunt Bessie's two daughters, Betty Rae and Patricia. Then later, they would come to visit us on the farm.

What great times we had! As I said in the beginning, we were poor and had little money. We had the greatest thing of all, however. We had love.