

FALL ON THE FARM AND MOLASSES-MAKING

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Fall on the farm was full of work harvesting that which had been planted in the spring and worked in the summer. About the time of the first frost, corn had to be gathered. It had been planted in rows just wide enough for the wagon to pass between three rows but



it would run over one row in the middle. This, of course, dragged the middle row down and it was appropriately referred to as the "down row." Little boys were required to gather the "down row", while Pa and Daddy gathered two rows each on either side of the wagon. It was back-breaking work, tough on the hands, and made for long cold mornings.

Pa had a tendency to plant the rows a bit too close together causing one row or the other on either side of the wagon to be knocked at an angle as the wagon went through the field. Daddy loved to gather as fast as possible and stay in front of the wagon by the mules' flanks thereby forcing them toward pa's side and making his inside row the one knocked over by the wagon. He would fuss and he would work, but it was difficult to catch up once your row became the one knocked askew. Daddy kept his own council but thought it was fitting "comeuppance" for planting too close.

If you are headed toward the new Walmart in Carthage on the Highway 25 by-pass and look just to your left as you pass the pond on the Turner Farm, you will be looking at the very spot the sorghum mill sat. It was neglected and forlorn for most of the year but when fall came, it was checked and double checked to get mill ready for making molasses. We grew sorghum cane from which molasses could be made and making molasses always took a couple of days on a Middle Tennessee farm.

The cane was cut with long machete-like knives and hauled to where the sorghum mill was set up. The sorghum mill was powered by a mule walking in a circle, hitched to a long pole. The pole turned the sorghum mill and when the cane was fed into the mill the rollers squeezed out the cane juice. When the sticky juice of the cane was boiled in a large vat, foam formed on top of the cooking molasses. That foam had to be skimmed off and it was very good to eat if you could sneak some on a length of cane. You had to take care though, or a large number of trips to the outhouse would follow. Eventually, the bubbling mixture became thick and turned into Molasses to be used for "sweetening" for humans and animals in the coming winter.

My Daddy liked to tell how much he and his brother and sisters liked molasses. "We made the best molasses," he would begin, "and Mama made 'cat head' biscuits to die for. We would sop those cat heads in them molasses on a cold morning, and those molasses being stiff and cold, sometime we would skid our plates out onto the floor. Well, Mama

was resourceful, so she took a 10 penny nail and nailed them tin plates to the kitchen table so we wouldn't scoot 'em out onto the floor. Don't you know, we sopped those molasses so hard we eventually wore the heads off those nails." Now that is some sopping!

Cattle and other livestock have since beyond my first memories, been auctioned on a commission basis and my partner and I still take our cattle to the Livestock Commission Sales Barn. It is interesting to me to note that little has changed since the days of my boyhood, except the number of "pen-hookers" seem to have diminished. "Pen-hookers" were fellows who waited for farmers to bring in a load of calves and then offered to buy them right there in the truck. They would then put the animals through the auction themselves, hoping to make a few cents on the pound from the resale. Some farmers, in a very busy time of year, would rather take a few cents less and be able to go on home and get back to work rather than risk the calves actually selling at a lower price; or to be forced to wait the better part of the day until the animals sold to get their money.

I suppose it was an early form of futures market, but it seems to have somewhat disappeared from the scene, since the sale barn will now mail a check to one's home and many of the worries about under-handed dealings are no longer a concern.

When a farmer arrives at the sale barn, the calves are graded by type (we raise Black Angus) and then into bulls, steers, heifers, etc and weighted. Some are sold individually, but most often they are sold by graded lot of 3 to 5 animals. Buyers from around the country attend these local sales and buy for the large feed lots in the Midwest. There the calves are fattened before becoming Black Angus Steak at your local supermarket.

One of the great innovations in cattle farming has been the gooseneck trailer. They are generally pulled by heavy duty pickup or flatbed trucks especially rigged for such rugged work. These goose necks are low to the ground and the cattle can simply be herded into them from the ground; but in my boyhood most of us used a high loading chute and transported animals in the stockade bed of our small pickup trucks. It was scary business and felt as if the truck would be turned over when the larger cattle shifted from one side of the truck to the other. Sometimes bulls or other large animals actually did over-turn a farmer's overloaded truck and escape into the woods to eventually become wild or join a farmer's herd nearby. It was where a "bull of the woods" often came from, and rounding one up was generally out of the question. When they "hightailed it" they were seldom seen again by the farmer who had raised them and brought them to market. (By the way, if you ever saw the south end of a scared 700 pound north bound bull calf headed for the woods, you would know where the term "high tailing" came from.)

Our lives, like the farms, have cycles to them and some of us who like to read these memories of days gone by, are in the "fall" of our lives, harvesting a crop of grandchildren, our pensions or retirement, and the comfort of knowing we have done our best at raising a family, or crafting a life that brought joy to us and was a blessing to others. Now that is a harvest worth waiting for.

Have a blessed day.

*Read more of Robert R. “Bob” Chaffin’s stories and ‘Writer’s Corner’ at:
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