

GRASSY

By

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People say I have always had pretty good recollections of things that happened a long time ago. For example, some years back, I was visiting the hospital where I was born and somehow wound up in a room in the old section. All at once, I had a feeling that I had been there, before. Sure enough, they told me that it had been the newborn-baby-section in the 'forties. I was born in the mid-forties so I would have spent the first hours of my life in that room. The ceiling featured early-model fluorescent lights (some blinking), along with old-fashioned Venetian blinds at the outside windows, all still in place, and---you'll just have to believe me on this---I recall lying in a crib and looking over and seeing some Venetian blinds just like in that room and the blinking fluorescent ceiling lights. I've had a lot of skeptics on that, but I'm telling you it's true.

When they took me home from the hospital after I was born, my Uncle Jimmy, who was a funeral director, pulled up in front of the house and blew the siren on the ambulance (what they called a "hearse" in those days). I can remember that it was a *black* "Packard" funeral hearse. I'm not sure if there is a message in that my first automobile ride was in a funeral car.

Other events of my early days that I recall have been corroborated by others who were there when they happened. I remember as clear as can be the time my father handed me out a driver's-side car window to be grabbed by my uncle and lifted onto a tractor. How little does a kid have to be to be handed out a car window? I remember the event with perfect clarity (even that the road was muddy). My parents seconded my remembrance as having happened just like that.

Another time, I was at my grandmother's house at "Grassy", in far northeastern Lauderdale County, Alabama, near the Tennessee state line. In those days there was much farming; a lot more than today. I can see the scene perfectly: it was at night, and some of the relatives were sitting around the walls in ladder-back chairs in a brightly-lit room. I was in my uncle Durward's lap and he was demonstrating his talent of projecting perfectly-rounded blue smoke-rings from his cigar all the way across the room. While he was doing that, I happened to glance out the window and saw four tractors in the darkness in line-abreast, their white headlight beams making a sweeping turn out in the distant field. I guess my uncles were hurrying to either plant the crop or to harvest it, which would explain the late-night fieldwork. I remember how impressed I was at the sight of the four tractors; their beams stabbing the night. My grandmother was there, which puts this as being no later than April, 1948, when she died suddenly.

I remember another scene, this one around the dining-room table, with grandmother sitting at the end of the table to my left. Although I was less than three years old when she passed away, I can still picture her black dress with white polka-dots, her glasses, and the bun on the back of her head. I was sitting in my mother's lap at the time. How's that, for remembering things?

How many people can call-up in their memory the last time they had a baby bottle? I can, and it's a pretty strong recollection.. It must have been about the same time as the happenings

with the smoke-rings and the dining room table. We were at the farmhouse and I was in a huge bed with my mother. The tall bedstead featured a colorful home-made quilt; that I recall exactly. It was in the early-morning and for no reason, I just hauled off and threw the bottle onto the floor where it shattered into pieces. (Baby bottles were made of glass in those days.) Daddy came storming into the room, and said something that meant, "No more bottles!" From that time on, my diet was solid food.

It was probably also around that same time that I had my first encounter with nature. Down behind the farmhouse, across from the hay-barn, was a rutted wagon-track leading to the fields. Alongside the road, next to the old wagon barn (where my mother was born), was a line of bushes and short trees. One spring day my mother and I were walking down the dusty byway and heard a tiny-sounding "peep" coming from a nearby low branch. Mother hoisted me up and I looked over into a birds' nest. Several baby birds were in the nest, their heads lifted skyward, their tiny mouths wide open. There was a flutter nearby---undoubtedly mother and daddy birds hoping we would move on and let the feeding begin in peace. Not wishing to deprive breakfast from the baby birds, my mother put me down and the two of us walked away. But I never forgot the tiny birds in the nest with their gaping mouths.

There sure were a lot of memories on the old farm. Actually, there were several farms that my uncles owned, all in the same general area. My great-uncle Byrd was a veteran of World War One and his farmhouse sat on the original homestead that he, his father (my great-grandfather) and his brothers (my grandfather and my great-uncles) had built in the later days of the 1800s. A handsome, two-story structure with peaked eaves and gingerbread trim, the house featured a full right-angled porch across the front. There were two other features of the farm I remember: the red barn and the fish pond. Uncle Byrd said he had gotten money from the government in 1934, about six hundred dollars, as part of a pension settlement from the First World War. He used the money to build a huge barn behind the house. Painted red, the barn is still there, although Uncle Byrd is now gone, and the barn is falling into disrepair. (*Update: both the old house and the barn have since been torn down.*)

The fish pond was gloriously stocked with all kinds of game fish. To get to the pond required a trek down a long grassy slope ("Grassy" described the area perfectly), through several fence-gates. Not easy, but once you got there, the fishing was spectacular. In my earlier years, I spent many happy hours with a line and a pole at that pond. (*A few years ago, I found the pond on a photograph taken by an orbiting satellite---presumably, still swimming with fish. But a later picture did not show the pond, which may have recently been filled-in*)

Uncle Byrd was an interesting old guy. He told me he was born in 1892, which seemed ancient, even when I was a kid. He had an unforgettable way of speaking, which could be described as a "foggy" voice. During conversation, he clacked his dentures around in his mouth, usually while he was thinking of the next thing to say. Anytime I think about Uncle Byrd, I envision his clacking false teeth and his distinctive voice. He lived in the old house with his wife, Lila, and his sister Myrtie. Uncle Byrd and Aunt Lila never had any children and Myrtie was a spinster.

Several of the married couples had spouses who were siblings. In several instances Sewells married Hammonds. I found it intriguing that most of those couples were childless. In addition to Uncle Byrd, who married Lila Hammond, his brother, Cliff, married Susie Hammond; and Belle Sewell, their sister, hooked up with Van Hammond. My grandfather, Owen Franklin Sewell, married Mamie Hammond. He and Mamie had a whole household of children---one of whom became my mother---along with her four brothers and a single sister, all of whom in due course

became my uncles and aunts. Only one of my grandfather's sisters, Lucille, a beautiful girl with long auburn hair, according to pictures, who married a man named "Tomlinson", had a multitude of offspring. Another family of prominence in the area were the Belues, some of whom were also related to the Sewells.

These people all lived at "Grassy", at the time a general location more than anything else, that was located east of Lexington, Alabama, only about two miles south of the Alabama-Tennessee state line in northeast Lauderdale County..

The main feature of the community was (and still is) the little white Cumberland Presbyterian Church at the intersection of the "Summertown Road" and Highway 64. Still surrounding the church on three sides is the cemetery where most of my relatives on my mother's side, including my grandparents and several uncles and aunts are buried. Every "Mother's Day" they observe a "Decoration Day." In times past, we would go up there on that second Sunday in May, walk about the cemetery (there was always a big crowd), attend a church service in the little white Cumberland Presbyterian sanctuary, then finish the day with "dinner on the ground" at one of the relatives' house.

I owe Uncle Byrd a big "thanks" for making history a living thing for me. One time he told me about some of his experiences in France in World War One. It seems his Army group had gone overseas on the ocean liner, "Leviathan," which was the biggest ship in the world at the time. The Americans had seized it from the Germans at the start of the war and transformed into a troopship. He had a lot of anecdotes about his adventures in the war, which whetted my appetite for learning about history. In school, down through the years, I had heard a lot about European historical figures such as *'Kaiser Wilhelm II'*, the ruler of Germany. Therefore, how interesting, it was, to realize that this "Kaiser Wilhelm" was the same "Kaiser Wilhelm" my Uncle Byrd had gone to France to fight against in the First World War! In this way I connected a real person I knew, Uncle Byrd, with a person about whom I had read in history books, the "Kaiser" of Germany. It was an eye-opening revelation to me and some years later played a part in my becoming a History major in college.

There are many memories of that old house of Uncle Byrd's and Aunt Lila's. Often, on Sunday afternoons, we went "up in the country," as we put it. If it was in the wintertime, all the old people clustered in the front bedroom of the house where there was a big fireplace surmounted by a big black mantle. Over the fireplace was a large, framed, colorized picture of Uncle Byrd and his brothers and sisters that was taken, as I was told, around 1905. I can still recall the scene that varied little during many visits over the years: Lila and Byrd and Myrtie in rocking chairs, nodding and talking in sepulchral tones among themselves, always with a crackling log fire going in the fireplace. Punctuating the conversation was the constant ticking pendulum of a rather small, plain-faced oaken cuckoo clock on the front wall opposite the fireplace. From time to time the cuckoo bird would emerge from of its lair and announce the passing of another hour. The only light in the room came from the fire, and the whole scene had a flickering, ethereal quality about it that was homey and domestic, and, at the same time, quaint and old-fashioned in a way that one would not be likely to see, today, especially, when one considers that these people, along with their age and era,(and now even the house) are now all gone.

The cuckoo clock had an interesting story. Uncle Byrd told me that in 1910, he saved his

money and sent off a mail order for the clock to *'Montgomery Ward's'* in Chicago, and how excited he was when it arrived. I haven't seen the clock for some years, now, and it would be interesting to know what happened to it.

The house was substantially transformed after Uncle Byrd died in 1976. His nephew, Kenneth, and his wife, who inherited the house, eliminated the fireplace and the wall separating the dining room and the bedroom, transforming the whole side of the house into one large recreation room with the kitchen at the other end. Externally, the structure retained its original lines and served as a reminder of how the place had looked at the turn of the last century, right down to the curved concrete retaining wall out front. *(UPDATE: The latest 'Google Earth' pictures divulge that both the old house and the big red barn behind it are now gone; presumably torn down due to long-term disintegration. As mentioned, even the old fish-pond seems to have disappeared. About all that remains is the curved retaining wall, still visible from high-above.)*

My mother's old homestead (where I broke the baby bottle) was originally built in the 1920s to replace a former structure that burned down in a lightning storm. Still there, it was residence of my Uncle Neil and his wife, who both died in 2013.. Recently, I found the place on "Google Earth", and from both the overhead shot and the side-view, the house and barn look amazingly like they did in days gone by. The only difference is that there is no cultivation in the adjoining fields; only grassland now stands where crops once grew; the cornfields are bare and all other evidences of active farming are now gone.

What was once only a general location in far Northeastern Lauderdale County, Alabama, the place called "Grassy", now has its own listing in several travel guides..

Were he here, now, I imagine Uncle Byrd would be clacking his dentures in deep contemplation about how things have changed.