

## REFLECTIONS: AN ORAL HISTORY

**Mrs. Ethel Lee Hudson, an octogenarian, recalls life growing up in the small farming community of Leola, Arkansas and reflects on the events that defined her generation.**

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**M**rs. Ethel Lee Hudson was born on March 14, 1921, the fourth of five children, on a farm in Leola, Arkansas in Grant County. Seven years separated her from her next older sister and eleven years from her baby sister so in many ways she says growing up was like being an only child. While her dad was primarily a farmer, when crops were “laid by,” he worked in the log woods or for the railroad laying ties. Her mother, a farmer’s wife, could “do everything from killing a hog to teaching a Sunday school class.”

Every Sunday without fail the family attended the community’s Methodist church. Mrs. Hudson said everyone in the community was expected to go to church, and to demonstrate this point, she recalled an incident from a time when her mother was teaching a ten-year old Sunday school class of which she was a member. Whicker Grant, a ten-year old classmate, walked into Sunday school late. He boldly informed Mrs. Hudson’s mother that he knew he was late but “wouldn’t be here at all if Mama hadn’t kicked my ass down the doorstep.” The daughter of the town’s depot agent nearly fainted at such language in Sunday school. Mrs. Hudson added that, of course, “kids these days wouldn’t be fazed by such language.”

Mrs. Hudson had many chores to perform on the family farm and enjoyed nearly all of them because she “didn’t know any better.” It was “just a lifestyle.” She fed chickens, gathered eggs, brought in wood, watered the stock, milked the cows, brought in water to fill the reservoir on the cook stove, chopped and picked cotton, and canned fruits and vegetables. She and her younger sister did escape hay baling, though her older sisters performed that task, as well. The only chore she remembers disliking was hoeing peanuts because she sometimes chopped the plant down altogether.

Mrs. Hudson clearly remembers her first ride in a car, her Uncle Robert’s t-model Ford when she was nearly four years old. Her parents were moving from one farm to another, and for some reason Uncle Robert was mad at them for moving—so mad that he “got drunk as a skunk” and took her for a ride, perhaps to irritate her parents. Her mother was terrified that she would be killed, but Mrs. Hudson remembers it as “a real treat.” Later when she was seven years old, in 1928, her older brother, who was still living at home, bought a car, and she enjoyed being chauffeured into the towns of Sheridan or Malvern to go to a movie. Leola had a bank and a drugstore and “The Café,” but no theater.

Mrs. Hudson did not drive herself until she was thirty-three years old. Her first husband passed away in 1954. Her brother-in-law asked for their car, but she said she would keep it and learn how to drive. She had one young daughter and felt that it was a necessity for her to learn to

drive.

She could not remember exactly when she first saw an airplane but knows it was before she turned ten years of age. A man from Hot Springs, Mr. Higginbotham, owned a small plane and would fly to Leola and land in a pasture to visit relatives. The kids would hear the plane and soon learned that he always left late in the afternoon. They would gather early out in the field to witness the pilot's departure and would watch until the last lights faded in the distance. She did not ride in a plane herself until after she retired from a thirty-four-year teaching career. She went to visit her stepson and family in Virginia. She booked a flight that only landed in St. Louis to let passengers on and off, so she did not have to change planes. She "loved every minute of it" and especially enjoyed seeing the Atlantic Ocean for the first time ever from the vantage point of the plane. Kentucky tobacco farms also were beautiful from such a height, she thought. She has ridden in a plane several times since and thinks it's "the way to go," though the younger sister Lucy will not set foot in one.

Mrs. Hudson heard her first radio broadcast as a teenager when her family purchased the coveted item. The radio was a big, square box, and it sat on the center table of the living room, a 22' x 22' room that had been a pre-Civil War house around which the rest of their farmhouse was later built. Every Saturday night neighbors would trek across the fields and fill every space of the living room to listen to the "Grand Ole Opry." They would bring popcorn and cookies and stay until midnight when the "solemn ole Judge" on the radio started his final lines about how it was "time for the paw paws to fall." Then the neighbors would get their lanterns and flashlights and head back over the fields for home.

At 4:00 A.M. the next morning, though, their father's knuckles would rap on their door, and his voice would boom out to "Hit the floor." It was time to do the farm chores so that everyone could get to church on time. Mama's Saturday afternoon ritual was to scrub the kitchen floor and to get the baking done because "Sunday dinner" meant not only her own family but also possibly relatives and always an extra family with seven children who lived so far from church that they spent the afternoon at Mrs. Hudson's parents' farm, ate dinner with them, and returned to church for evening services. Every Saturday her Mama would survey the kitchen and say, "It's Saturday. Put on the big pot and the little one." They always had fried chicken, either shoulder meat or a baked ham, chicken and dressing, any vegetable in season, or canned fruit from the root cellar if vegetables were not in season. There were fruit cobblers of all kinds—peaches, plums, and blackberries, and lots of gingerbread because they made their own molasses.

The kitchen table that seated so many, and which to this day is used by a nephew, was made by Mrs. Hudson's grandfather who cut a cypress log and had planks cut from the log at the sawmill. Even on Sunday, oilcloths were used instead of white tablecloths because the latter would be "just too hard to wash and iron with those heavy irons." Mrs. Hudson loved the oilcloth because it was so much fun to play jacks on—the jacks "just slid everywhere."

Other radio favorites for the family were "Lum and Abner," "Amos and Andy," the 6 'o' clock news, and a Nazarene woman preacher from Little Rock who preached just before lunch and whose service was never missed by Mrs. Hudson's mother.

Social life at eighteen and younger revolved around school and church. Mrs. Hudson played basketball from the day school opened until tournaments ended in the spring. They played baseball, too. She belonged to the Epworth League, a young people's group at church that met every Sunday night. She was active in 4-H Club. She and her friends held swimming parties at the swimming hole in the summer, and frequently a half-dozen girls would spend the night at each one another other's houses. Some of the neighbors would have "play parties" so named so the Baptists could attend; music and dancing took place. Couples paired off for dating at the ages of sixteen to eighteen, but several couples usually went places together, such as uptown to "The Café" where there was a juke box both there and at the drugstore. She said she did not have a chance to get into trouble because her older brother who "was born grown and never improved" was at every function and reported back to her parents on every small misdeed, such as leaving the building to go outside even with another girl or sitting with a boy *who was smoking!* Mrs. Hudson said that the community was a safe place with everyone looking out for the kids; it was "the village Hillary Clinton spoke of."

Mrs. Hudson met her future husband, a long-distance hauler in Sheridan, when she was sixteen; he was considerably older than she. He was a friend of the young man her sister Lucy was dating. When her parents met him, they approved and did not comment on his age; the couple married when Ethel was seventeen.

Mrs. Hudson's memories of the important men of her time are positive. She believed Franklin Delano Roosevelt to be an intelligent man and a good President who "knew how to bring the country together out of the depression." She thought Hoover got the blame for the depression "but was a scapegoat with everything sliding before he got in." John Fitzgerald Kennedy she considers "one of the greatest Presidents," and Martin Luther King, Jr. "one of the greatest peacemakers."

Many historical events remain forever fixed in her memory. She remembers teaching in the junior high school at Bryant when news of Kennedy's assassination reached her and of being skeptical about the moon landing until the interviews with astronauts by journalists after the event convinced her it had actually happened. By far the most vivid memory, though, is of the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. She and her husband were at her sister's house on 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Little Rock when they heard of the attack. They left her house at 2:00 p.m. to go to her brother's house which was located in the vicinity of the present-day MacArthur Park. It took them until 11:30 p.m. to reach that destination because people poured into the Little Rock streets, and they had to "inch their way" to her brother's house. Mrs. Hudson said she was "scared to death" in this state of "absolute panic." Soldiers were everywhere in the street as were military vehicles. Military police were blowing whistles, orders were being shouted over megaphones to soldiers to return to base, and soldiers were running "aimlessly" everywhere.

The war did not adversely affect her farm family because food was never in short supply on a farm. Her mother did have to go to church for the first time without wearing stockings. Meat, flour, coffee, and sugar were rationed, and stamps were issued for purchasing shoes. The community really missed basketball because neither Leola nor Sheridan had a team since prospective male players had all gone to be soldiers.

Mrs. Hudson has many fond memories of her life—among them family holiday celebrations and her own school days. At Christmas her parents would select a tree from the pasture a few weeks before Christmas and bring it home for the family to decorate. While they had some store-bought ornaments—balls and icicle tinsel, for example—her Mama always strung popcorn and cranberries to drape around the tree. (With no electricity, there were no lights, of course.) Christmas dinner was always served at their house with many relatives in attendance. Her mother cooked for weeks. There were gallon-sized crocks filled with cookies, old-fashioned pulled taffy, and homemade candies of every description. Her mama made each child his favorite dessert; the pie safe, now in sister Lucy’s possession, was “filled to brimming” with desserts. Each child had a Christmas stocking, and Santa visited every year. Her most memorable gift, however, was given to her by her brother when she was of pre-school age. He gave her a *Baby Ray* pre-primer and the first-grade *Baby Ray* book. He purchased them at the drugstore which sold the school’s textbooks. The family always received in the mail the Spiegel, Montgomery Ward, and Sears catalogs. Mrs. Hudson, at four, was already reading the Sears catalog, chosen “because it was the thickest one” so her brother decided it was high-time his baby sister had a real book to read; she still has this prized possession.

Halloween was also a memorable holiday. Even then, adults were worried about kids being out on the streets so the school held a big carnival each year, and the Methodist Church *always* had a scavenger hunt. Boys were pranksters even then—putting an outhouse on the grocery store roof every year and tying a calf to a skylight at the grocery store.

At Leola, elementary school went through the eighth grade, and then students attended four years of high school. In the sixth and seventh grades, girls would build a playhouse under the pin oaks at recess to play house. Jacks and jumping rope were also popular, and some of the fathers made bag swings filled with hay or pine straw. Boys played marbles or a knife game called mumbledy peg which, of course, today would result in expulsion. Mrs. Hudson believes schools today have gone overboard with restrictions. She remembers fondly that they had an hour for lunch. As a younger student, she would bring her lunch to school and sit under the trees outside in pretty weather to eat with her friends. She always traded her fried pie for a friend’s cookie that “was as big as a moon pie.” As an older student, she went with friends to the drugstore for lunch or to the grocery store for a banana and a sandwich.

In the third grade Mrs. Hudson had a teacher whom she greatly admired and who made a lasting impression—Mrs. Wilma Thornton, the mother of Ray Thornton who would later become active in Arkansas politics. After not too many days in Mrs. Thornton’s class, eight-year-old Ethel told her mother, “That’s what I’m going to do [teach] if I ever get out of school.”

It took a while, but Mrs. Hudson did eventually “get out of school” to make a career of teaching. She graduated in 1956 from what was then Henderson State Teachers’ College. She wanted to be an elementary school teacher, but she took so many electives that at graduation, she had a major both in history and English and minors in science and physical education. She taught first and second grades at Leola for two years but decided she had too many relatives there to remain and accepted a fifth-grade teaching position at Sheridan where she stayed for five years. Then she took a job in the junior high at Bryant where she taught English for twenty-seven years.

Altogether she taught thirty-four years before retiring.

While Mrs. Hudson believes every generation must learn wisdom on its own—“usually the hard way”—if she has any advice to give, it would be this: “Be yourself. Think for yourself. You are intelligent. Act in a way that will prove it to other people.”

In retirement Mrs. Hudson lives next door to her only daughter and enjoys her two grown grandsons, their wives, and her two “granddogs.” She spends her days actively engaged in church work and a retired teachers’ organization; and of course, as a former English teacher, she spends a good many days “just reading.”

### **Biographical Sketch**

Jonathan Young is a junior at Henderson State University. He is a psychology major, and wrote “Reflections” as a class project in Dr. Ann Smith’s Western Civilization class. Ms. Hudson is a neighbor whom he has known since he was two-years old. Jonathan’s fondest memory of Ms. Hudson is that she always handed out Halloween pencils for treats on that occasion.

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