

The Old House

1906

The young mother stood in her kitchen and wept as she washed her dishes. She'd only been at the farm for a couple of years, since her husband had insisted on building the barn before the house; and the house seemed very big and empty even with the two small sons who were playing in another room. She couldn't believe that her husband was dead. Neal had only been 35, but his brother John had died the same year and he had only been thirty-one. For a moment she thought that it wasn't fair that they had died so young while their 67-year old father was still strong and healthy, not to mention her own



grandfather, Lemy Cox, who was 79. She shook off those bad thoughts and looked at the telegram again. Her sister Georgia had wired that she had sold her farm in Oklahoma and was on her way back to move in and help with the boys. Don't worry, Georgia had told her, she still owned her oil fields and they wouldn't be hurting for money. She'd take care of everything when she got there.

May 13, 1917

The boys didn't romp up and down the stairs anymore and they didn't jump on their beds or bang on the piano, but Nan and Muddy had to admit that it filled up the house to have them back home for a day or two. They were both away at school, doing well for the most part, even though George had failed Latin, but now they'd come back home for their grandfather Johnny Hardin's funeral. He'd died a few days before, fallen off his horse on his way to church.

That evening, they all sat around the table and talked about the eleven years since the boys Dad had



died. When Georgia Cox had gotten there and told them that she was their Aunt Georgia, they couldn't say that. In fact, they couldn't even pronounce Aunt, and called her "Nan." They'd had trouble with common words when they were little, who'd have thought that James was going to make a lawyer. They couldn't pronounce Mother, so that's how their mother came to be known as "Muddy" for the rest of her life.

October, 1944

Nan Cox wiped her forehead with her apron. It was a hot day to be



canning, but it had to be done. The tomatoes and a few peaches were still coming in, and the apples and pears were getting more plentiful. She had been listening to the latest news about the war on the radio while she worked. She hoped how soon that would be over. It had been a hard time on everyone. Even her canning was more difficult now. It was harder to find the zinc lids

and the rubber seals and jars had practically disappeared. Everybody was making do the best they could. She was running low on jars and had to use any old jar that she could find.

She took out the jars of peaches and set them on the table. It was easier to do her canning now that they had an electric stove, at least she didn't have to build a fire anymore. When the jars were cool, she got her pencil and as was

her habit, wrote the date on the lid. At least she did on the lids that were still all zinc and one piece. She couldn't on those new lids that they'd come up with to save metal for the war. Those lids were two piece, a zinc ring with a glass lid. One of the jars she had to use was an old baking powder jar, so she also recorded that pears had gone in it in 1944. She and Muddy would carry them down to cellar later. Right now she was feeling her 66 years and thought that she might go rest in the parlor for a bit.



November, 2000

The old Hardin house stood in the dark. Earlier in the year the electricity had been disconnected, so for the first time since 1930 there were no lights shining in or at the house. A grainary stood behind it, a gaping wound where the mill wheels had been torn through



the



window. The ashes of an old outbuilding scattered in the cold breezes of winter, and the frame of the barn barely shone like the ribs of some weather-beaten skeleton in the moonlight.

Here was where a family was reared.

The

rooms that once echoed that family's life: the laughter and sadness, times of happiness and disagreements; the walls that watched children and grandchildren grow; the floors that felt the footsteps of the proud and strong women who built the home grow slower and weaker until it bore them no more; the windows they watched out of waiting on the boys to return home from school and then from college and jobs



and their own families; all these were as quiet as the cold winter night, as silent as the clouds that floated by and hid the moon and stars.

This was no longer a home. It was just another house, an old abandoned house in the way of progress, a house that had been left behind and would soon be destroyed by the future.

November 11, 1999

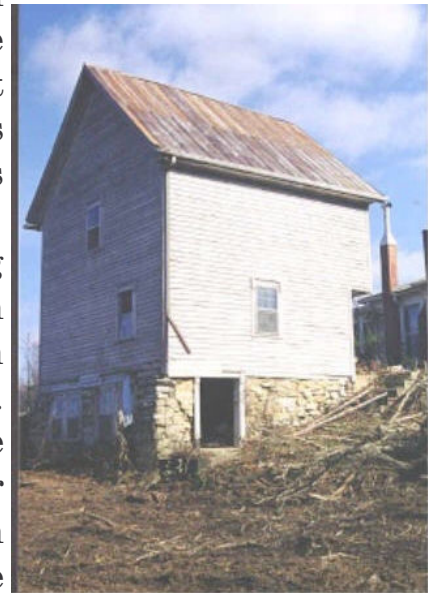
It was not a weakened house, the floors don't creak and no walls sag and no roof leaks, it was physically in as good shape as it had ever been. The



curved staircase that wound to the upstairs was strong and firm, waiting for children to once again run up and down, sending their footsteps echoing throughout the house. But it was a wounded house, it had been stripped of mantles and light fixtures and wallboards. Its furniture had been taken out and sold and its large glass front door was broken. Old papers and dirt and worthless belongings were in the

floor. In its closets the old women's dresses still hung, as if they were waiting for the return of people who would never be back. No, this old house doesn't lack soundness or structures, what it has lost is its spirit. It is just an empty shell. A house needs people and that is something this one did not have.

No doubt the house was wakened from its long slumber last fall when a group from the church visited it. John Hardin was there to welcome them to Muddy's and to lead them through the house. Perhaps the house even hoped that it would live again, as people's voices and children's laughter wafted through it and around it for the first time in nearly forty years. But whatever hopes the house may have had were soon faded away as John and the



rest of the group continued their community tour and left it alone again, with only whatever memories may linger after so many years.

December 17, 2000

Everyone wondered what the big announcement was. The Cogburn family had passed out notices to various members of the community that there would be a meeting next week with a once in a lifetime announcement. Nobody in the family except for Doug even knew what the announcement would be, and there was much speculation. On that day in December, everyone who could gathered at the community center and waited for the big

news as they nibbled on various snacks.

Finally Doug got their attention and thanked them for coming. He told them about a T.V. show he'd seen once where there was an old



house that was going to be torn down. It had been in the community for a long time and everyone had fond memories of it. There was a fight in the family who had the contract to tear down the house. The Grandfather and father wanted the job but the Grandmother was opposed to it. Peace was finally restored when someone thought of letting

everyone take home some small part of the house to put in their own homes as a reminder of that house.

Doug then told the party that he had two little pieces of audio visual aides he wanted to use. First they watched the video he'd made last November when the church had taken its annual historic tour and John Hardin had led them on a tour of the old house. Then he played a minute of a tape of Naomi Johnson that he had made back in 1979.



He then called everyone's attention to all the kerosene lamps that sat on the tables. Some were made of pint jars and some were made of quarts, but all had been converted into lamps. He told them that he'd been collecting those jars which were last used for canning everywhere from 1939 to 1956 and that he'd cleaned them out and washed them up over the last few months.

Those jars came out of the root cellar of the old Hardin house and everyone was to pick out one and take it to their own home as a reminder of the old house. He told them to grab whichever lamp they liked, but he'd like for Dan Duggar, who gave him the idea for the project to have the one sitting up front because it was different. It

wasn't a Ball jar, it was an old baking powder jar that still had pears in it and had been dated 1944.

Doug also reminded them of what they had just heard from Naomi Johnson, whose 100th birthday was the next day. She'd been talking about her grandmother Craddick used to weave rugs and other items in her loom room and how that years ago she'd tried to find a rug or just a piece of the cloth that Aunt Min Swatzell had been given by Grandmother Craddick. Aunt Min told her that every scrap of the rug was gone. Naomi said that she wished she had just a piece that had been made on that old loom, and she'd looked at him sadly and said, "we've let so much slip right through our hands." Before everyone went home, Doug told them that it was considered bad luck to have an unlit candle or lamp in the house, so he asked everyone to light their lamps for at least a few minutes tomorrow evening.



Naomi Johnson
Dec. 18, 1900 - Dec. 5, 1984

December 18, 2000

As it grew dark the next evening, the old Hardin house also grew dark and cold and Naomi Johnson's tombstone faded into the night, but through out the community, kerosene lamps were lit and their soft glow was reflected in people's faces as homes were brightened and warmed by the lamps from the old house. People watched the lamps burn and thought back to a younger and simpler time, a time when old houses were new and subdivided farms were whole, and the lamplight reflected in the faces of people who are no more. Everyone was lost in their own thoughts and memories as they watched their lamps.

Perhaps nobody had stopped to think of why the tearing down of that one old house had been so upsetting to each of them. If they had thought more about it,



perhaps they would have found that it was a traumatic or at least a bothersome event because it symbolized what they feared most; a home that had been part of their community for longer than any of them had been alive had been sold to outsiders and was being torn down to make way for the industrial park that was replacing the old farm. Too many changes, too much progress was creeping toward them, threatening their community and changing their world. Town was no longer a place they went, town was upon them, annexing their homes and cutting up their history, and town neither knew nor cared.

At the Cogburn home, Doug thought of the faces who were being lit by the lamps. These were the faces of his childhood, grown older and wiser; these were the faces of his friends he'd grown up with, how long ago that sometimes seems; these were the faces of children and babies, the Katies and Reeds and Zaks and his own children, faces young and fresh, faces of a different time and different world, faces that might never understand why their parents and grandparents watched kerosene lamps burn, faces that wondered but couldn't understand the memories and years that shone in the yellowish glow of the lamps from the old Hardin house.