

Dr. Mom

By J. W. Henson

I turn an eye to heaven
For a sign that winter's past,
Up among the stars of beauty
I find the sign at last.

It is Orion the Hunter
Being hunted in the night,
As he reaches for his zenith
Just one hour into the night.

JWHIII

The spring rains of 1931 had ended during the last warm days of May. Dad had brought out the plow and was following the team across the face of the newly turned earth. The soil was rich, and the smell of the loam being turned to the sun was exhilarating. The work was mundane enough but the farmer was free; he was independent. The world lade their tables with the product of his hand, yet he ate of the first fruits of the land, and fed others the crumbs from his table. What he was doing was important to others than himself. He had followed this routine of plow, plant and harvest for 30 years. It was cyclical and he knew the routine for the season and the things that must be done. Those things had to be observed like a ritual if they were to eat.

He and mother had married late in life, each feeling there was none that was meant for them. Mother was 30 years old, and he 39 when they were married just 18 months before. Their relationship had been platonic for several years before the wedding. The wedding was a simple affair in the home of a local minister, and witnessed by Mother's sister and her husband. There was no honeymoon, for the cows needed milking and the other chores that were incumbent upon farmers, even in the wintertime, placed a demand upon them.

The summer had burned to a close, and on November 30, 1930 I was born in the room at the northeast corner of the little house by the side of the road. The birth was at 10:30 pm., and as with the rest of my life, a light rain was beginning to fall.

The hours on the farm were long and the work hot and dirty. There were the worries of borrowing money for fertilizer and seed; the concern that the weather would not allow a crop to pay for those items when the season was over.

"Whoa", he said in a soft and gentle voice to the team of large brown mules. It was music to their ears, and the response was immediate. Anything that rhymed with that word was sure to arrest them. Surveying the sky in the gathering twilight, he turned the plow to the left, and with the sole

of his shoe cleaned away the soil that was sticking to the moldboard. The animals had put in a faithful day dragging the plow and man across the field. If the animal had been smarter or the man less determined, the work would have overwhelmed them. Like time itself they had worn away another day.

Dad wasn't as hungry that night as the work should have demanded. Across the table by the light of a kerosene lamp Mother noticed the lines of care and the well hidden pains in his gentle, noble features. He turned into bed early to a night of fitful sleep, and awoke with pains and nausea on the morrow. He kept his bed that day. It was alarming for he was a man of industry, and not one to recline even during the exertions of the day. The Doctor was called. They still made house calls in those days. Hospitals were not part of the treatment that came to mind to our simple country people.

Dad's left foot was icy cold. There must have been a blood clot somewhere along the way. On Sunday afternoon, June 7, 1931, the Doctor dropped by after church to see his patient. They talked of the weather, and the crops, Dad from his bed and the Doctor in a chair nearby. At length Dad told Mother that he would like a glass of water. Returning, she slid her arm under his head to bring him to a sitting position. At that instant he went limp. Dad was dead. There was nothing the Doctor could do. Life had forsaken our loved one.

Mother often told me of the joy that she and Dad had in those short months of marriage. He would discuss with her his plans and aspirations for me. He wanted me to have an education for he had so sorely missed one. But alas he was to never see the fulfillment of his wishes. All who knew him, spoke of him in warm and glowing terms. I should like to have had the privilege of growing up in his house.

I was six months old when Dad died. He had had a \$10,000.00 life insurance policy that all Veterans of the First World War were eligible to carry, but Mother's younger brother had persuaded him to discontinue the payments a few months earlier. He said that with a wife and son, Dad needed the money to support them. We were condemned to a life of hard times.

The old doctors had little in their arsenal of medicine that could help more than wasp stings and abrasions. There were no antibiotics. They were still a decade away, still in the laboratories of pharmaceutical houses, or yet in the brain of some bearded chemist. In fact Mother seemed almost as qualified as the doctor of the time. She would be called on by the neighbors from miles around when there was illness in the family. She had tended the sick bed of many people. There was something in the commanding way in which she went about her job that inspired confidence. Most of the time the patient recovered, in fact I have heard her say that she never lost a patient.

When there was a boil or sore that was not healing, there was always the poultice. Certain maladies required a charcoal poultice, and others seemed to respond better to one of flax seed. When Mom learned of the nature of the distress she would go armed with the proper treatment. The flax seed were put into a pan and partly cooked with a little water. They were then poured sticky onto a clean white cloth and wrapped into a bandage. The warmth of the poultice and the osmotic pressure of the flax seed certainly did the person no harm.

Headaches seem to have bothered the old-timers as much as they do modern man. It appears that when there is no pressure or stress on us we generate our own. One cure for headaches was to

bind the head tightly with a band of strong cloth. I have never had a headache so I do not know the value of this remedy. Mother thought that headaches were caused by a constriction of the blood vessels in the head. She recommended that the sufferer should exercise to get the heart rate up, and thus increase the blood-flow to the brain.

Coughs were doctored with an elixir of one tablespoon of honey, and one tablespoon of lemon juice in one-fourth cup of water. The solution was taken a spoonful at a time and allowed to run slowly down the throat to relieve the tickling and the ensuing coughs. Another medicine was to boil a thick syrup of onion and sugar, strain and allow to cool. This was taken in the same manner as the honey and lemon juice.

Hiccups (or hiccoughs if you prefer) had a very simple treatment. The sufferer would hold his breath as long as possible, or breathe into a small paper bag cupped tightly over the nose and mouth. Continue breathing into and from the bag until the hiccups go away. The theory behind this was that the holding of the breath or breathing from a bag would increase the carbon dioxide content of the blood, thus raising the acidity of the blood. This remedy seems to work. I like treatments that have immediate results. That way one can tell if they actually work.

Garlic and onions were used for liver foods. I am not sure what that means, but I have often heard the family discuss certain foods as brain food or other organ specific nourishment.

Bee pollen and/or honey were given to build the immune system against allergies. Allergies were usually called hay fever.

I was never allowed to walk barefooted in the early morning grass until the dew dried off the grass. I was told that I would get dew poisoning if I did. Dew poisoning was supposed to be parasites that would be picked up through the skin when the grass was wet. They would finally find their way to the intestines and give you worms.

Burns were treated with an ancient remedy. Aloe Vera plants grew around the house for the purpose of treating skin wounds. The Bible says that the body of Christ was anointed with Aloes. If one had a burn the leaf of the plant was crushed and the juice applied to the wound. It seemed to give almost instant relief. It would also be chewed to give relief to an aching stomach or as a cure for constipation.

A tea made of Senna leaves was rapid relief for constipation. I never did like the taste of the tea, but it really did the job. When one got a cold the tea was given as a purgative "to clean out the system". Castor Oil was used for the same purpose. It was mixed with orange juice or the juice of the grape.

Stitching and sewing of open cuts were not in common vogue. If one had sustained a serious cut with an axe or knife there were no tetanus antitoxins in the wings of the home treatment room. The injury would be encouraged to bleed and was washed out with soap, water and bandaged with a soft cloth. The lamp was brought to the table, and a pad of cloth was wet with the kerosene. We called it "coal oil". The wound was given a good wetting with the kerosene and the pad put on the sore and bandaged in a manner to hold the flesh in approximately the position it belonged. I must admit that there was magic in the treatment. I have often thought that kerosene was a substance the body tried to shut out by healing as rapidly as possible.

The sick room was a solemn, and dreary place by night. A kerosene lamp was left burning on the bureau. The wick was turned down very low, and the lamp cast long, sad shadows across the room. If it were in the winter a fire was kept in the fire place. Heavy frost would collect on the inside of the window panes, so a fever was not a great problem, for the room was never very warm. There was the miracle drug, Aspirin, that could be used to keep a fever under control. There were no thermometers in our home to record the burning within the patient. The back of the hand of a well one was used to determine if the sick were feverish or afebrile. If the sickness struck during summer, there was no air conditioning. The sick were cooled with hand fans furnished by the local funeral home. Damp wash cloths across the feverish brow relieved some of the discomfort.

Sore throats, colds, and flu were the primary contenders with health. Mom believed in gargles for soreness of the throat. A heaping teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm water was gargled hourly. More drastic measures were taken when the soreness persisted. A tablespoon of vinegar in a glass of cold water was used at regular intervals. If this did not bring relief within 24 hours, she would change the remedy to a teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of warm water. Vinegar was acid and the soda alkaline. The theory was that if the bacteria grew in an acid environment the soda would make an unwelcome pH change. This was to have shocked the organism, and stopped its reproduction.

She had yet more severe remedies. Two drops of kerosene on a level teaspoon of white sugar was held in the mouth and allowed to "soothe the inflamed tissue", as it slowly dissolved and ran down the throat. Another questionable aid was a glob of Vicks Vapor Rub about the size of a pea held in the mouth until it dissolved and ran down the throat. The taste of these two treatments made one say that the pain was better, even if it were not.

A more gentle but aggravating treatment was a cold wet cloth wrapped around the neck and secured with a woolen outer wrap. I never understood the logic behind this piece of "doctoring".

Colds and flu took a more rigorous turn. The cliché was "Feed a cold and starve a fever". One treatment that I did not mind was an 8 oz. glass of water with two tablespoons of sugar, and two of 5% vinegar. These were stirred until the sugar was dissolved. The patient was taken to the sink and told to drink rapidly at the given signal. A teaspoon of baking soda was quickly stirred in and the elixir drunk down while the effervescence was at its height. This was believed to increase the carbon dioxide in the blood and thus lower the pH slightly. Castor oil could be administered once the cold had become well established. A good cleaning out seemed the desired reaction.

If the malady got into the chest a "Plaster" of Vicks Vapor Rub was generously applied over the chest, covered with a cloth and wrapped with a large towel. The pajama top was put on over this. The patient was then taken to the wood stove in the kitchen where a pan of water was furiously boiling. A funnel was made of newspaper, a teaspoon of Vicks Vapor Rub added to the water, and the victim breathed through the small end of the paper while the large end was placed over the steaming cauldron. From there they were quickly taken to bed and a hot water bottle, that would scald the skin, was placed on the chest over the plaster.

The old-timers used to say that "if you doctor a cold it will get well in seven days, but if you do nothing it takes a week." I have no idea how effective these remedies were. There was comfort in

knowing that someone was concerned with your welfare and was doing something about it. I believe it was therein that the real remedy lay.

Mom considered it more important to stay well than to mend health once it was impaired. Good food, exercise and proper rest were the primary goals. Winter time was taken seriously. Tonics were in the catalog of prophylactics.

Sassafras Tea was one of Mom's favorites. We would go along the byways and dig up the small plants that were growing about four to six feet tall. They had to be dug during winter "while the sap was in the roots". We stopped along the stream and swished the roots through the water to remove as much of the clinging earth as possible. Back at the house we took the shrubs to the chopping block, where the fire wood was split, and cut the roots free from the stem. Small hair roots were pared away, and the remaining roots thoroughly washed again. She did not remove the bark from the roots, but put the entire thing into a pan of boiling water. This was allowed to boil for about 10 minutes, and the refuse was removed, the tea filtered into a pitcher, and sugar added to taste. Mother was addicted to sweets so her taste was "sweet". The liquid was a transparent, ruby colored drink. It had a pleasant aromatic smell and taste. I liked that medicine as a beverage. She would pour milk into her tea. It turned a turbid pink that I could not bring myself to enjoy.

In April when the warm showers were falling and the sun was bathing the earth with yellow light the Pokeweed made its appearance. The stems and leaves were eaten when they were very tender. We stayed away from the roots. The roots were bad medicine indeed. When we went gathering Poke we took a large paper bag. If the thumb nail could be pressed through the tender stems, they were considered right. The stalks and leaves were from six to 12 inches tall. The greens were taken home and "looked". Looking beans removed gravel and other objects, but looking greens removed insects and leaves that had spots on them. The whole plant was immersed in a pan of boiling water. Completely submerged, the blanching process went on for about five minutes. The water was drained off and the greens rinsed in cool water. Shaken dry they were put into a skillet with some oil, chopped onion, and fried for another five to seven minutes. Mom liked eggs scrambled in with the greens. This was not my favorite; the eggs took on a green cast that was not palatable, to me.

There were no super markets in the times of which I am writing. The people had gone all winter without fresh fruits or greens. When the warmth of spring returned, and the poke and ramp were pushing their heads above the soil, both man and animal were ready for those tender greens. The bear, opossum and coon were all serious contenders for the ramp. The ramp is a flat leafed leek that grows in the high mountains of Appalachia. They can be served in any manner that the green scallion can. The taste is stronger than the onion.

There never was a discussion as to what systems and organs of the body these strange teas and herbs performed their tasks upon. Another drastic tea, made only when it was apparent that something was seriously amiss in the body was Willow bark tea. It was made from the slime of the inter lining of the bark. I only had that poison imposed once upon me. It's serious medicine even in the hand of a "professional".

Stomach aches were common in my youth. Mother would set out armed with "death and destruction" to cure me. When these terrible cramps would possess me I would go into hiding,

fearing the treatment more than the malady. When the house had grown quiet for too long Mom would come looking for me. The simple cure was to lie on the stomach. If this did not do the job she would take a teaspoon of sugar with a drop of paregoric. This narcotic was readily available over the counter back then. It really did a job. The pain was gone almost as fast as the sugar reached the stomach. Mother cautioned me never to help myself to this remedy.

Bee stings were common annoyances on the country farm. A mud plaster would be applied to the tender area. If there was a smoker around, the mud would be made with tobacco juice. As a child, I once found a wasp nest as large as a small dinner plate. It was covered with the flighty insects. I called to an elderly man who was nearby to take a look. He surveyed the scene, and rubbed his right hand under his left arm pit. Removing the hand, he started slowly toward the nest. The wasps began fanning their wings and moving away from the hand. At last he reached beneath the nest, and broke it free from its attachment. I was impressed with two things. One was his courage, and the other was his need of a bath. Even the wasps recognized that.

When we children would run so long that we got side aches the standard cure was to bend over and spit beneath a rock. Relief was immediate. It was thought that the blood was pooling where it should not and that this gymnastic would relieve the pressure and reestablish normal circulation. I have no idea where doctor Mom learned her anatomy and physiology. Some of it seemed good, and then there were the descriptions of hernias and hemorrhoids that are still frightening today. It was good that she never decided to do surgery. Snake bites were unknown yet the fear existed. Men would go into the woods with a flask on their hip in case they should be bitten by a snake. I figured that it must happen pretty often for there seemed to be less elixir in the bottle upon their return.

Chiggers were another hazard in the summer out-of-doors. They left large angry red spots that itched like the mischief. They had the embarrassing habit of getting in areas that were covered by clothing. Nothing deterred Mom from locating and treating them. She would take a ball of butter about the size of a pea and work a generous helping of table salt into it. This was rubbed into the sore. The coarseness of the salt and its light sting felt good. The salt would draw the moisture from the little insect by osmosis and leave it dead.

Many of the women suffered from low blood sugar, and pearl tea was the drug of choice. Pearl tea was a cup of hot water with a tablespoon of white sugar. The faint, weak spell would pass like magic. I remember looking into the crystal clear cup and thinking that it looked too weak to add strength to anyone. Mother had to have her sweets for weakness until she died at age 91.

Mother once had a Wen on the back of her hand. Being in the presence of a Doctor she asked him what could be done for it. He told her to take a Bible on a Sunday morning, lay her hand on a table with the Wen up. Take the Bible in the other hand and come down on the Wen with a fierce blow. She asked why a Bible and why on Sunday morning, for superstition was not totally removed from the people of those times. He told her, "So you won't curse. It hurts like the dickens!" She took a book and followed the Doctor's advice. The offender went away.

Around this time, I got a very large, angry looking cyst under my chin. It was soft and full of blood. Doctor Mom gave it a good looking over and fell to work. She sterilized a sewing needle in the flame of a match, and scratched the surface until it began to weep blood. She put me into the crib and went to bed. Along in the night she awoke to check on me. I was covered with blood

and the pad of my crib was soaked. Mom was sure that I was dead, but alas the cyst was gone, the bleeding had stopped, and you guessed it, I was still alive. She always used a steel sewing needle to pick and gouge in the flesh. It was her belief that the verdigris or patina on a copper pin was poisonous.

Sawdust, insects, and other things that got into the eye were removed by Doctor Mom using the tip of a lead pencil. It must have taken a very steady hand, for it took a very steady head from the patient. I dared not move for fear that she might stick the pencil out the back of my head. The corner of a handkerchief was also used. Another relief was to lift the eye lid and drag it across the other one, to remove the offending substance. I preferred all of the treatments to the lead pencil.

One family that lived near the Salem Community was wiped out by tuberculosis. Several of the children were school mates of Mom's. She really liked the family and this memory stood at attention in her mind for many years. After the lifestyle improved in this part of the country, TB, also called Consumption, was nearly eliminated.

Then there were the Kilgores that lived near our family. Many funny stories evolved around our two families. Mr. Kilgore was one of Grandpa's farm hands. One day he saw Mr. Kilgore take a dip of snuff. Grandpa was not a virtuous man, but neither did he believe in the use of tobacco. He told his helper that he could get more benefit from the snuff if he would put a spoonful in a glass of warm water and drink it. Along about bedtime one of the Kilgore children came to get Grandpa. He said that his dad was dying. On the scene the old man discovered that Kilgore had in fact tried the snuff in the water, and was having a bit of a stomach cramp.

Colds and pneumonia stalked those who had delicate constitutions and were exposed to the harshness of the elements in winter. Mother came down with Pneumonia as a young girl. There were no miracle drugs, and the doctors had poor transportation and all too often poorer training. The lives of the sick were in the Lord's Hands when the doctor was unavailable, and victims of superstition when they were present. It was a long hard winter for Mother and the doctor despaired for her life. Yet she was meant to live. She had a place to fill in society. It was not her time to go.

On another occasion she suffered what was termed a nervous breakdown. The stresses of exposure, and unbalanced diets left the people subject to all manner of illnesses in the winter. A "nerve specialist" happened to be visiting in the Chattanooga area. He was from up north. Mother's doctor implored him to give some special consult to her plight. He appeared at the house one day along with the regular doctor. He made some observations, and with the regular assistance of nature, she rapidly grew better. She must have gotten all of her illnesses behind her in those early years of life, for I do not remember her being ill but very few times in my lifetime.

Mom was the Veterinarian, too. I remember once when a thunderstorm blew in fast and furious from the west. She forgot, or did not have adequate warning of the coming storm, and the baby chicks with their mother hen were caught in the open. After the fury had subsided, and the rain had about ceased, she ran into the yard searching for the biddies. I was close at her heels. As we rounded the north side of the house, there, littered across the lawn, were the beautiful little puffballs of yellow. They were lying on their sides, just as dead as the proverbial doornail.

Mother stooped over and picked up one of the precious little chicks. She opened its beak with the fingers of the hand that was holding it, and gently blew breath down its throat. As if by magic the small bird revived. After I had seen the occurrence a couple of times, she instructed me to help, for we were running out of time. It was a beautiful experience of reviving the "dead" little chickens.

Herbs were a part of the treatment. Aloe Vera was grown in the home and applied to burns, or eaten to improve the tone of the digestion. Bee pollen was given to help immunize one suffering of allergies and to reinvigorate those suffering from a lack of energy. Blackberry leaf was steeped into a tea for the relief of diarrhea. Catnip tea improved sleep, and conditioned the nerves. Cranberry juice has an acid that was used when the kidneys and bladder needed toning up. Golden Seal was used on chancre sores, and for the stomach. That is to say nothing of the Witch Hazel, Wintergreen, Senna leaves, Rose Hips, Garlic, Horehound, and dozens of other roots, barks, and leaves.

I do not know how she learned all of the medical skills that were in her repertory. I could talk for hours on her treatments of discomforts within the household. How she used salves, plasters, liniment, decoctions, and hot and cold fomentations. It is still a marvel to look back upon the things that she did with such courage, and reflex.

Life must go on even when the spirit is not ambitious. In the days and weeks that followed Dad's death, Mother continued the farming where Dad had laid it down. One day about the end of June she happened upon a spot in the dry field where the foot tread of Dad was still clearly visible upon the face of the earth. The old brogan shoes with their toes turned up as if in vespers had left their imprint. The footprints and the man who made them have now been gone for many seasons. We sorely missed him too, for a home without a strong honest father is only a half home.

Mother was also left with the responsibility of raising me. Her true love lay in the cemetery in Georgia. I would see her with a magnifying glass, and Dad's photograph trying to get a closer look at her absent dream. I once took up the glass and noted that the grain and distortion were multiplied as much as the features of Dad. It did not help. We could come no closer to him in this life. She even had the photographer enlarge the picture, but it was of no avail. I leave it with your imagination to know the depth of heart ache and sorrow that was experienced in those sessions of grief. Death is so final, yet our memories will not allow the loved one to leave us. They are there. A great void exists within us. A hurting that no bandage can soothe, a longing that cannot be breached. There is nothing in the annals of medicine or the doctor's pouch that will bring a lasting relief.

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