

My 'Future' as a Farmer

By Carl Goodman

I had never expected to be reading about the Future Farmers of America in The New York Times. But there it was, on the front page of the business section, a full-blown feature about the FFA and how it was looking ahead, expanding its scope to appeal to young people and staying relevant.

Accompanying the article was a photo of two young men sporting white cowboy hats and blue jackets. Emblazoned on the back of one jacket was Tennessee.

I never belonged to the FFA, but the organization was pretty popular during my Grundy County High School days in the late 1950s. Its sister organization, the Future Homemakers of America, was popular, too, and prettier. Its membership was all female. I obviously wasn't a member of that group either. (But I shared with Emma Jean Hawk of Pelham, a FHA member, the honor of Most Versatile in the Class of 1960.)

As I recall, many, perhaps most, of the FFA members were from the Valley, which included Pelham and the surrounding area, home to big farms and tractors.

As a resident of Tracy City, I considered myself a city slicker and spent most of my extracurricular high school activities writing for the school newspaper and trying out for plays. It just somehow seemed more urbane, although I had no real sense of the word at the time.

What I did have a sense of was our father's fondness for farming. He had spent most of his boyhood on a farm along the Elk River near Hillsboro. That was before the family lost the farm and moved to Tracy City, where, at age 16, he began his career as a coal miner.

To feed that fondness and six children, Dad struck deals with other family members, with friends and neighbors to cultivate what otherwise would have been idle land. It seemed Dad could not tolerate either idle land or idle kids. And as one of those kids, I spent many so-called summer vacations longing for school to begin so I could stop farming and start studying.

Unlike those in the Valley, our farm operation wasn't mechanized. We were a fiefdom of small gardens, armed only with hands, hoes and a mule—and a borrowed mule at that!

Elmer Brawley, the town's cobbler, who lived near my grandmother, owned a tractor and mule. While Dad would hire Mr. Brawley to plow our fields, we'd borrow his mule to lay off rows for a variety of vegetables: beans, corn, cucumbers, okra, potatoes, squash and tomatoes. And because I often stayed with my Mama Goodman in a big, two-story house, her garden was my primary responsibility. That didn't rule out the garden at our home. When he came home from the mines, Dad would walk the rows slowly as if looking for clues to a crime. Weeds were the enemies. My brothers and I tried to slay them with a hoe, but they defied death.

It was in my grandmother's garden that Dad sensed the limits of my future as a farmer. I found it extremely difficult to control the mule with the reins and plow with my two hands and 70 pounds. The mule ignored my commands. I shouted hee and haw till I was hoarse. No matter. My rows zigzagged and Dad was not pleased.

“Son,” he said, “either you or that mule must have been drinking.”



“Classmate
Grady Ward Partin
in control of his mule.”

On occasion, I would have to walk the mule across town to reach one of our garden spots. And when those occasions happened to be on a Saturday, I was, to put it mildly, “on the spot.”

That’s when Tracy City was in its coal mining heyday and the hub of shopping activity. Folks came from all over the county. To be seen walking a mule through town did little for my image as an urbane city slicker. To help disguise my identity, I would pull the bill on my baseball cap as far down on my face as possible and walk with a slouch.

What I could plainly see was that my future as a farmer was not to be. The mule seemed to agree.

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