35. Down on the Farm

June 20, 2009

Riding with Daddy

[A Father's Day Story! Ride with your Dad somewhere, anywhere, if you still have the chance. Drink in his wisdom and give him another hug. If your Dad is gone, reminisce and think of all the priceless memories he left with you and then be a Daddy to some Daddy-hungry child.]

Daddy reminded me repeatedly when I was growing up, "Son be careful, try to make a good name for yourself. Watch your reputation!" This advice was wrapped up in countless other things that Daddy wanted me to know. He ever so skillfully dropped little bits of information about the reputation that someone had. I am sure that I did not pay much attention at the time, because it was not as exciting as learning how to drive the car or truck or tractors. Nor was this as exciting as how to pack baskets of peaches, and haul them to the railroad and stack them neatly in the refrigerated freight cars. He was as honest a man as I have ever known and he was trying to impress upon me to be the same.

We often drove over the farm to check the orchards and cattle. I will never forget his tremendous talent in handling cattle. His deep 'whooo-kee' call to his cattle probably could be heard a mile away. Many times as a boy I went with him to the pastures and when we got there, no cattle would be in sight. The ground almost shook when Daddy called. Then in about five minutes or so after Dad called, the cattle would come to us from the shade and creek banks. When they spotted him with his salt bucket they began running at a gallop. He placed little piles of salt around in clean spots in the fields. The salt was like magic. The calves would lick it up in a hurry and look at Daddy begging for more. Daddy carefully walked among the steers, checking for runny noses and pink eye and all of the other things that might indicate a sick calf.

Many times it was just the two of us and after we left the public road, Daddy would say to me, "Son, slip over here and sit in my lap, and you drive." I just plain could not resist that. As I grew older, he let me sit alone and drive by myself. We talked about all kinds of things, about how to tell the good calves from others, and sometimes we talked about people. He tried to impress upon me the value of integrity and honesty and goodness.

He told me of his love story of farming with his four brothers. He told of another brother who moved away who had two infant sons, and then he died of typhoid fever. He told how he and his brothers, who as boys, caught rabbits in their wooden box traps, and then killed them, cleaned them, tied their hind legs together, and strung them on a fence rail. Two of the brothers would place the opposite ends of the chestnut fence rail on their shoulders, and carry the rabbits to the

country store and sell them. When he told me these stories from his childhood, then I wanted to listen to him all the more.

There were other times he left me at the peach shed to help sell the peaches. He would leave instructions, “Son, give your customers good measure, count the boxes carefully, and throw away any bad fruit. We want them to come back.” Then the thrill of making a sale, and often the question from the buyer, “Are you Mr. Sam’s son? Well, if you grow up to be half as good as your dad, you will be all right!” And I kinda shook my head in awe, Daddy had a good name. And then I thought, what will they say about me one day when I am grown? Can I ever be that good?

Once a man from back in the mountains, who Daddy did not know, came and tried to make a deal to buy Dad’s steers that he sold every summer. The man was stout; he looked you straight in the face with his piercing eyes. I don’t ever remember seeing him drive a car or truck. He dressed very plain. The hundred or so steers were probably worth about twelve thousand dollars and Daddy questioned the man pretty vigorously about his ability to pay for that many steers. The buyer said, “Mr. Saunders, if you doubt me, why then don’t you go and ask Judge Meeks about me? Judge Meeks knows me.” Judge Meeks was the circuit judge at the time and Daddy knew him well. Daddy talked to Judge Meeks, and he got his reply, “He is ‘gilt edged!’ He will do what he says.” He bought the steers.

Sometime after this the old cattle buyer and I became good friends. He knew that I had heard about the deal and the steers and Judge Meeks’ comments. He would ask me, “What did your Daddy tell you the Judge said about me?” He would kinda smile, and throw his shoulders back, and steal a glance at me and wait for the answer. He knew what the judge said. He wanted to hear me tell him again. He was proud of his name.

A friend from Western North Carolina and I were talking at one of the nursery plant shows about integrity and character, and ‘doing what you say you are going to do.’ He said, “My dad always told me, “Son, there is only one thing that you will take with you when you leave this world; that is your NAME.”

Both Dad and the old cattle buyer are now gone. When you spoke their names it meant something. Dad tried to impress its value upon this little boy many years ago.

Have a great Father’s Day,

Paul Saunders