

HAVE YOU EVER...

Composed by J. B. Leftwich

There was a time when life was simpler, when problems were critical but less complex and when issues were not blurred by national pundits weighing in on op-ed pages and on radio and TV.

It was an age when parents made decisions and children "minded" or faced penalties applied with an Elm tree switch.

A world without a trained professional in every vein of life worked quite well, and the children of this age evolved into what writer and TV anchor Tom Brokaw labeled the greatest generation.

Perhaps we were the greatest generation. Perhaps the greatest generation is yet to come. The subject is debatable.

But not by members of the greatest generation, who survived the Great Depression, fought two major wars, returned to attend college and thrive in industry, agriculture or in the professions. And not by the survivors -- citizens now older than 80 -- whose obituaries pepper newspaper columns every day.

And who will record the joy and the pathos of that age when we were young and we fashioned our plots to emerge in a better world? Our motto was: "Use it up...Wear it out....Make it do....or Do without."

One writer, a former schoolmate, has authored a small, self- book capturing the lifestyle in rural Western Putnam County in the 1920s and the 1930s.

Maurine Ensor Patton, of Cookeville who died last month and decades ago was my seatmate on the school bus transporting high school pupils to Baxter Seminary, delved deeply into rural life for her small volume, titled "Have You Ever?" A few of the answers to the questions follow:

Have you ever....

-- Put your letter in the rural mailbox with no stamp but with two pennies?

I have. Pennies were precious and we could not afford to buy a sheet or a roll of stamps.

-- Been on a telephone party line and your ring was two longs and one short?"

Absolutely. And we listened also to other rings, such as one long and two shorts, to gather community news -- gossip.

-- Carried a chicken to a store to trade for groceries?

That was SOP of the time. We didn't have billfolds then because we had no bills. Most of us had no coins.

-- Sat on a nail keg?

We congregated at a general store that sold nails from kegs and saved the kegs for seats.

-- Washed your feet before going to bed?

Of course. Nobody in our community had a shower or a bathtub. After a day of field-work with dirt caked around your ankles, you didn't dare crawl between clean sheets.

-- Built a fire under an iron kettle to boil the clothes?

Granny washed on Monday, usually a full day's work. On Tuesday, she ironed. Today, we toss the clothes in the washer, and then attend to other matters.

-- Gathered wild blackberries for pies, jams and jellies?

Yes, and a few chiggers and occasionally a few June bugs.

-- Walked three miles to a Holy Roller meeting under a brush arbor?

I did. Their meetings were entertaining. And some of those Holly Roller girls were very pretty.

-- Enjoyed the fragrance of wild honeysuckle blossoms in the evening?

Now, we're getting romantic. There was this pretty redhead visiting in the community, and . . .

-- Watched your dad bottom a chair with strips of Hickory sapling bark?

My dad could do anything. He could repair the clocks, shoe the mules, cut our hair, build our houses, make molasses, play a Jew's harp, make our bull tongue plows. And I? I could write a pretty good theme.

And I swung on grape vines, hulled walnuts, popped popcorn over an open fire, swam naked in the blue hole, had the itch, ate wild grapes, rode a steer, broke a filly, hid in the hayloft, made shoe laces from groundhog hide, fell off a foot-log, slept on the floor because it was cooler, hunted polecats in a drizzle, put a needle in the Victrola ...

I am thankful for the memories, but more thankful they are memories.

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