

REMEMBERING AUNT SIS AND
COTTON BRITCHES WINTER

Second Thoughts

By J. B. Leftwich, Columnist

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The weather was unseasonably cold, some kind of late spring winter, I suppose, although blackberry and locust winters were a few weeks past. Mama said it was cotton britches winter.

Everybody was bundled up, wearing long sleeve shirts and even sweaters to ward off the chill. Mama wanted Dad to build a fire in the fireplace, but Dad, citing the late date – “only six day till June,” he said – refused. So Mama hovered near the kitchen stove which had to be fired at least once a day winter or summer.

Usually, Mama started cooking dinner, the noon meal, shortly after breakfast in order to get it over with and allow the heat to diminish. But that day late in May with the temperature lodged near 50 degrees she added more stovewood.

As she mixed cornmeal for enough bread for both dinner and supper, I appeared topless and with cut-off overall pants covering my posterior but little else.

“And what are you doing in that get-up?” she demanded.

“I’m going swimming with Albert,” I said.

Albert was Aunt Sis’s youngest. Albert was 18 years old, three years older than I but about three years behind me in school. It wasn’t that Old Al was dumb or anything. Fact is, he was a lot smarter than I about many things. But Al had trouble reading and multiplying on paper although he could do a lot of arithmetic in his head. Besides that, Al stayed home to work when he was needed, while Dad would not tolerate my missing school.

Al was Aunt Sis’s standby. He lived with his mother and two unmarried sisters and their four children in a three-room house about one-quarter of a mile from our house. The living room was probably 20 x 20 and was all there was to the house when it was first built about one-half century before I was born. The big room served originally as living room, kitchen, dining room and bedroom. Some time later, a lean-to kitchen was added.

It was here that Aunt Sis and her brood of five children, two boys and three girls, had lived until the two older ones had kicked off on their own. As a matter of fact the oldest one, Mark Peter, had gone to Nashville and got himself a good job working in a restaurant. He saved his money and bought a small hamburger place where it was said he was making “good money.”

A lot of people were not surprised when Mark Peter went off and did well.

“He comes from a good stock,” they would say. “Old Man Peters is plenty smart and owns a lot of land.”

Old Man Peters was Mark Peter’s father. He was a bachelor just as Aunt Sis was a maiden, and almost a score of years ago her liaison with Mr. Peters had produced Mark Peter. Later her trysts with a prominent married man had produced two daughters. Their father was a member of the county court and he too owned a lot of land and was prominent in the community. Of course, nobody talked about this in polite company, but everyone knew he was the father.

Aunt Sis was sort of a prototype Murphy Brown. She just said to heck with convention and went on and did what came naturally. The strange thing was the community accepted her and her indiscretions simply because she was regarded as a member of a lower social class where such was expected although she was the only one I knew then who had five children and never married. As for that matter, I never knew any other unmarried female in the community who had even one child without first saying, “I do.”

The community actually took care of her when times were tough. Our family would give her a turn of cornmeal and a gallon of lard or other staples. One cold winter, Dad gave her a hog and helped Albert butcher it. The family members were clothed with second hand items, and they were relatively warm in their old house even though daylight showed through the cracks in several places.

I never understood why Aunt Sis apparently could attract males any time she chose. Aunt Sis was grossly overweight and much of her was displaced because she owned not one bra. She dipped snuff and was never too tidy with it, allowing streams of tobacco juice to meander down the crevices of her chin and drip on her chest or lap.

“Can you understand why....?” I asked Portfolio who knew everything else and should have known the source of Aunt Sis’s mystique.

“Beats me,” said Portfolio for the first time in his life admitting he was ignorant of something.

Never could we have imagined Aunt Sis as a young, slender, passionate female with all of her physical adornments in their intended places. To a boy age 15, all elderly persons were always elderly with wrinkles, liver spots, thin gray hair, and, in the case of Aunt Sis, with tobacco juice dripping from her chin.

Thinking of her as young and desirable was as inconceivable as picturing Jenny McMurray, the sexiest female I had ever seen at the time, as old and wrinkled with tobacco juice staining her clothing. The only way I could picture Jenny was as a curvy mass of humanity with a lilting laugh and with hair that flowed with the wind like the tail of a thoroughbred in the Kentucky Derby. And that is the way she is frozen in my

memory – forever young and forever pretty. She moved away, and I never saw her after she was 19.

(Part one of two)

TAKING A DIP DURING
COTTON BRITCHES WINTER

By J. B. Leftwich, Columnist
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I spent little time contemplating the morals of Aunt Sis. Aunt Sis was Aunt Sis and that was the way she was. In the double standards that pervaded our community, her behavior was accepted but not approved. Her social status was not affected. But if some female in my family or in the family of my peers had adopted a Murphy Brown lifestyle, she would have been ostracized.

I wasn't sure who Old Al's sire was, but the stories making the rounds had his father as a drummer who came through the community selling thread and scissors. According to this theory, the salesman sold Aunt Sis a bill of goods then asked how she planned to pay. Aunt Sis reportedly explained her plan to him, and a bargain was struck.

Knowing Al as I did, this story seemed plausible to me. Old Al possessed a quantity of blarney and finally wound up a salesman himself after he had seen a big part of Europe during World War II. Al came back to the community but did not stay. He got a job selling farm machinery and finally went to Akron, Ohio, where he is said to have made a fortune selling automobiles. Some years after I had migrated from the community, he came home in a brand new Olds and wearing a diamond that would have choked a fying size chicken.

Al was right educational, in his own way. I never knew where he got it – according to Portfolio, he ordered it out of a magazine – but he came into possession of a pornographic comic book which did much for Portfolio's education.

Lest Mama find out and tan my hide, I refused to look inside it although I did see the cover and recognized it would take a lot Xes to rate it. I hoped Mama never found out I'd seen the cover.

“You out of your head or something?” Mama yelled. “You'll freeze to death trying to swim in weather like this. Get that thing off and put on some decent clothes.”

“The weather's a little chilly but the water will be warm,” I assured her. “It warmed up last week while the temperature was 90. I'll be all right.”

“At least wear a shirt,” she said almost pleading with me.

At some point in my teen-age life, Mama recognized there was no reasoning with a hard headed boy, especially on matters that were debatable or not absolute.

“Go on but don’t come home with a head cold,” she said. “You’ll get no sympathy from me if you get pneumonia.”

Her last statement was a parting thrust expressing her hope that I would listen to reason and stay out of the water. It expressed her acquiescence, her recognition of the fact that she could not go through my life diverting me away from danger or temptation. There was something a little wistful in her words. She was beginning the continuing process of cutting her apron strings, of ushering her son into his own decision-making process.

I was right. The water was warmer than the weather, and after I got used to it, I stayed submerged relishing its warmth and exhilarated by its buoyance.

Mama was right. When I emerged from the water and started home, I almost froze. My teeth chattered out of control, and my lips turned blue. I knew what she was thinking when I arrived home. I developed a cold which may or may not have been a consequence of exposure. I did not develop pneumonia for which I was thankful since I figured I would never hear the last of it if I got it and was bedridden.

Dad had relented and built a fire in the fireplace. There are few joys that exceed the pleasure of coming in from the cold and a restoring body heat in front of an open fire.

Mama was real sweet about my cold. She did the things that farm mothers did in those days and nursed me back to health.

She never once reminded me that she had warned me of the consequences of exposure to the winter temperatures of that 28th day of May during cotton britches winter so many years ago.

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