

Remembering day with old Granddad

By J. B. Leftwich

There are details about that winter day I can't recall -- my exact age, why I was home instead of in school, what prompted my grandfather to an act I could not have anticipated -- but the essential detail forever is engraved in my memory.

On a sunny afternoon in January, I think, Granddaddy decided to burn a tobacco bed. In those days, farmers in my neighborhood burned brush on sites where tobacco seed later would be sown.

"Get your coat," he said, "we're going to burn a tobacco bed."

No previous clue that the burning was in the offing. No discussion of tobacco or tobacco beds. Out of the blue, came the announcement.

Granddaddy was not your typical grandparent of fiction or TV. I don't remember his ever getting on his knees and playing with his three grandsons. I think I never sat on his lap or joked with him.

I was the oldest. Up to the day of the tobacco bed burning, he had talked more to me than to the other boys. But our conversations usually were brief, and I recognized and understood the two generations separating us.

The site of the tobacco bed was on a north hill side where the slanting sun rays beamed directly in the winter months.

The bed was below a bluff where rains had deposited soil from higher on the hill and left a rich residue that produced healthy, thick shanked tobacco plants.

Brush had been cut earlier and piled near the burn site. Now sap was drained and the fuel flammable. We piled the brush carefully on the bed site, heaping it high to produce an intense flame and to kill the weed seeds embedded in the soil.

We worked silently, piling the brush as the heat of the sun began to wane and clouds gathered to obscure its rays. My coat was thin and my back and shoulders cold. I welcomed the fire.

We stood a few feet away as the fire raged through the brush, then turned our backsides toward the fire while the intense heat diminished.

"Wait here," Granddaddy said, "I've got something."

There was no explanation as he moved into a thicket and almost immediately, returned -- with a half-gallon fruit jar a little more than half full.

"Here," he said.

Nothing more, no invitation, no explanation. And there I stood, a teen age boy with a Mason jar of clear moonshine whiskey.

I looked at Granddaddy who, in contrast with his usual posture, was grinning impishly. Then I knew I was invited to sample the prime product of the hills.

I took a healthy swig and passed the jar to him. His drink lowered the level of the liquid appreciably.

I didn't know what to say, so I turned to face the fire and warm my front. Granddaddy said nothing until he handed the jar back to me.

"Here," he said.

I took another sample.

By that time the second sampling was an appealing idea. Granddaddy took his turn, then went to the thicket and hid the jar. He returned and we both turned our backs to the fire which by then seemed to be warming my insides.

I don't remember how the conversation began, but I realized we were talking in a dialogue neither of us had experienced before. The separating generations had dissolved. We were talking as peers, this teen and his grandfather.

The subject of the conversation faded in the fog of passing years, but the communication we had, and maintained in years to come, stands like a obelisk in my conscience.

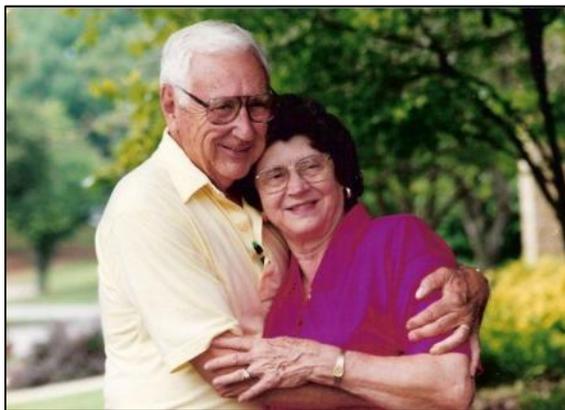
The phrases had not been coined then, but this was my coming of age. My rite of passage.

It was our secret. We never again spoke of it to each other or to anyone else in the family. And we never again shared alcoholic drinks. But there were many other peer conversations yet to come.

We later shared other experiences, exchanged ideas and often debated issues, but none more poignant than the one on the day we burned the tobacco bed.

(J.B. Leftwich is a veteran journalist and a columnist for *The Lebanon Democrat*.
Email: leftwichjb@charter.net)

<http://www.ajlambert.com>



J. B. Leftwich & his wife Jo Doris
Picture courtesy of J. B. Leftwich