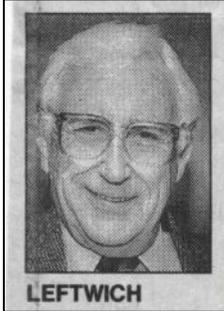


WHEN LIFE WAS SIMPLER, AND FAMILIES CARED

By J. B. Leftwich

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One of my great teen-age pleasures while growing up in the depressed economy of the 1930s was visiting in Mount Juliet with my mother's uncle's family.



In that family, the children ranged from just younger than Mama to younger than me.

Mama's cousins in that family included Lillian, a vivacious redhead, and Ruby Pearl, a head turning blonde, facts that were not entirely wasted on me, although Mama cautioned me that these girls were my second cousins, so behave myself.

But the great joy was just to be with a joyous bunch of teens and sub-teens who understood how to have a good time and how to get into a bit of mischief.

They lived on Mount Juliet Road, near and across the street from the current site of the public library, in a large and ancient house surrounded by a large number of acres of farm land, acreage now split into residential subdivisions.

Three generations lived in the house: The children, their parents, and their grandmother, Permelia, who was my great-grandmother, a lady of remarkable memory who would have filled my vacant head with family lore if I had been bright enough to listen.

Uncle Bethel raised vegetables. Truck farming it was called then. Acres of tomatoes, beans, watermelons. We boys picked tomatoes and headed off to Old Hickory to peddle them door-to-door at prices ranging upward from 10 cents for three pounds. This was old hat to the family but exciting to me.

Then, there were the watermelons, some so ripe they would pop open when you stuck a knife in them. We could eat at any time as much as we wanted to eat.

It was the knife-sticking exercise that got W. T., Cal and me into trouble. We found a new way to determine ripeness: Insert a knife, and if it popped open, it was ripe. Often, several melons were required before one actually cracked open. We called it exploding.

Well, the other melons we stuck were never the same again. In fact, they just lay in the sun and soured. When Uncle Bethel discovered what was happening, he almost exploded himself. To put it mildly, he took a dim view of our activity, which came to an immediate halt.

There were other boys besides W. T. and Cal., including Henry, the youngest, and Gatty, who was different. I never heard Gatty's condition described until much later when Down's Syndrome emerged as a name. Nevertheless, Gatty played along with the rest of us; indeed, he was much smarter in some ways – he never stuck a knife in a watermelon in the middle of the patch.

What makes this story interesting is not our boyfriend capers, but the way the family thought of Gatty, who simply was considered on of the gang, although his participation in many of our exercise was limited. Gatty was never shielded from the public.

Even in those less-than-enlightened days when many families were embarrassed because of a special child, Gatty was in the mainstream as much as was possible then.

The other children grew up, married, and left home, but Gatty remained with his parents. Uncle Bethel died, but Aunt Ruby lived to be 90. After she died, Gatty lived alternately with his brothers and sisters until age or illness rendered them unable to care for him during his last year.

Bernard Gaston Bates, 72, died recently, outliving by many years predications of a youthful death.

It would be unrealistic to assume that Gatty did not add stress to the lives of his siblings, but the remarkable thing is that this family in one way or another handled its problems and made sacrifices to care for one of its members.

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See J. B. Leftwich stories at:

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