

TAKING DAD BACK HOME

By Phil Crowder

Writer's Corner

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Dear Rainer,

Well, May is almost complete and we have gotten the garden planted, the fresh shoots of chamei, eggplant, peppers (both bell and Korean), zucchini, cucumbers, radishes and rows of corn carefully moved from their nurturing seedlings beds to, as Pearl Buck put it, the good earth. We will plant dozens and dozens more of chamei over on some bare land we have next to our incipient persimmon grove. That soil is not very nutrient rich. We planted grass on it last year, fine golf-course style grass, but it grew up fast, was lushly and briefly beautiful, and then every last blade of it died right down to the roots. This year we are adding to that hard-packed clay some fertilizer and lime pellets but, most importantly, I'm taking my hoe murderously to it and breaking it up into very small bits to a depth of about eight inches. I except the chamei to grow.

My mother and father were here last week for my youngest daughter's high school graduation. One day dad suddenly asked if I could take him to his birthplace in middle Tennessee. For the last time, he said. That stabbed cold, hard and deep. I said sure and so, the next day, we took him home to the mountains and the streams he played in and loved so completely as a child. He remembered everything (through everything had changed). He even pointed out where his dad (his dad!) had dug out a road to their stream to allow horse-drawn wagons to travel down it in the dry season. He showed me the spot by the dirt road where he, his mother, his sister and brothers would meet the peddler once a week and trade wild blackberries they had picked for some kitchen utensil or special knickknack. Then he walked up a bit turning toward the stream and told us this is where he had played with his pet squirrel, Tommy, and that Tommy would ride chattering on his shoulder as they walked down to the road to wait for the peddler. He turned to his left, again. Where they had grown corn was now an orchard of pecan trees, interspersed with patches of wild blackberry, but you could see in his eyes as he scanned those rows of trees that the corn was still growing tall. He continued forward and walked slowly, unsteadily, a bit painfully, up the shoulders of the mountain his family had once owned...and back down again.

The house of his parents was no longer there... and he suddenly wanted to leave. We drove him around a bit more. He pointed out where his family had stayed after they had lost the farm, at his aunt's farm. But that house was flattened, too, and overgrown with weeds. None of the families that he knew as a kid were there anymore. All had been wiped out in the Great Depression. Dad's farm, which had been in his family since the 1850s, was sold for a dollar an acre: \$365. And he took me back to it. He wanted to show me where he had come from. It was his greatest gift to me.

You know all he asked for? It was a picture of that field.

It is approaching evening, and my wife is showering from her time on the treadmill. In a few minutes we will go to the pharmacy and get a copy of that picture and then I'll e-mail it off to him late tonight when I have trouble sleeping.

When my dad's dad died soon after he lost the farm, they went hungry for a while, then what was left of the family moved up north to Indiana. There dad found an assembly line job in a factory making car batteries, and he worked full-time to support his mother, sister and brothers from age 15. He never graduated from high school. He never lost his faith in people. He never lost hope. And one day he achieved his dream.

He is a good man, my father.

And I love him.

"Writer's Corner" accepts any family-friendly poetry, essays or narratives of 700 words or fewer from local writers. To submit materials for possible publication, e-mail arts@herald-citizen, c/o Arts Editor, 1300 Neal Street, Cookeville, TN 38501. The editor reserves the right to edit or refuse submittals.

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