

Free Range Children; Growing up Beyond the Fences
Pete Strange
April 4, 2016

The Vacation:

The first night we saw Foxfire. We never would have seen it if we had had sense enough to make camp in the daylight. But we didn't get to the river until mid-morning and by the old Corps of Engineers' map we had - that only showed bridges and power line crossings - we just didn't feel like we were making any progress. So we kept going until after 9:00pm and then we could barely see as we walked up on the bank to make camp. We boiled some soup and by that time it was full dark.

The dark really didn't matter to me because I had my Christmas present. For Christmas Mom had traded in sixteen books of S&H Green Stamps (almost two years of collecting from her trips to the local Albers store) and had gotten for me a patented "Pop Tent" that didn't need stakes. You just put the poles into the loops, pushed down on the top and "pop" you had a two-man tent. Except that when we crawled into the tent that first night we found that the ground wasn't flat; there was a half-buried piece of log right under the fancy, attached ground sheet. I fumbled through the pack and found my hand axe, we moved the tent, and I knocked the top off that rotten log; then Tom and I retired for the evening.

I have always rolled around in my sleep. One time, down on Fourteen Mile Creek, Dad found me in the morning, at the bottom of the hill, almost in the creek and with a bunch of cows standing right over me. That first night on the Kentucky River I must have gotten up a good head of steam because I woke up with no tent over me and with what I thought was dawn coming up through the trees around me. I started to get up, only to hit my head on what looked like the light. I reassessed the situation and concluded

that someone had knocked Tom in the head and taken everything, but left the lighted flashlight behind. But, when I reached for the flashlight all I got was wood chips - every one of them glowing with a clear, green light. Now I figured I had eaten something that had cooked my brain. I stumbled around, found the tent, woke Tom and asked him what he made of my discovery. We looked around, and every chip I had hacked off that rotten log was glowing. We were setting in a field of Foxfire - something you just can't believe in until you see it for yourself.

Nobody was going to believe two fifteen year old boys when we told the story, so we gathered up those chips and put them in the pack for proof; but when we got home two weeks later, all we had were plain old woodchips. I've cut a lot of logs before and since, but I only saw Foxfire that one time.

Of course, today no one would believe that two fifteen year old boys had been left on their own on a river bank eighty miles from home. It may sound unusual now, but it was just part of the adventure of growing up fifty years ago. For me the hardest part of the planning was to find a time when I could escape from working for Grandpa, a small contractor who didn't believe in vacations for fifteen year old boys. I suggested to my mom that he wouldn't notice if I just extended my school for a couple of weeks and she agreed. We were free range children. Dad was busy working, or fishing or hunting; and mom was mostly busy trying to carve out her space in a world designed for men. She encouraged all adventures, just so they didn't hurt your grades in school. So I made a plan, borrowed an old canoe and was ready to go, except that I needed a partner for the trip.

Tom was not what you would think of as a top candidate for the job. He lived up in town, over on the smarter side of the tracks, had liberal parents; and the family even had a black woman who came three times a week to do for them. The good news was that

with all their liberal views, Tom's parents couldn't think of saying no to one of their children. There was no yelling, no paddling, no children working, and no saying no at their house. So all I had to do was convince Tom, who was more into playing drums in a band and attracting girls than he was into fishing, that it would be a grand adventure. Tom bought my story and told his parents that it was his idea. And, they, as always, said yes.

So we loaded all the gear we could conceive of needing, tied the canoe to the top of Mom's car, and she rode us down to Clay's Ferry, where they were building a high bridge for the new I-75 expressway. We unloaded our stuff, made sure we had some change to call for Mom at the end of the trip, and launched our adventure.

One big challenge for us was what to take for food. I maintained that two hearty woodsmen could eat what they caught. Tom was less confident and insisted upon cans of beans and soup, which weighed down our ship. We did take a supply of what I considered at the time, "nature's perfect foods." The first was Spam. You can eat it right out of the can; you can cook it and it will make grease that you can use to cook your fish and potatoes; and it is pretty good catfish bait both raw and cooked. The other perfect food was, of course, oatmeal. It packs tight, will keep either wet or dry, and when you add hot water it swells up to twenty times its size – and let it cool to sticky, roll it in some grease, and it's pretty good catfish bait.

With provisions, shelter and transportation in hand, we planned to travel twenty miles a day, reaching Carrollton 160 miles down the river, in about eight days.

The second day we met up with Jeannie C. Riley. If you have canoed in calm water, you know that twenty miles a day is pretty hard work – especially with a two-week supply of canned beans

and soup along for the ride. We lived near the Ohio River, which generally has a two to three mile an hour current, so we figured we could pretty much lay back and float along for eight hours to make twenty miles. Bad planning. The Kentucky River in the summertime might have a good strong five mile an hour current if there is a lot of rain, but, as a result of the fourteen dams that were installed to canalize it and make way for commercial traffic, it might be a lake if there is a dry spell. We got the dry spell, so we had to work hard for our travel; which meant that we were ready for some real food when we hit the first town.

I am not sure that you could call Camp Nelson, that gathering of a few dozen souls halfway between Lexington and Danville, a real town, but it had everything we needed in a single bar and grill perched high above the water next to the US 27 Bridge. We entered like we belonged, although both of us were spotted as near-Yankees by our lack of the proper twang when we ordered. We had just settled in to eat our burgers and fries, when the true Hillbillies next to us decided to play the jukebox. They dialed up Harper Valley PTA by Jeannie C. Riley, the newest country music diva; then they followed that song – with Harper Valley PTA. By the time we completed our meal we had heard about mom’s mini-skirt at least twenty times; and we were pretty sure that even Howard, the slowest kid in our little school, would have known all of the words by then. Some folks who travel the rivers are traumatized by “Dueling Banjos” from the movie “Deliverance;” for me, I have nightmares about being trapped with the fellas who loved Ms. Riley enough to play her one and only hit over and over and over.

The third day we had fish for dinner. The good news about that second day was that, about five miles down the river from Camp Nelson, there is a place called Polly’s Bend. Even now, fifty years later and having done my share of traveling to beautiful spots, I still carry in my head a picture of Polly’s Bend as the best

campsite I have ever encountered. A creek comes into the river there with a nice gravel beach to pull your boat out on. Up a path from the beach there is a shelf, a sort of lawn covered with short grass, which is perfect for your tent. And behind the lawn that creek comes down off the palisades in a waterfall; the perfect shower for a dilettante like Tom, who labored under the misconception that you would be happier if you were cleaner, and for me the perfect sound to sleep to – as long as you didn't roll out of the tent and into the creek.

So, we strung our trot line across the mouth of the creek, cooked some Spam to eat with our cold beans, and settled down to do some production fishing.

Now that I have embraced fly fishing and understand just how much money you can spend to catch a fish that you have no intention of eating, I am a little embarrassed to reflect upon my approach to fishing at fifteen. Our goal was to catch fish, with the intention of eating anything that was big enough to swallow the bait. (My first real hint that Ginger and I might get married someday was when, at the age of sixteen, I took her mother a present of thirty-six little bluegill – and was invited back for the fish fry.) A Trotline - one hundred feet of good, strong, staging, with a leader and hook attached every two feet - was to my mind back then the most scientific approach, and the most fun approach to the sport. There is no better experience on earth than pulling the boat along in the dark and feeling the fight of a fish somewhere down the line. And there is nothing more terrifyingly exciting than thinking you are pulling up a fish in the pitch dark and getting a hellbender - that big but harmless salamander that can grow to a foot or two in length and comes out of the water kicking and scratching. Later in the trip we pulled up a big snapping turtle and to minimize confusion in the boat I suggested to Tom that he just cut the line and let the thing go on its way. Tom may have had some advantages in life but he was woefully short on education

regarding snapping turtles. Instead of giving it its space, he thought he would save some leader and cut the line right against its beak. That turtle reached out and took a chunk out of the fatty part of Tom's hand; and he carries the scar, as evidence of the tuition he paid for his education about turtles.

That second night out, there at Polly's Bend, we had good luck. No turtles, no hellbenders, but three nice channel cats about sixteen inches long. Big enough to leave on a stringer without the turtles eating them and small enough to fry up good in our little skillet. We went to bed with the calm certainty that we would have fish for lunch the next day. That plan hit a bump in the road when we inventoried our equipment the next morning. We had brought along one of every tool and utensil that we could imagine that we might need in the wilderness; every tool and utensil except the right tool to skin a catfish – a good, strong pair of pliers. I don't know if you have ever tried to skin a catfish without pliers; if not, you can take it from me that it is not the way to go. By the time I got done, the fish were badly bruised and I was badly cut several times from trying to clamp the fish's hide between my sharp knife and my thumb. By the time we had the fish fried in the grease from some Spam I was wondering how the pioneers managed.

After lunch we headed down river toward High Bridge.

One of the joys of river travel is that it is really hard to get lost. You may not know where you are a specific moment, but you surely know that the Kentucky River flows west from Hell Fer Certain Creek and empties into the Ohio at Carrollton. If you stay inside the banks, you will get to where you are going.

The fourth day we figured out how to make lunch. One of the jobs I had, working for grandpa, was to help build the septic tanks that treated the sewage from the houses we built out in the country.

Grandpa had a simple rule for a working septic tank: “If the sewage stays in the tank or the leach field too long it might stop up and cause problems; if the sewage can get away – as long as it isn’t too obvious – then there will be no problems.” What this meant was that we always created an outlet from the field tile so that extra waste could just run down the hill and into a creek. Even at fifteen I knew that drinking out of creeks and rivers that had raw sewage coming into them was not a way to stay healthy: and, that’s what caused us to find out how to make a good lunch.

We were tied up at High Bridge – so named because the Southern Railroad crosses the river there on a high bridge, just downstream from where the Dix River enters the Kentucky. Our water jugs were empty so we climbed the hill, walked down the road a piece and knocked on the door of a farmhouse. The lady came to the door and we asked her if we could fill our water jugs from her cistern pump. She said yes, then asked us where we had come from. We proudly said that we had come down the river from Clay’s Ferry and she looked at us hard and asked, “What do you eat?” We said that we had some beans and that we ate fish when we caught them; then beginning to catch on, we looked at her like we hadn’t had a real meal in a week.

It worked!

She said, “You boys sit down on the stoop here and I’ll make you a sandwich. You can’t live on fish and beans.”

We may not have been too smart, but we caught on quick where food was involved. We polished and repeated that performance every day for the rest of the trip, with consistent results.

At Frankfort we almost gave up. History books are a most unreliable source of information. If you read the history of Kentucky, you will learn about brave pioneers, bloodthirsty

Indians and happy children who walked behind the wagons or rode on the roof of the flatboat. Like most everything in history books, that happy children stuff is a flat out lie. There is no mention in the history books of mosquitos, chiggers, ticks, leaches, corn bugs, deer flies, horse flies or any of the other hundred or so child-o-vores that Noah saved from the flood for the sole purpose of torturing children. By the fifth day Tom had a practical understanding of the lies he had been told. He was fair-skinned and tried to stay clean, so he gave off a sweet smell that was nectar to the beasts. I was swarthy and smelled like bait, fish and my surroundings, so I didn't stand out as some kind of new meat.

The bugs were eating Tom alive. His skin was so covered with bumps that he looked like a popcorn ball. And to make matters worse, he was modest so he wouldn't go naked when he went into the water. He would come out of the water into the weeds in his wet underwear, inviting a thousand chiggers to take up residence in his privates where the wet cloth touched his skin.

As we pulled our canoe up to the dock in Frankfort, Tom looked at me and said, "I'm done. Let's call for a ride home." That was fine for him to say because he was going home to go to the swim club every day. I would be going out to dig ditches and to haul form panels, so I was less inclined to end the trip. As a delaying tactic I suggested that we walk to town, find a drug store and buy some calamine lotion or baking soda to give him some relief. He agreed that he needed some relief and deferred the argument about going home.

When we got to the drug store, the pharmacist took one look at Tom and asked whether he was doing research into all of the bugs in Kentucky. He gave Tom his best itch cream and instructions not to disrobe in the store to put it on; and then he saved our trip. He said, "I have what you boys need. Just got it in

today. It's a brand new product that is supposed to keep insects away. It's called Off." Tom went on to become a clinical psychologist, I think in part to try to help depraved souls who like the woods. If you ask Tom today to name the greatest invention of human kind, he will likely tell you that it is Off. If I smelled like the woods, from that day forward Tom smelled like a chemical factory. He put so much Off on his skin that the bugs couldn't break through the barrier with a jackhammer.

That fifth day we almost drowned in a lock. The locks on the Kentucky were early technology. The sills on the gates were raised by turning a threaded rod that brought them up slowly; and the gates were opened by a rack and pinion powered by a large drill motor. Back then when all fourteen locks were operating (I don't think any of them are today) the government employed a lockmaster who lived in a government house and operated the lock when you rang the bell. This could be a slow process because he was not required to stay close to the dam. He could be plowing down the road; or he could be on an errand to town. Above Frankfort, time didn't matter much because there was no commercial traffic. But even though those lockmasters were being paid with our tax money (Well not Tom's and my tax money, but somebody's.), they just didn't like having to stop what they were doing for two boys in a canoe. We learned quickly that if we wanted to get on our way, the best approach was to offer to do the work.

At Frankfort the game changed. At the time there were still small tows that hauled gravel and coal that far up the Kentucky from the Ohio, so the dam there was manned eight hours a day. This did not help us much, since the lockmaster still maintained that we were a bother and that we should just unload our canoe and portage around the dam. We stood on our rights, which is usually bad judgment, and so we were "allowed" to go through the last locking of the day – provided we didn't mind going through with a

tow boat. We had never been in a lock chamber with a tow boat. We thought that when the lower gates opened he would just drift on down the river. Instead he started his four-foot screws and threw a wave back at us that swamped our boat, much to the entertainment of the lockmaster and his buddies who had gathered to watch. Thanks to that miracle invention, Styrofoam, we didn't sink – but we did spend the next day drying out our soaked gear.

As grandpa would say, “The first rule of the road is the right of gross vehicle weight.”

The tenth day we arrived at Carrollton; found a pay phone and dialed up Mom. She told us she would be down when she had time later in the day, and then she asked a remarkable question. She asked if we would be okay on our own until she got there. Evidently while we were out in the wilds she wasn't too worried about our welfare, but now that we were in a town and had made contact, the perils of the world were to be considered. I had that experience with Mom a number of times growing up. When I made sixteen and got an old Rambler automobile, everywhere I went I took a little boat on top the car and an old Montgomery Ward outboard in the trunk. If we knocked off work at noon on a Saturday, I was off to Bullock Pen Lake to catch bluegill or Gunpowder Creek to chase jugs all night. Generally the only question I got when I showed up late on Sunday was, “Did you catch anything?” That all changed one day when I told Mom that I had asked a girl to go to the movies and we were going to drive twenty miles to Cincinnati. The way she reacted you would have thought I was planning to cross the DMZ into North Korea; allowing as how she wouldn't get a wink of sleep until I was safely back in Kentucky.

So we waited for her to come down to get us, sitting on a curb and working at staying out of trouble. And the next day, Tom went to the swim club and I went back to work for Grandpa.

At this point I offer an apology to the members of the Literary Club. While I am here and I am reading this story to you, the fact is that I didn't write the story for you. You are mostly old enough to have good memories of adventures in your own childhood. Maybe not quite the adventures that I share here, but adventures just the same. I didn't write this story to convince you that my adventures were better, or more exciting or even funnier than yours; I wrote this story for the generations who have followed us. The generations who have lived within the fences - the fences of safety, the fences of expectations and the fences of accountability – and so have had to get their adventures in the watered down form from movies, videos and, not often enough, books. And when they do have adventures, there is planning and padding included; knee pads, elbow pads, helmets and the like. I wrote the story for generations that I fear are becoming Kipling's Tomlinson - that man, who after being sent from Heaven to Hell because of his lack of good deeds, was kicked out of Hell for having done no deeds at all, with these parting words from Satan, "The God that ye took from a printed book be with you Tomlinson!"

When and where I grew up we got our experiences with very little planning, and with no padding at all.

I grew up in a world where the defining lines were often indistinct or non-existent. There was a fine line between antiques and junk; and my family worked hard to erase that line. Everything we owned fit into one of three categories. It was either a valuable antique (which meant it had no value at all because we were not

allowed to sell it); or it was a good thing that needed a little work (which meant it was destined to rust away waiting for repair); or it was an interesting object (which meant that you could probably mount a mailbox on it or sell it to a city woman to put in her flower bed). We were rich in objects, but defined by our objections.

There was a fine line between genius and insanity. My family never went near that line. Mom's favorite description of her relatives was, "They're smart enough; they're just a little retarded." Uncle Harvey Carvosso would be a good example; a wonderfully gifted craftsman, who just couldn't stop himself in time to save the project. He built a house out of bridge timbers, which were loaded with creosote oil, then he put in a six foot wide open fireplace and wondered why the house caught on fire. He built an elaborate cabin onto his twelve-foot fishing boat; so elaborate and heavy that the boat would hardly float. He found joy in feeding us caviar; but his version was fried bluegill eggs. And he built his own beautiful ballfield; because he had been banned from all of the public fields for fighting. Uncle Voss was smart enough; but he was just a little retarded.

And, to the point of this story, there was a fine line between adventures and abuse. I don't think that we were abused at all; but there is no doubt that a time traveler from the twenty-first century would have sought warrants to put a few of the adults in jail. There were even a few times, not many, when I would have called 221-KIDS myself, if it had been available. I would have called rather than cleaning cisterns. We used to fix up old farm houses, often not lived in for years. One of the jobs was to pump out and clean the cistern, but our old gas pump had such a short intake that it sat right on the opening while it ran. After the water was pumped out there was a proper concern that so much of the products of combustion had sunk to the bottom of the hole that there would not be enough oxygen to sustain life. Grandpa's solution was to call me over, tie a rope around my waist and invite

me to go down the ladder first. I was a shy lad and often suggested that someone else should have that honor, to which he would always reply, “Look at it from my point of view boy; I can pull you out, you can’t pull me out. So, get over here.”

Grandpa was the patriarch of a little tiny construction company, run off the card table in his living room. We all worked in the company in some way; his sons, and sometimes his sons-in-law, as carpenters, and we boys as laborers. Grandma was the company cook. We all came back to the house at noon and paid her 35 cents apiece for a meal that no amount of money could buy elsewhere. And my mom, who was the best educated among us being a school teacher, kept the accounts – but because she was a girl, the boys got a salary and Mom got a single \$100 bill each Christmas as a thank-you present.

Grandpa ran his company by four simple rules:

- He had his labor relations policy, which was: “Kill a mule, buy another one; kill a man, hire another one.”
- He had his interpretation of the child labor laws, which was: “One boy’s a boy, two boys is half a boy, and three boys is no boys at all.” He kept us separated so we wouldn’t play or fight.
- He had his safety program, which was: “What are you afraid of; there’s a better world hereafter?”
- And he had his productivity analysis and motivational speech, which mostly amounted to him putting his arm around me, looking at me real hard and saying, “Petey, you’re bound to stay busy. It takes you longer to do eight hours work than most people.”

As the oldest grandson in that patriarchy, my big adventures started the day after my sixth birthday when Grandpa pulled up to our house in his pick-up and announced that I wasn’t going to get to sit home “lazin’ it” all day when there was work to do. That first

day he took me up on the roof of a house they were building, tied a rope around my waist and the other end around the chimney, and I carried shingles and nails to the men all day. Proving my point that I wasn't the shiniest leaf on the tree, it took me until I was eighteen to realize that if the rope was long enough to walk the entire ridge of that house, it was never going to keep me from hitting the ground. Like a lot of things with Grandpa, that rope was for confidence, not for comfort.

You might ask, where were my mother and father while all of this was going on? By this point, my father had had enough of being a son-in-law; and had offered to fight the whole clan singly or as a group. Dad was the youngest of thirteen kids, so he had attitude to spare; Dad was a poet, so he hid no emotion; and Dad was the lightweight boxing champ of the army, so he had major muscle motor skills. Dad was what you might call notional. By the time I was six, he had moved on to a succession of what his in-laws looked down on as "city jobs."

Mom believed that work and education were the only paths to success, so she was all for my working on any non-school day. She would get me up every morning, dress me and send me down the road to sit on the running board of Uncle Pete's truck until he came out to go to work. But, some days I would just sit there in the dark and Uncle Pete wouldn't come out; so eventually I would wander on home and tell mom that I guessed we wouldn't be working that day. And then she would get around to looking at the clock, see it was only 3:30am, and tell me to go back and lay on my bed for a while. One of the tradeoffs in getting to have adventures was that you didn't get many apologies.

And I did have adventures. Along with building houses and occasionally a church, we had time for fishing, for hunting and for the sorts of games that children in grown men's bodies could think up. There was the always fun trick of shooting someone in the

butt with a BB gun at the same time that you set off a firecracker. Amazing how many people would actually believe they were shot. There was the popular game of putting snakes wherever they were least expected. One of the favorites was to thread them through the holes of warm brick. They would sleep there until some unsuspecting bricklayer would pull the middle brick out of the rack and find that a live snake came along.

All good fun, except that some of the adventures weren't quite so intellectually grounded. When I was twelve, Grandpa bought what was left of Joe Fichle's hardware store. Joe was going out of business and had sold all of the good stuff, so he gave Grandpa a cheap price on what was left – which was mostly nails and screws that Grandpa could use in his business. The adventure came from the fact that along with the nails and screws there were three big cartons of twenty-two cartridges; everything from birdshot to CB Caps, which were used at shooting galleries, to shorts, to longs, to that epitome of firepower, long rifles. These had no use in the business, so Grandpa gave them all to me. That summer, everywhere I went I carried a Winchester pump gun and a pistol that today would be called a Saturday Night Special; a grand adventure for me but a measurable risk for every living thing in the county.

The other example of poor thinking, at least in my eyes, was a game called, "Our boy can whip your boy," which usually resulted in me getting my butt kicked twice; once by some big hod-carrier's kid, and once by Uncle Jim who was stupid enough to bet on me.

That game did; however, lead to my most important learning for being an executive. One day, after a full day of fighting on the job, my Uncle Pete said he wanted to talk to me alone. John Wayne wasn't even in the game with Uncle Pete. Uncle Pete could jump up and grab the bottom of a joist and chin himself; Uncle Pete could put a sack of rich mortar on each shoulder and

beat anyone in a footrace; and Uncle Pete was a war hero, having been shot down on his nineteenth mission as a B-17 pilot, then finding the partisans and fighting with them until he could walk out to Switzerland. If Uncle Pete talked, I listened.

That day he sat me down and said, “Petey, I want you to do me a favor; just learn to take it and keep your mouth shut. There’s always going to be some kid who can beat you up, and you’re going to be inclined to complain to your Uncle Jim. Jim will beat the kid up, who will complain to his daddy. Then, the daddy will beat up Jim; and then I will have to go kick the crap out of the daddy. If you learn to just take it and keep your mouth shut, there will be a lot less suffering in the world. Perhaps the best advice I have ever received – but not always followed.

Uncle Pete was, in fact, responsible for my long career. What started on a roof top at the age of six almost ended on a roof top at sixteen. At sixteen I knew damn near everything and so I had figured out a labor saving strategy. We had three hundred twenty five squares of shingles (almost a thousand bundles) to nail on the Hickory Grove Baptist Church. I was way too smart by then to carry those bundles thirty feet up a ladder, so I devised a plan. I set up a well-wheel, hooked up a line and put my eleven year old cousin on a borrowed tractor. I would put six or eight bundles of shingles on a pallet and have him haul them up to the roof; then I would carry them out the ridge. My plan worked perfectly except that every time I pulled a bundle off of the pallet I spread a few more gravels from the shingles on the roof. I was far too busy being smart and efficient to even think about cleaning up, so by noon I was standing on a sloping roof covered with tiny ball-bearings. About two o’clock I turned with a full bundle on my shoulder, slipped on the gravel and was headed for the edge. We were taught that if you fall on a roof, you should make an angel – get your arms and legs out so that you have a lot of surface area on the roof to slow you down. I had no time to think about

physics as I tumbled toward the edge, but I can remember wondering whether I had done a good job of clean up or would land on a pile of brickbats after falling thirty feet. As I rocketed toward the edge of the roof a big hand reached out, grabbed the back of my shirt and threw me head over heels back to the ridge. Then Uncle Pete said in his calm voice, “You weren’t planning on getting off work early today, were you?”

Back to the vacation. What really made the trip down the Kentucky River special was that it was not my first try at a vacation. When I was about thirteen Grandpa offered me my first vacation. My Aunt, and the other son-in-law, had decided to become missionaries and to carry the Baptist faith into the wilds of Northern Ohio. They were up at a place called Fostoria, preaching among the unenlightened farmers and the autoworkers in Toledo. When Grandpa asked if I might like to go up and see Lake Erie and maybe catch a few lake perch, it sounded good to me. So they put me on the Greyhound and headed me toward Toledo, a city so distant that it might as well have been in Spain.

Those who have stayed with this story will no doubt be smarter than I was and harbor some suspicion regarding Grandpa’s motives. When my Aunt and Uncle picked me up at the Greyhound bus station, they allowed as how they were glad to see me; and then told me the real reason I was there. It seemed that they had converted a local farmer to be their chief benefactor in building a little church, and that the farmer had become so distracted by prayer that he had let his soybeans get too high to be cultivated with a tractor. So; someone was going to have to chop a few weeds by hand so that Farmer Euler could combine the beans. Farmer Euler had a field of beans that looked to me to contain more flat ground than our entire county in Kentucky. He would sharpen my hoe in the morning, start me at one end of the field and pick me up for lunch at the other end. That vacation was a great opportunity for technical training; in his youth farmer Euler

had been the hoeing champion of some part of Alabama and he was eager to share his knowledge. (The secret to success is to move the hoe back and forth, not up and down). In addition, those four-hour trips through the field provided plenty of time for quiet contemplation. I came away with an important conclusion - that is that there is always a worse job than the one you are doing, so be careful about allowing someone to sell you on a new opportunity.

There was no fishing on that trip – it stormed the last Saturday when the fishing was planned – but he did pay me; and after I had given my tithe to the new church, there was enough left to purchase a Pflueger Pelican spinning reel; an object that was as important to me at the time as any graphite tennis racket or fancy putter could ever be to a child today.

When I arrived back in Kentucky and asked Grandpa about his approach to vacations, he responded with, “What are you complaining about? You got the same suntan hoeing those beans that city people get sitting on the beach.”

It is at about this point in reading this writing that my children and grand-children will be rolling their eyes and saying, “Isn’t Grandpa lucky that he came to live with us.” They came up with that statement after years of listening to me say to them that they were lucky to have been born into my family instead of the one I was born into.

Both statements are of course true. But it is also true that I feel that I have been much luckier than they. I didn’t get much in the way of education in the Commonwealth. I graduated from high school with the vague notion that the twin cities were Indianapolis and Minneapolis, and with no notion at all of what Calculus might be. But I did find the joy of work; that exposure to expectations, accountability, shared purpose and accomplishment that is

transformational for human beings. And, because I grew up working with construction workers, I was lucky to learn early that intelligence and opportunity are two different things and that they intersect in people's lives in very different ways. During my adventures I met dozens of construction workers who were smarter than me; they just didn't have Bettysue Strange as their mother. If she had been their mother instead of mine, they would have been CEOs and I would have still been pounding nails. I am living proof of the smartest thing that Emerson ever said, that is: "Men are what their mothers make of them."

I end this ramble with the day that I fell in love with work. In addition to being a contractor, Grandpa was a small scale farmer. He had a little patch of corn down by the creek that fed more critters than humans, and he decided that the solution was to fence it in with farm fence. So; one morning he took some locust posts, a posthole digger, a spud bar for the rocks, a sack of lunch, some water, and me down to the creek. He staked out the locations for the posts and told me to have the holes dug by the time he got back. That was one of those occasions when I would have called 221- KIDS. I was just a skinny kid; I couldn't dig post holes in that rocky bottom ground. After he left, instead of digging I stood up and I cussed that old man. After I ran out of curse words I sat down on that pile of posts and cried, feeling properly sorry for myself at the unfairness of life. But, after I ran out of tears, I decided that even though I couldn't dig all of the holes, I could at least work on one to show him I had tried. I started on one hole and when I got it done, I started on another; and somewhere between the third and fourth hole I decided that I would show that old man, that I would die in a heroic attempt to dig all of the holes – so that he would feel guilty about my demise. But I didn't die; and when he came back he said the words that have informed all of my success. He said, "Good job boy. I knew you could do it."

Success is fun. It's a great thing to have money, and titles and awards and such; but if I have accumulated some of those things it has not been that stuff that has mattered. Each time I faced a project beyond what I thought to be my ability or capacity, I kept on going because it couldn't be harder than digging those postholes, and if I did complete the project, someone might say to me, "Good job boy. I knew you could do it."

I am proud of the advantages that my kids and grandkids have had in growing up. I am confident in the success that they will find, because my wife is a great mother and grandmother. But, I hope that our fences of safety, of planning, of support, of education and of expectations – all that well-intentioned stuff that we do to protect our children against abuse and failure – don't separate my kids and grandkids from the joy of work and the chance for an adventure that will allow them to see Foxfire at least once in their lives.