

## "Daughter fondly recollects father's finest legacy -- 'himself' "

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by B. Lou Guckian

This Father's Day holds special meaning for me. My dad, Eugene Guckian, is 81. My mom, formerly Margie Brzozowski, is 77. Shortly after they married in 1944, they moved from Gonzales to San Antonio where they raised six children. I am one of the six.

I have reached middle aged and with age has come contemplation. So it's natural that this Father's Day has me thinking that if I had it to live all over again, I'd have been a little easier on Daddy as a teenager, and I'd have spent a lot more time getting to know this man, my father.

Whether reminiscing about his life as a boy growing up on a farm, a soldier who at the impressionable age of 19 met death face to face during World War II, or a young suitor in love and courtship with my mother, Daddy is clear about the details. And his life, as I have found by taking time to listen to him, is filled with interesting details.

He tells his stories convincingly well. So well, in fact, that listening to him is like reading through the pages of a novel set in a bygone era that I missed but wish I could've lived. If you take notice, you can't help but hear history. When I pay close attention, I hear my legacy.

I sit watching sometimes as he spins a tale for a friend I've invited home for Sunday dinner. When the dishes are cleared and the two of them sit across the table from each other, and he begins to deliver his discourse, the room becomes still. His eyes meet theirs as he leans in for emphasis, peers through his eyeglasses, and takes on the demeanor of one of numerous narrators—the boy, the soldier, the father, the husband, the son.

Daddy was raised in a simpler place and time where hard work was all you knew and fun was something you built in between for balance. When he and his brother played cowboys and Indians, Daddy said, they rode real horses, sometimes "buck-naked."

In the summertime, his three sisters, brother and he rode down from their farmhouse in a horse-drawn wagon with his mother, Alta (Mercer) and his daddy, William Guckian to the river to bathe. "We knew it so well, my brother, George Edward, and I were like ducks," Daddy recalled. "We'd fall off anywhere along that river and swim clear to the bottom."

More than anything else, he loved to fish. Still does. Never a hunter, Daddy was raised to respect and know wildlife. "Your daddy can hear a bird singing somewhere off in the distance and without ever seeing it, tell you what it is," Mama said.

Daddy's childhood playground in the early 1900s was a 644-acre farm in Gonzales that belonged to his grandpa, Papa Mercer. His early life evolved around chores on that farm, a one-room schoolhouse, Hammond community picnics in summer when he helped his daddy barbecue, and open country where he fished, went swimming and rode horses.

More than 80 years of living has given him a goldmine of memories that form the core of his stories. One of my favorites has to do with picking cotton. "I hated pushing a plow behind that darned mule, and I hated picking cotton even more," Daddy said. "When I was 10 or so, we'd all go to the fields to pick cotton," he recalled. "I'd fill my sack with just enough cotton for a pillow, and then I'd lay down underneath a tall stalk and take a nap, until Daddy found me and gave me a whipping. But as soon as he was gone, I'd lay back down and go back to sleep!"

As a young man, he dreamed of some day opening a small barbecue sandwich shop. But fate had something else in mind. First there was the War. Then came marriage, six kids and a lifelong mortgage. Tragedies that can leave you speechless came later—the death of his parents, two sisters, a host of uncles, aunts and friends, and my younger brother's untimely death at the hands of a drunk driver.

Through it all, he has somehow managed to temper the sting with tenderness, evidenced by his great-grandchildren who seek him out to sit contentedly in his lap.

It's fascinating to me that some memories stay with you forever while others disappear. As a teenager, I remember getting out of bed late one night and, peeking down the hall to the living room, saw nothing in the darkness but the fiery tip of his cigarette. Worry must have kept him awake often, especially during those years when my mother was ill. I think he held himself together with those cigarettes and God.

One of my favorite memories is of Daddy getting ready to leave for work in the morning, smelling of Old Spice, grabbing his sack lunch off the kitchen counter, and kissing Mama and us good-bye. And every night after work, he'd come straight home.

It is perhaps for that reason, more than any other, that I love and respect him so. Many men would have quit when the going got too tough. Not my father. He chose to stay. He was there; and thank God for all of us he was.

On Friday nights, I'd lay on the floor in the living room at his feet as he sat in his chair and watched westerns on TV. To this day, my first picks are westerns and my favorite actor is John Wayne. Watching westerns with Daddy produced in me an appreciation for the sprawling countryside, free-running rivers, wildlife and the finer, simpler side of life—which is, as I've discovered as I've aged, the best part.

I don't wonder if he still loves my mother. He does, even after or perhaps because of all he and Mama have lived through together. He complains sometimes about her "honey-do" lists, but dotes on her just the same. He stood before her one afternoon not long ago, looked into her eyes, gently placed his hands on her shoulders and said: "I don't know what I'd do without you." I'm sure my mother feels the same way about him.

Together, Daddy and Mama raised six kids, held onto to their marriage for 60 years, and never once did he turn to drinking, drugs or other women through rounds of heartbreak or hard luck. And that's what makes him extraordinary.

Eugene Guckian never did get to fulfill his dream and open that barbecue sandwich shop. But he did get his barbecue sauce into H-E-B Food Stores a few years ago, and today, stores all over Texas and Mexico keep it well stocked. We call it, fittingly, "Daddy's."

Some might say that barbecue sauce, which he first cooked in a tin can over an open fire at age 12 and which he has perfected over time, is his legacy. Without a doubt, all his children and some of his grandchildren can cook up some tasty Texas barbecue and duplicate his barbecue sauce recipe. But I say, Daddy's finest legacy is himself—which I will cherish forever—along with all the timeless memories he can hand off to me.

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