

"Through tough times of every sort, Daddy never gave up"

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by B. Lou Guckian

My dad is 81. And I am middle-aged. If I had it to live all over again, I'd have been a little easier on him as a teenager, and I'd have spent a lot more time getting to know the remarkable man I call Daddy.

He grew up in the country in a simpler place and time. When he and his brother played cowboys and Indians, they rode real horses, buck-naked sometimes, Daddy said. In the summertime, his three sisters, brother and he rode down from their farmhouse in a horse-drawn wagon with his mother and daddy to the river to bathe. "We knew it so well, George Edward and I would fall off anywhere along that river and swim clear to the bottom," he said.

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 640-acre farm in Gonzales that belonged to his Grandpa Mercer. His boyhood years evolved around chores on the farm, a one-room schoolhouse, community picnics in summer when he helped his daddy barbecue, and big open spaces where he fished, swam and rode horses.

Daddy's memory is a gold mine of stories about country life, but my favorite 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. I'd fill my sack with just enough 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, Daddy dreamed of some day opening a small barbecue sandwich shop. But fate had something else in mind. First there was World War II. Then came marriage, six kids and a lifelong mortgage. Tragedies that can leave you speechless came later—the deaths of his parents, two sisters, a host of uncles, aunts and friends, and my younger brother's untimely demise at 28 at the hands of a drunken driver. Through it all, even when tough times turned his nature crusty and caused his words to sting, my father's spirit eventually rebounded, still strong. He has managed to temper the sting with tenderness, evidenced by the way his great-grandchildren seek him out to sit contentedly in his lap.

Whether reminiscing about his life as a mischievous youngster, a soldier who dodged bullets and recovered corpses from "no-man's land" during the war, or a young man in love and courtship with my mother, Daddy is clear about the fine points; and his life is filled with spellbinding details. When I pay attention, I hear my legacy.

As a teenager, I recall getting out of bed one night to peek down the hall to the living room to where he sat smoking. All I could see in the darkness was the fiery tip of his cigarette. Worry must have kept him awake on countless nights. He held himself together with those cigarettes and God.

One of my favorite memories is of Daddy getting ready to leave for work each morning, smelling of Old Spice, and kissing my mother and us good-bye. And every evening after work, he'd come straight home. Perhaps it is 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. But my father chose to stay.

Daddy never did get to fulfill his dream to open that barbecue sandwich shop, but he and I did get his barbecue sauce into H-E-B a few years ago, and today, stores all over Texas and Mexico keep it well stocked. We call it, appropriately, "Daddy's." In place of his dream, he raised a house full of kids, held onto to his marriage for 60 years, and never once turned to drinking, drugs or other women in the face of heartbreak. And that's what makes him great. He is my hero. I am proud to be the daughter of Eugene Guckian. And I am proud to call him Daddy.

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