

When I was Growing Up on the Farm at Gustine, Texas

By Missy Jones

I remember our farm when I was a young girl. This was on what was known as "The McCullough Place". This was to the north of highway 36 between Gustine and Comanche in Comanche County, Texas. Daddy had bought this place and I just loved living there. Our house faced the west and we had a long porch across the front of the house. My sister Maxine remembers a large lilac bush in the yard, but I can't remember that. I read in a gardening magazine that lilacs wouldn't grow in Texas, but there are lots of lilacs still growing and blooming at abandoned home sites here in Central Texas.

Our barn and horse lot was behind the house on the south east and north east of the yard. We had a tank for watering the livestock. I remember that we had some ducks, and when the tank was frozen Daddy would take an axe and cut a hole in the ice for the livestock to drink. And, when the ducks came out to the frozen tank, they set down on their fat bottoms and slid all over the ice.

Daddy had the cow lot and the horse lot fenced with wood, I think that he said that it was "rawhide lumber". Daddy made a wide gate for the horse lot. This was made from a better grade of lumber than the "rawhide lumber". Maxine and I would swing on that when he wasn't looking.

Daddy had a cow for milk, and I remember standing close to him when he milked, and how sweet the cow's breath smelled and how pretty her eyes and eyelashes were. I think she was a jersey cow.

There were several large post oak trees in the yard behind the house. Near the trees was the chicken house, also made from the rawhide lumber. This had roosts for the chickens to roost on at night, and also nest boxes for them to lay their eggs in, and to set on the nest when daddy wanted them to raise some baby chickens. It was my job to reach into the nest and gather the eggs. Sometimes the old hen was sitting on the nest, and I knew she was going to peck me. If I had reached under her fast, she probably wouldn't have pecked me, but I reached for the eggs really slow, and she nearly always tried to peck me. Sometimes the hens would steal their nest out in the weeds and grasses, and it was my job to watch them to see where they had stolen a nest, and to gather the eggs there. My daddy would set hens.

He would take a lead pencil and make x's on the eggs that he wanted to leave in the nest. We knew to leave those eggs when we gathered eggs. When the time was right, there would set the old hen on that nest every day. Did you know that a hen would reach down with her beak and turn her eggs every day? I think that the hens would set 21 days, maybe not right. Daddy would mark on the big Cardui calendar hanging in the kitchen just when he had set the hens.

I have always loved watching a hen and her baby chicks. She is talking to them all of the time. Our chickens were free range, and they wandered all over the place. She is telling the chicks when she has found a bug or worm for them to eat. She calls them and they

come running to her. At night, she will set on the nest, fluff out her feathers and the chickens are kept warm under her.

Sometimes, we might have some baby chickens to die. Maxine and I would get a shoe box, if we had one, wrap up the dead little chicken and bury it. Down to the southeast was some sandy land with pear trees and a plum thicket on it. We would have the chicken funeral there, and would put some wild flowers on the grave. Some day if an archeologist ever digs up that location, he may wonder just what kind of ceremony had taken place there.

Sometimes we would have chicken hawks. What happened to these hawks when people quit raising free ranging chickens? Anyway, these hawks could swoop down and pick up chickens and hens. We could be in the house and hear the old mother hen squawking and we would run out of the house and chase the hawk away.