

Company's Coming! Whitewash the Trees and Sweep the Front Yard!

Lawn maintenance is big business now. It seems that about every other pickup truck you see is towing a mowing machine of some kind. Many of us now have a contract with a lawn service for aerating, and then spreading lime, fertilizer and grass seed. The lawn must then be mowed at regular intervals for that just-perfect carpet look. Others prefer to do it themselves and purchase a fancy mower or tractor to take most of the work out. There are power trimmers and edgers to finish off the job. In the Stanley area of the late 30s and 40s things were much different. Those who had a grass lawn had only a push-type reel mower. The grass was mostly volunteer and there were plenty of weeds too tall for the reel to cut. A hand sling was used to trim those tall weeds. One thing this method did was to burn plenty of calories. A goodly number of families preferred a different way.

In the 30s and 40s, Stanley was a town with a population of about one thousand. Street names were not used so residents lived on the "north end", "south end" or "uptown". Jake and Daisy Rhyne had a farm of about sixty-eight acres on the "north end". Their home was at the extreme north end of Main Street on the west side of the railroad tracks. The home, now remodeled, still stands. Stanley Middle School is situated on what was the cotton patch. It is hard to believe, but the middle school today has almost as many students as the population of Stanley then.

It was common practice that after church and lunch, the families would visit parents. When the weather was warm enough, everyone would be outside. The women would sit in the front yard and the men out under the trees. There were usually enough grandchildren at Jake and Daisy's to have a ball game. The ball was usually a wad of paper wound endlessly with friction tape. A suitable stick was found for a bat and rocks marked the bases. When the grandchildren heard the train coming, the ball game would stop and they would gather in the street beside the railroad track. Trains of that day were pulled by steam engines so there was always an engineer and fireman on board. Most engineers kept a bag of candy on board and when they saw a bunch of kids gathered they would blow the whistle and throw out a handful or two of candy. Candy was very hard to come by so you can be sure that the scramble was on as most times there were more kids than pieces of candy.

Both Jake and Daisy came from large families. After the crops were laid-by late in the summer was a time for family visits. Stanley was about a central location for both families so it was common to gather at Jake and Daisy's. Saturdays before a Sunday gathering was a very busy time. If watermelons were in season, some ripe ones were pulled and carried to the creek to cool down. A sharp eye was kept looking for the iceman to make his rounds. One of the grandchildren who lived nearby was usually given the chore of going down to the branch to get some clay. On the very low banks of the branch (actually, just a trickle of water), were pockets of very white clay that the water kept very slick and slimy feeling. Some clay was dug up and carried back to the house where it was stirred in a bucket of water until the water was thick and white. There were seven large oak trees in the front yard. The mixture of clay and water was now

called “whitewash” and was spread with a brush all the way around each tree up to about chest high. The hearth in the sitting room was covered with leftover mixture. After drying, the tree trunks were very white.

After the trees had been whitewashed, the front yard had to be swept. There was no grass in the front yard and if anything green began to take root, it was pulled up. A corn broom was used to sweep the yard. Each stroke of the broom had to be from the direction of the house straight toward the street. No angled sweeping of any kind was permitted and there better not be a footprint showing anywhere.

When Jake’s family visited, the men would carry chairs out under the trees where they would sit and talk all afternoon. There was no air conditioning at the time. Jake had only one sister and a number of brothers. One of the brothers would bring a box of King Edward cigars that would half disappear by late afternoon. Jake would delight his grandchildren by making cigar smoke come out around his eyes. Late in the afternoon, the watermelons would be brought up from the creek and cut. If watermelons were not in season, homemade ice cream would be churned.

When Daisy’s family visited, there was another chore for Saturday. There was a trip to the woods to find a just-right sassafras limb. Daisy would cut enough right size limbs into the right length to make “toothbrushes”. After being cut to length, the bark was skinned off and one end was soaked in water until the wood, fibers were pliable enough for separation to resemble the end of a brush. Most of Daisy’s family was sisters who would sit on the front porch all afternoon. Almost all enjoyed snuff. They would twirl a damp toothbrush into the snuff can and twirl until enough snuff had been picked up. The toothbrush filled with snuff was then placed between cheek and gum. A trip to Russell Handsel’s store on Saturday had been made to make sure there was enough Tube Rose.

Yes, times have changed dramatically in the past sixty to seventy years. Power riding mowers have certainly helped to put an end to whitewashing trees and sweeping the yard. Air conditioning, television, computers, etc. have also helped to end the need or desire to be outside. And yes, times will change again. Those who are alive sixty to seventy years in the future may even have artificial grass or something that requires no mowing. But, let’s all hope that family gatherings continue forever!

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