

## The Place Called Home

Like re-reading an old classic book you read in your youth - characters, places and faces step up from memory into your present world. This past week as my wife and I journeyed through east Texas, Arkansas and southern Missouri, the nostalgia washed over us. My mother has long ago moved from Arkansas, Dad is buried in east Texas and as of last week Barbara's parents have moved from the Ozarks of Missouri to Houston.

I was born in Little Rock and every summer we went to where Mama called home in North Little Rock. We spent long summer days, my siblings, my cousins and I playing through the woods, going barefoot, and picking ticks off each other just before the evening bath. We would clean up and Grandma and her daughters were in the kitchen creating the most divine smells only excelled by the delicious flavor of chicken-n-dumplings, fried green tomatoes, okra, mustard greens, iced tea and banana pudding. Aunt Florene, now well into her nineties, is the only one left on "the hill." Her son, my older cousin Jimmy was a hero of mine. He personified the word "cool." Two years ago I preached his funeral. To this day, old men say he was the greatest pitcher that ever threw a ball in the ballparks of Arkansas. I remember not long after he got out of the Navy, he walked up to me and said, "Hey, Johnny, you want to go for a ride?" And off we zoomed in his Corvette. He didn't have it long. It was one of those things a young man just had to try out. How lucky I felt to have been with him in one brief, shinning moment. What a feeling! I will always picture Aunt Florene's 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air and Uncle Omar's side boarded pick-up. Oh that wonderful pick-up that carried all his thoroughbred, beautiful hunting Beagles. I still remember their names: Jack, Suzie, and Bo-Jack. I loved those dogs.

We intermittently shared the summers between my mother's folks in Arkansas and my father's in Texas. Those Texas days were grand! Exploring the piney woods, climbing the trees and the evening ritual of more good food, but something else that for us was like a right of manhood. The women would sit back around the table after supper to play dominoes and talk about ... well I'm not sure, because it was just the things women-folk would talk about. And besides, it was often in hushed tones that inferred to inquisitive little brothers and boy cousins, "You're not invited." This was all very fine with me, because just under the giant Formosa gathered the men of the Pope family including Uncle Wyatt, the oldest... of whom his history teacher said, "Wyatt Pope forgot more history than I ever learned." Uncle Wallace (a.k.a. Uncle Poodle, due to the fact that he followed his mama as a toddler, she said, like a little poodle dog). He was a very devout man. He was so Christian and honest that Daddy told me he went into Dallas to do business and didn't have a nickel for the parking meter. When he finished his business, he went back to his home in the distant Dallas suburbs and retrieved a nickel and went to the very meter where he had previously parked and deposited his nickel. Uncle Hobart, the only bachelor, returned from World War II and his family said he was never the same. Hobart never left his child-like appreciation for the smallest things. He was our ride to Big Sandy Creek where I learned to swim and the supplier of Cokes and Baby Ruth candy bars. He never talked about the war. But Dad said, "My older brother Hobart was the one that made sure the youngsters such as himself were in church regularly." And then there was Uncle Charles, the hero of D-Day. It was there on that beach fighting for his country that he nearly lost his life. I see him now... walking with a pronounced falter due to critical wounds he received in the war. I heard only kindness from this former warrior's voice, the tallest of the Pope boys. And the uncle I never saw under the tree... Uncle Philip, the most athletic of the boys. He won local and state boxing championships and held the record for the fastest mile for several years in Texas. He moved to California where he ministered as a preacher. He and Dad were always in touch, even though they didn't come to the Texas homestead at the same time. As the Pope men would gather under that tree, I heard the stories of World War II, World War I, Spanish American War and the most often talked about war, The Civil

War or War Between the States. Interspersed in all this talk was the music. Before the night was over, my dad would bring up Scripture and although not all his brothers were in the same kind of church, they all hung on his every word. He was a brother that had “made good” in his profession as a preacher and they were all proud of him. I was too...he was my dad. And to me...the best of them!

As I write these words I am in the little house just off of Bull Shoals Lake and just down from Lake Taneycomo. It is the house that my children loved to come to every summer or whenever the school calendar allowed. It is the place where a dear couple from Indiana wanted to live one day. And so they did. This place became a fairy tale kingdom and adventure land all rolled into one. My heart is warmed as we drive around these lakes where Grandpa taught our kids the fun of catching Rainbow Trout. They would come home and Grandma would cook up what they caught. So here I sit in the place where the kids turned their classical instruments into the very tools of bluegrass. Heather would turn her violin into a fiddle, Juliana would pick up the guitar, Jonathan would turn his cello into a doghouse bass, and then finally Sean joined in with an actual bass. Heather would sometimes play mandolin and Jonathan would play anything with strings. I hear them in my memory as I write these words, playing their instruments with Grandpa Wright and his Herring Bone Martin. I hear the airtight harmony that only brothers and sisters can make. I hear those songs, “Please Don’t Tell My Daddy Jesus isn’t Real,” “Hallelujah, I’m Ready”, “Mullenberg County,” and “Faded Love.” I hear the sweet alto of Heather, the soaring soprano of Juliana, and the tremendous tandem tenors of Jonathan and Sean. In my memory I see my oldest girl look over to me, smile and play one of my all time favorites, “Ashoken’s Farewell.” This was a mystical song that simply says, “Good-bye” with a weeping sound from the violin stings. Juliana and Jonathan would come in with the guitars while Sean proved the foundation with his bass. In this little house...some of the most precious memories of my life have taken place. In scenes now gone by, I see the night settle and the stars come out and every time one of our children would talk or sing or laugh...I would see the stars come out in my wife’s eyes. A lot of love was given in this place. A love that was so real it is even to this day palpable.

We traveled back through Arkansas and Texas where my childhood coming of age took place. But none of those places is more precious to me than this place in southern Missouri where our kids came of age. So in a few hours we will be moving Grandma and Grandpa Wright near us. But we take with us the memories of Silver Dollar City, Bluegrass festivals, fishing, story telling, and every form of family fun. Before all the shows came into near-by Branson, there was a preacher by the name of Harold Bell Wright who wrote a wonderful book entitled “Shepherd of The Hills” about this very area. And as we leave this area my prayer is that our Lord, our Shepherd over our hills and valleys of life will watch over our kids who did a heap of growing up in these hills. The great thing is that home is so much more than the place...it is the people. Home is where the heart is. Home is where the family is. So really we don’t leave anything behind; we take it all with us. *“Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward”* (Psalm 127:3).

- Pastor Pope

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