

A LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

*Memories of Growing Up in
Bell County, Kentucky*



Sarah K. Rigdon

A Light in the Window

by Sarah K. Rigdon

It seems like only yesterday, but yet it was many years ago, another lifetime, or was it? Sometimes it seems as a dream. But while I'm sitting here letting my mind travel back into the past, it seems very real.

I'm a very small girl. We live in a small three-room log house. The one Grandfather built before my daddy was born. My mommie has worked very hard all day scrubbing clothes on an old battered wash board, using lye soap that she made several days ago, to get the dirt out. She has scrubbed the floors of the setting room and kitchen until they look and smell so clean. She has made supper and just finished feeding my brother and me. She has Daddy's supper put back on the ole coal range cook stove to stay warm for him. Daddy is working in the coal mines and is always late getting home. He is so black when he gets home, and so tired. Mommie has water on the stove getting hot for Daddy to wash in. Grandfather is sitting by the ole stone fireplace smoking his ole homemade corncob pipe, looking at me, grinning because I've gotten my way once more. Mommie has put my older brother, R.D., to bed. My baby brother, Gideon, who is very tiny is already sound asleep. But with a lot of begging from me, Mommie has agreed to let me stay up and wait for Daddy.

Between the stitches that Mommie is putting in the patches she's sewing on Daddy's overalls, she looks at me and smiles. While I'm standing by the window watching for Daddy to come home from work I see a light! Daddy is home! But wait, the

light isn't getting any closer to the house. I turn and say to Mommie, "Daddy's light isn't getting any closer to the house." She gets up from her chair and walks over to the window, looks out thru the window, puts her arms around me and smiles. "Honey, the light you see is only the reflection of the flickering flames in the ole stone fireplace. It isn't quite time for Daddy just yet, but he'll be home very soon."

Soon. That seems such a long time (since I'm getting so sleepy). I walk over to Grandfather who is still sitting by the fireplace reading the Bible by an oil lamp and the light that is coming from the burning logs in the open fireplace. He picks me up and is holding me on his lap and I ask him to sing me a song. He says, "Now what shall I sing?" I tell him to sing *I Can't Get Back Home*. The real name of the song was *Shady Grove, My Little Darling*. It was about a man in prison who was wanting to be released to return home to his wife and daughter. There was a line in the song that said, "Take me home to my wife and little darling." So Grandfather starts to sing very softly and holding me so tenderly and soon I'm fast asleep.

I awake and I'm not in Grandfather's lap anymore. I'm in the bed. Oh – ever so warm and snug. I hear Mommie in the kitchen making noises with the pots and pans, while she's cooking breakfast for all of us. I can smell the bacon she's frying and the gravy she's fixing. The coffee is perking on the stove and the biscuits are in the oven, baking in the ole cast iron stove. I crawl out of the warm bed shivering since our bedrooms are cold because we don't have a fireplace in them. I creep into the kitchen where Daddy is sitting at the ole wooden homemade table, waiting for Mommie to put breakfast on it. He raises his head from the Bible he's reading and says, "There's my girl.

You didn't wait up for Daddy last night." "But I fell asleep, Daddy! Grandfather was singing to me and I couldn't stay awake." He smiles and puts his arm around me and says, "That's all right. Daddy still kissed you good night." He reaches over and picks up a big red apple that was laying on the table and says, "Look what I brought my little girl." I always looked forward to something he'd get me when he stopped at the ole mining company store. About that time, my brother, R.D., comes into the kitchen rubbing his eyes and saying to Mommie, "Mommie, I'm hungry." My daddy reaches over and runs his fingers through his tосseled hair, then picks him up and puts him in a chair beside the table. The he tells Mommie, "Hurry Mommie, and give my big man something to eat." My brother says "No Daddy, I'm Big Britches." A few days before Daddy had gotten my brother a pair of new overalls and when Daddy has put them on him, my brother tells him the boogeyman won't get me now, for I'm Big Britches. About that time Grandfather comes into the kitchen saying, "Did I hear someone say Big Britches was in here?" We all smile.

Mommie says, "Sit down Granddad and I'll pour you some coffee." Grandfather sits down and turns to Daddy saying, "I think I'll start plowing the lower bottom land today if it's dry enough." Daddy tells Grandfather, "You take it easy Dad, and don't overdo it. You know you've been having a lot of pain in your head lately." Grandfather says with a snarl, "Oh I'm all right. There's nothing wrong with me." By that time Mommie has breakfast put on the table and tells Daddy and Grandfather, "Now stop arguing and start eating." She waits on my brother first and pours him a glass of milk. As he starts to eat his biscuits and gravy, she reaches and gets my plate and fills it as she

talks about her plans for the day.

Daddy finishes eating before we do and raises from the table, picks up his dinner bucket, kisses us bye and leaves for work which is about a three mile walk one way. Mommie worries about him a lot, working under the mountain digging coal all day. So many men get killed in the coal mine. But Daddy says, "I've got to make money to take care of my family."

After Daddy has left for work, Mommie asks Grandfather if he'll watch us, my two brothers and me, while she goes to milk the cow. I asked her if I can go to the barn with her. She tells me I may, "but put your coat on for it's cold outside." As she turns to pick up the milk bucket she asks Grandfather if he'd care to help get my brother dressed while she was feeding the horse and milking the cow.

Mommie and I leave for the barn, which is a little way from the house. We pass Grandfather's bee gums and go through the apple orchard which is on each side of the path to the barn. Stopping along the way looking at the little spring flowers peeking their heads thru the thawed ground, while the little birds in the apple trees were chirping and she tells me that they are happy because God has kept them safe thru the long cold winter and has brought warm weather to their land once more.

Then I remember I haven't seen my cat for two days. I start to worry and say to Mommie, "My cat Fluffy might be frozen to death." Mommie tells me she's sure Fluffy is fine. By then we're at the barn. Mommie throws some corn into one stall for ole Prince, our horse, to eat. Then she lets Bossey, our cow, out of her stall and gives her some feed and Mommie sets down on a little wooden stool Daddy had made for her to sit on while

she milks the cow. As she starts to milk I climb upon a ladder that goes into the barn loft and Mommie tells me to be careful and don't fall. "But Mommie, I hear something crying." I tell her. She stops milking and listens. "So do I." she says "Wait til I'm done milking Ole Bossey and I'll see what it is. But I think I already know what it is." saying it with a smile on her face. She finishes milking Bossey and sets the bucket of milk aside where Bossey won't kick it over. Then she climbs the ladder into the barn loft. Very shortly she returns with the prettiest little fuzzy thing I'd ever seen. She tells me, "I've found your cat." I cry, "But Mommie, that's not my cat." She starts laughing and tells me, "No, but it's her baby and she has three more." I get all giggles and happy. Now I have lots of cats. Mommie tells me , "They're just little kittens now." "Mommie, will they grow up to be cats?" "Yes," she says, "they will. Just like you'll grow up to be a young lady someday." "No! no! Not me Mommie. I'm going to stay little always." Mommie starts laughing and stoops down to pet Fluffy, who had followed her from the bed of hay where the rest of her babies are. She wants Mommie to put the one she's holding back with the others. Mommie tells Fluffy, "Oh, all right. I'll put your baby back with the others and you come with me and I'll give you some warm milk." Fluffy obeyed just like she understood what Mommie was saying, I ask Mommie if I can keep them all. She says, "Now we'll have to talk about that with your Daddy and Grandfather. You know Granddad doesn't like a lot of cats." "But Mommie, they are so little." "We'll see," she tells me. She gives Fluffy some warm milk in a little pan that was sitting in the barn, that Fluffy had drunk milk from so many times before. "Mommie, Fluffy really likes that warm milk. Yuk!" Mommie starts to laugh and tells me, "You liked warm milk when you

were very small.” “Was I as small as the baby kittens?” “No, not that small.” says Mommie. Mommie picks up the bucket of milk that she’d set aside, and says to me, “Come. Let’s go to the house and tell Grandfather what we found in the barn.” I run ahead of Mommie so I could tell Grandfather first.

I find Grandfather still sitting at the table, reading his Bible, while my brother R.D. is sitting on the floor playing with some wooden toys Grandfather had whittled out for him some time ago. I start telling Grandfather what Mommie and I had found in the barn loft. I’m talking real fast because I’m so excited. Grandfather says, “Hey! Slow down so I can understand what you’re saying.” About that time Mommie comes through the kitchen door, that I’d left open when I came in to tell Grandfather about Fluffy’s babies. Mommie tells Grandfather that we’d found Fluffy in the barn loft and she has four kittens and I want to know if I may keep them all. “Please! Grandfather may I keep all of them? He reaches up with his hand, strokes his long red beard and says with a twinkle in his eye, “Oh, I guess I can as long you’ll let them stay at the barn.” I squeal with delight and throw my arms around Grandfather’s neck and say, “I love you Grandfather.” he just smiles and gives me a squeeze and tells Mommie, “I’ll go get the mule from the barn, hook her to the plow and start plowing if the ground isn’t too wet.” He pats me on the head and says, “See you at dinner time.” So a long busy day is on its way.

My baby brother, Gideon, awakes and Mother takes him from his bed, changes his clothes and feeds him, loves and cuddles him for awhile and tell him as she puts him back in the bed, “You’ll have to be a good boy today. Mommie has a lot of things to do.”

She puts warm clothes on R.D. and me and lets us go into the yard to play. Me making mud pies and him the great hunter. Mommie looks out on us all thru the morning hours making sure we're safe, while she busies herself with her duties of a homemaker and mother.

Soon it's dinnertime and I know what we're going to have. For I've smelled it cooking all morning. It seems I can almost smell it now. Chicken and dumplings.

Daddy comes home from early that day and he seems very worried. I hear him telling Mommie that he had gotten laid off from the mines. It was the years of the Depression (1932). Daddy tells Mommie the Depression is hitting a lot of people and times were hard and it looked like they were going to get worse, unless God would bless us to get a man into the White House that cared for the poor people. Mommie tells Daddy not to worry, we'd make it and everything would be fine.

When Grandfather came in from plowing he seemed so tired and he said he was going to lie down and rest awhile before dinner. Mommie turns to Daddy and says, "I'm worried about your dad. He doesn't look well." Daddy says, "Well, since I won't be working in the mines I'll do more on the farm and help Dad do the plowing and planting, take all the load off him as I can, for he isn't a young man anymore." Grandfather was about seventy-five years old. Mommie tells Daddy she will help also, when hoeing time comes.

Daddy and Grandfather worked real hard for the next few weeks getting the plowing and planting done, while Mommy was taking care of things at the house. She was getting the eggs under the ole setting hens that were beginning to set. So I knew

soon we'd have very small little chickens running around in the barnyard. Mommie would be fixing all the broken places in the chicken pen so the chickens couldn't get out into the garden she had put out nearby.

Summertime was here and everything was growing up so pretty. Grandfather says, "It looks like we're going to have a good growing year."

Summer has gone so fast. Soon it was harvest time. Mommie has been canning and drying fruits and vegetables for weeks. Daddy and Grandfather have started harvested the corn that they planted early in the Spring, that is now turning brown in the fields.

Daddy tells Grandfather he won't be able to help him every day harvesting the corn, because he's going to look for work to make some money to buy the things we'll need thru the winter months. I tell Grandfather, "I will help." Grandfather puts his arms around me and tells me, "Have Mother get you a sack to carry corn in while I get the mule hooked to the corn sled." Oh, I felt so important. I was going to help Grandfather gather the corn and carry and put it in the corn crib. Mommie gives me a cloth flour sack. She always saved all the cloth flour sacks and feed sacks and during the long winter months she'd make quilts and pillowcases from the sacks she'd saved all summer. I take the sack and go in a run to the barn where Grandfather has already gone and has the old mule fastened to the corn sled. He puts me in the sled and I get a nice bumpy ride into the corn field where the corn had already been pulled and put in piles thru out the corn field. Grandfather begins putting the corn in the sled. I know now I was more in his way than help, but he made me feel like he really needed me to help

him. Soon the sled was filled with corn and Grandfather tells me I'll have to walk back to the barn since the sled is so full with corn. I tell Grandfather, "But Grandfather, I don't have any corn in my flour sack." "So you don't," says Grandfather, "but I'll soon fix that." He puts three ears of corn in the sack Mommie had given me. The sack was so heavy with the corn in it I had drag it. I think Grandfather laughed all the way to barn at me trying to carry the sack of corn. Soon we have all the corn put in the corn crib. Grandfather puts the mule back in the barn and tells me, "I couldn't have gotten all the corn in without your help." It's been many, many years since those days with Grandfather but at times I still miss him and want to see him so bad.

With all the harvesting done, Daddy begins to get the firewood in for the long cold winter months. Daddy has been able to pick up a few odd jobs here and there to buy the things we need that we couldn't raise.

Grandfather is so quiet anymore, he spends a lot of time with his daughter who lives nearby. He isn't as jolly as he was. I ask, "Mommie, what's wrong with Grandfather?" She says, "Grandfather doesn't feel well so you must not bother him while he's feeling sick." I tell Mommie, "But I want Grandfather to sing to me." Mommie says he will when he starts to feel better. But he never sang to me anymore. About a month and a half later in December of 1932 he passed away with a stroke. I couldn't understand what had happened to Grandfather. They wouldn't let me into the room they had laid him out in. Mommie and some neighbor ladies were sitting in an adjoining room to the one Grandfather was in. Daddy and some more men were in where Grandfather was in. Mommie went into the kitchen for some fresh coffee so that gave

me a chance to go in and see Grandfather. I made it into the room where Grandfather was before Mommie could stop me. I started to cry. "Grandfather won't talk to me!" Mommie takes me on her lap and tries to tell me Grandfather is dead and can't talk. But I don't understand. I jump from her lap ever so angry and tell her, "If someone kills my daddy, I'll kill them." Mommie tries to comfort me and tells me no one killed Grandfather, that he was old and tired and God wanted him to come to Heaven to live with Him and all His beautiful angels, where he'd never have to hurt no more. "But Mother, I miss him so." "I know, I know," she says. "We all miss him so. But Grandfather is so happy in Heaven with God." I ask Mother if I will ever see Grandfather again. She tells me I will someday. Then I couldn't grasp the meaning of what she was telling me, but there came a time in my life that I believe God gave me Hope that I would see Grandfather again.

Winter has come and gone and it's spring again. But it isn't a happy time. We miss Grandfather so much. Daddy isn't going to farm any this year, but Mommie says God's will she'll raise a garden. Daddy is gone a lot. He visits churches in Tennessee and Virginia. So we don't see him very much.

Daddy still can't find any work, so he picks up odd and end jobs for people on the farms nearby enough to barely keep us going, with what Mommie raises in the garden. Soon Daddy begins to sell some of the farm land, since he didn't farm anymore he said he didn't need it. Daddy seems so sad. I know he still misses Grandfather very much – as we all do. Mommie spends a lot of time with my brothers and me. As soon as the morning the morning chores are done she takes us to visit Daddy's sister or she will take us into the hills on a treasure hunt as she called it. We loved both. Since my aunt had girls my age, I loved going there for we'd play for hours in the barn, Or if it was warm, we'd go wading in the stream near the house. Those were wonderful happy years although we had no material things worth anything. For Daddy has sold all the farm animals and all the land except the house and garden. But I still had my cat. I had a little rocking chair that Grandfather had made and I'd wrap my cat in a small blanket and rock her and try to make her go to sleep like Mommie would my baby brother. But my cat always managed to escape from me. I'd get so mad at her because she wouldn't lie still in my arms.

Three years have passed since Grandfather died. I hear Daddy telling Mommie that he's going to sell the house and move away. Mommie says she doesn't mind, that it

hadn't been the same since Grandfather died. So he finds a buyer for the house and sells it and we leave the farm and the light in the window for good. My insecurities began.

Daddy moves us to Harlan County where he had found a job in a coal mine. My Mommie had had another baby since Grandfather died, so now I had three brothers. Now Mommie didn't play with us as much as she did.

Daddy was so restless he wouldn't stay in one place for very long at a time. We didn't live in Harlan very long until he moved us back to Bell County – where he was without a job again. The money was gone that he got from selling the farm. He rented a one room log cabin about two miles in the hills from the farm where I'd been so happy for a few years. I'm now seven years old and I've just gotten to start school. We are so poor, a far cry from the light in the window. I have no shoes to wear to school and only one dress. Daddy says it's because of the Depression that we're so poor. I don't get to go to school for very long, only until it started getting cold. Because I had no coat or shoes to wear, I had to quit.

Daddy started going from one coal mine to another looking for work. Since we were beginning to come out of the Depression, jobs were being made by our new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. One day while Daddy was gone looking for work, Mommie took us to visit Daddy's sister. While we were gone our house burned. It started from wood falling from the fireplace. The house wasn't much, but it was home. Now we didn't have anything but each other.

When Daddy returned home, he was very worried. He didn't know where we

could live. We stayed with a neighbor a few weeks – soon friends and family got enough together for us to make do with and we moved into another one-room house. We don't have much to eat and Mommie is expecting her fifth child. Things are really bad. Daddy leaves every day looking for work. In December 1937 he leaves the house real early one cold snowy morning, without having anything to eat. He was gone all day, but when he returned late in the evening, he had some good news. He had gotten a job with the Southern Mining Coal Company at Balkan, Kentucky and also a house for us to move into in the mining camp. Mommie was so happy and relieved – now we would have a warm house to live in, food to eat, and also Mommie would have a doctor to care for her when it was time for the baby to be born. So it seemed our worries and hardships were coming to an end. And so they did. We were very happy and fared very well for about seven years.

So we make arrangements to move into the mining camp. The year is December 1937. We've just moved into a little mining town called Balkan. When Daddy left for work this morning, he told Mommie the man that was coming to move us to the mining camp would be here early and for us to be ready and he would meet us in our new home after work that evening. Soon after Daddy left, the man came with a big wagon and a team of large horses. Since we just had a few belongings, it didn't take him long to put them in the wagon.

Since the day was so cold and cloudy and it looked like it might snow, he told us to climb in the wagon and we could ride instead of walking across a mountain that was about a three mile walk. Mommie was very pleased to ride instead of walking since she

was going to have another baby in about six and a half months and she'd have to carry my baby brother who was only one-half years old.

It seemed several hours before we got to the mining camp. The houses were small and dirty with coal dust that came from the coal when it was dumped into the railroad cars which the train would carry it away to other parts of the country. We soon arrived at the little three room house which would become our home. The floors were bare and the house was cold. But as soon as the man that brought us here got the few belongings we owned off the wagon and into the house, it didn't take Mommie long to get a fire going in the old cast iron cookstove Daddy had picked up over the hill by the house that someone had discarded. It didn't have any legs so Daddy got rocks from the creek nearby to set it on.

As my brothers and I stand by watching Mommie start a fire in the small fireplace that was in the two bedrooms, I start to feel very sad. I turn and go into the kitchen where it's much warmer, since Mommie already has a fire going in the cookstove.

Mommie gets the fire going in the fireplace and follow me into the kitchen and tells me to watch my baby brother, Sam, while she unpacks the pots and pans and gets supper started before Daddy gets home. Soon she has something on the stove cooking and sets the table with our chipped odds and ends dishes. I push a wooden box up to the little window in the kitchen and stand my baby brother on it while we watch for Daddy, who will soon be coming up the narrow dirt road that leads from the mines. (Oh! How I wish we still lived in the ole farm house, with the light in the window.) Mommie

tells me to be careful with my baby brother and don't let him fall. As I had in the past several times picked him up and let him fall from my arms.

Daddy arrives home from work just before dark and seems very pleased that Mommie has the few bits of furniture we have in place and is putting supper on the table. Daddy sets down at the table to eat as my two older brothers, R.D. and Gideon take their places at the table. Each one is trying to talk to Daddy at the same time. Daddy tells them, "Slow down. One at a time!" as he looks at Mommie and grins. Daddy then tells Mommie that he'll get some rugs for the floor and some new furniture just as soon as he can. He said that we're just beginning to come out of the Depression and it's going to take a few months before we can go into debt at the company store.

The winter months passed fast and it's spring and I feel much better now about living in the mining camp. I've made friends with some little girls nearby. Also my brothers have met three boys that live in the house next to ours. So their family and our family have become very close. So once again I began to feel secure and safe. Mommie and Daddy seem so happy. Daddy plays a lot with us in the evening after work and on the weekends. But since it's getting close for our new baby to be borned, Mommie just sits and watches as the children and their fathers gather in a flat place below the house to play ball. Some of the other mothers play, but most of them have small babies, so they sit with Mommie and talk to each other as they cheer us on. Soon dark is upon us and we can't see to play ball. Mommie tells Daddy to send us to the house now so she can get us ready for bed. With a little complaining and wishing we could stay out longer, we all go to our houses where we get washed and clean clothes on and off to

bed we go. Daddy comes in very soon after we're in bed and the lights in the camp start going out as everyone is returning from a hard day's work and the children from their long day of ventures and play.

Two years have passed since we left the farm. I'm now ten years old. I now have my first baby sister, after three brothers. I'm so happy and proud that I have a sister. Life is becoming less play for me now. Since I'm the oldest child I have to help with the smaller children and help Mommie in the house. But I don't mind. I love helping Mommie. I really do more than she wants me to do.

It's the last of August now and school will start very soon. But my brother R.D. and I won't get to go but a few weeks. When it gets cold Daddy won't let us go. He says he can't buy us warm clothes to wear and besides Mommie needs me home to help her. We want to go to school with the rest of the children but Daddy doesn't feel it's necessary for us to go. Daddy and Mommie seem so happy together, and Daddy buys Mommie real pretty dresses and other nice things. But as long as my brothers and I have one good outfit of clothes, he says that's enough.

He keeps his promise to buy nice things for the house. We have rugs on the floors and nice beds to sleep on and a real living room suite. Nice dishes and pots and pans and even a radio. But what Mommie likes most of all is a big Home Comfort Cast-Iron cookstove (with legs!). She's so proud of that stove. She shines it with grease every day. Mommie is so proud of the way our house looks. It's even nicer than the house on the farm with the light in the window.

Daddy goes to town about twenty miles away every Saturday and takes Mommie

with him. They spend the day in town taking in a movie and eating dinner out. Leaving me who is now almost eleven years old in charge of my baby sister who is about six months old and my three brothers.

Sometimes my brothers don't do what I tell them and they go outside of the yard where Daddy has told them not to go. It upsets me very much, for when Daddy and Mommie return home on the train that brings the people of the mining camp back from their day in town, Daddy will blame me for my brothers going outside of the yard and I will be hollered at, It hurts me so much when Daddy hollers at me and belittles me, for I want him to be proud of me. I'm not a pretty little girl and Mommie makes my dresses which are very plain and she keeps my hair cut short. If Daddy would buy me pretty dresses like he does Mommie and she would let my hair grow I would look much better. I look at the two girls I play with and they wear store-bought dresses and their hair looks so clean and pretty. I'm poked fun of a lot by some of the kids in the camp. It hurts so much. I always run to the house and hide behind the door and cry.

Two more years have passed. I'm 13 years old now and it's getting close to Easter. I keep begging Daddy to buy me a pretty dress that I saw hanging in the company store window. But he says I don't need it. One day Mommie sent me to the store to buy food for supper for that evening. While I was at the store I walked over to the rack and stood and looked at the dress for a long time. Then I took it from the rack and took it over to the owner of the store and told him Daddy said I could have the dress if he's charge it to his account. I was shaking real hard for I knew I'd get punished by Daddy for getting the dress. But I knew it would be worth a whipping if I got to keep

the dress. I took the dress home and told Mommie what I'd done. She was very upset and wanted me to take the dress back. But I told her the man at the store said he wouldn't take it back. She said she'd have to tell Daddy and I would get a whipping. So I went to the bedroom I shared with my three brothers and stayed in there until I heard Daddy come in from work.

I heard Mommie telling Daddy what I had done. Daddy was real quiet for several minutes. Then he told Mommie to tell me to come in there where he was. He said, "I should have got the dress for her today when I bought you one." I went into the kitchen where he was and he put his arms around me and said I could keep the dress and that he was sorry he didn't get it for me when he got Mommie's. Oh how happy I felt. Now I could really enjoy wearing the dress and I'd have a new dress to wear Easter Sunday just like my friends. the next day Daddy bought my brothers some new overalls and new shoes and bought me a white pair of shoes to wear with my new dress.

It seems Easter will never get here. I'm so eager to show off my new clothes. Soon Easter morning is here and I'm up early so I can get my chores done. Soon breakfast is over and I have the dishes washed and put in their proper place. Real excited I go to the bedroom and get my new clothes on. I stand and look in the mirror and think, "Is that really me I see in there?" I look so different with a store-bought dress on and the night before I'd rolled my hair on strings and it was real curly – I felt so grown-up. It wasn't very long before my friends were there and we all started for a walk, while admiring each others' new clothes. We go to another girl's house which was a few houses away. As we open the gate to go in, I stop in awe. For there stood the

most handsome boy I'd ever seen. He was over five feet tall, dark wavy hair and dark brown eyes. Later I found out he was a neighbor's brother who was visiting from a small town not far away. He looks at me and I stand there staring at him, not realizing at that very moment he'd taken a spot in my heart that no one else would ever occupy. I turn and start walking away with my friends knowing I'd never forget the tall handsome stranger.

The day is soon spent with me spending most of it with my friends, but something is different. I keep thinking of the tall good looking stranger I saw this morning. My friends don't seem the main thought in my mind now, something else is there. A few years later I learned that Easter Sunday was the day I started growing up.

Soon my friends and I part and I return to my house, where Mommie has cooked a special dinner for us. Strange! I'm not hungry. I should be, for it's been several hours since I'd eaten breakfast. But Daddy had a rule. We all had to sit together at the table and eat. I sat with the rest of the family and ate, but my thoughts were on the happens of the day. I didn't feel the same.

I was so glad when dinner had ended and I had the kitchen all to myself, where I could think and dream without anyone interrupting into my own little world I'd just found.

Soon the day is over and Mommie tells me that I'll have to stay home from school the following day, to watch the small children who weren't in school, because she and Daddy were going into town to pick up some things we needed. I wanted to stay up longer but Mommie refused to let me stay up. So I go to bed with such beautiful

thoughts of the day still going thru my mind.

Morning soon comes. I awake with the sun shining in my bedroom window. I jump out of bed and run to the window and look out remembering the day before and thinking, "Was it a dream? Did it really happen?" I hear Mommie in the kitchen humming a song while she was cooking breakfast. I get dressed very quickly and go into the kitchen where Mommie is. I ask her if after breakfast may I go for a walk in the woods, which were near our house, before she and Daddy leave for town. She tells me I could go, but not too far into the woods for she and Daddy would be leaving early.

So after breakfast I hurry and do the dishes. As soon as the dishes are done, I grab one of Daddy's old work shirts that was hanging on a chair and throw it around my shoulders and ran out the door. Soon I'm walking among the tall trees that beginning to put forth little buds that will bring out the pretty green leaves and beautiful flowers.

Oh, how beautiful it is this morning. The sun is shining so bright on the fields that is beginning to turn green beyond the woods. The brooks in the woods have thawed out and clear bubbling water is running over the rocks, that seems to have been placed there for that very purpose. As I ever so careful step from one rock to another, trying not to get my feet wet, my thoughts are still on the day before (Easter Sunday). The day my thoughts and dreams turned from play house and dolls to thoughts of the tall handsome boy who was visiting his sister next door. I stop for a moment and say to myself, "Did he notice me?" I pick up a handful of stones and throw them into the clear flowing water and think, "No, this is silly. He's gone now and you won't see him anymore." I walk deeper into the woods while stopping along the way to swing on a

grape vine, while watching the birds fly from one tree to another and wonder if they are as happy and content as I. I stop and sit down on a big rock and take some colored stones from the running water and start to write on the big rock.

I'm so engrossed in my line of thoughts I don't hear my mommy calling for me to come home. Soon my brother comes for me and tells me that Daddy and Mommie are ready to leave for town and I have to come home to take care of the children. Oh – how I hated to leave the peace and quietness I always felt while walking alone in the woods. I felt like it was my own little world where no one dared to intrude.

I threw the stones I was still holding in my hands back into the running water and start for the house. I stop and look back and say as if there was someone in the woods that could hear me, "Don't go away, I'll be back."

Things begin to change at home. Daddy and Mommie quarrel a lot. He goes to town now by himself and comes home late. I hear them quarreling when he gets home. Mommie is very unhappy all the time and cries a lot. I know she and Daddy are having serious problems and I'm scared and feel so insecure.

Mommie finds out that Daddy is seeing other women. He doesn't seem to care for us anymore. He begins to sell some of the pretty furniture he'd bought for Mommie. He is so selfish. He doesn't buy Mommie any more nice things, but he's spending money on another woman. He sells the milk cow we have. Now we'll have to go without milk. The day the man came to pick the cow up, we cried and begged not to sell her. While Mommie was milking her for the last time that warm spring morning, all the kids were standing around where Mommie was milking the cow. Mommie gets through milking and starts toward the house, but she is crying so hard that she doesn't see the step that goes into the kitchen and she stumbles on the step and falls and spills all the milk on the kitchen floor. Mommie is expecting her sixth child and we are all concerned about her fall. It made us stop crying about Daddy selling our cow, For we were very happy that Mommie wasn't hurt.

There's no change in Daddy's lifestyle. Mommie feels she has to take the way Daddy is carrying on because of the children. Summer is almost here and the baby is due anytime. I do almost everything in the house, cook, clean and take care of the smaller children. But I don't mind. I'm fourteen now and the tall handsome boy I saw on Easter Sunday two years ago is visiting his sister again, and he's spending a lot of time at our house, playing with my older brother. He talks to me sometimes and he doesn't know

how my heart flutters and seems to almost stop when he talks to me. But I know to him I'm only his friend's sister.

The baby is borned and Daddy and Mommie talk their problems over and Daddy promises that he'll change and start spending more time with the family. So he does. We move to a nicer house in the mining camp and Daddy buys some more furniture. It is a much bigger house and in a cleaner section of the mining camp. So for about two years life is pleasant and peaceful and Mommie and Daddy are so sweet to each other. Also they treat my brothers, sister and me better. We get to go to school more but still not all the year. We've never gotten to finish a whole year of school since we started. I've studied real hard and made the best of the time I spent in school. I've never been held back in grades. The teachers have promoted me each year to the next grade and I always kept up with the rest of the class.

Daddy was a real strict father. My brothers and I were never allowed to get involved in any activities at school. We weren't even allowed to play with the rest of the kids at recess or at lunch. Most of the time I'd beg the teacher to let me remain inside to study. We never had a bad teacher. There were always so nice and understanding to us and did all they could to help us.

Daddy is becoming restless again and Mommie is expecting her seventh child. Daddy is wanting to move away from Balkan. He's going to Harlan County about 30 to 40 miles away. Mommie and us children don't want to move. But we always do as Daddy says. So in December 1943, we have to quit school and leave Balkan and move into Harlan County. We wanted to go to school there but Daddy wouldn't allow us. He

said we were needed at home. Mommie wasn't doing very well, she was having a hard time carrying this baby. The baby was due in April of 1944. Mommie had to spend so much time in bed. Daddy is gone on weekends. Spending time with a young girl 17 years old. Which later he divorced Mommie and married the girl. Daddy is 35 years old. Mommie begs Daddy to stop seeing the girl. But Daddy won't. He decides he wants to get into the Navy. He said if he could get away he would be able to decide what he wanted from life. I said to him, "Daddy, don't we count?" and he told me to shut up. He is so cruel and selfish. Oh how he's changed since the light in the window.

April soon arrives and I have another sister, the most beautiful baby I'd ever seen, with lots of black hair and big brown eyes.

Daddy finally gets into the Navy in May 1944. He wasn't in but a few weeks until he was wanting out. He wrote Mommie to do everything she could to get him out on a hardship discharge. He said he'd be a better husband and father and we'd move back to Balkan where we lived so happy for a few years. That made me happy for several reasons, one I knew I'd get to see the boy that had stole a piece of my heart. So Mommie began an effort to get Daddy back home. After several weeks she succeeded in getting Daddy out on a hardship discharge. He arrives home in June and makes arrangements to move back to Balkan. I didn't mind leaving Harlan County for I hadn't made any friends while we lived there. I was so busy caring for Mommie and taking care of the house. But when we moved back to Balkan we had to move into the worst looking house there was in the camp. I was so upset I cried for hours. For days I couldn't eat I was so unhappy. And as usual Daddy didn't stick to his promises. He started seeing

the young girl again.

September arrives and my brothers and I get to start back to school. We don't have money for our workbooks or lunch. Since Daddy is spending so much time with the young girl, Mommie takes in washings and quilts for people to get money for our school supplies. I also iron for two families in the camp to help out. We know we're losing Daddy and it hurts so much we cry a lot. But little did we know we were still to face the worst and most hurtful thing.

Mommie tells Daddy he'll have to give up the girl or she was getting a divorce. Daddy said he wouldn't give the girl up and he would be the one that would get the divorce. So a divorce proceeding was started by Daddy against Mommie for mental cruelty which was untrue but Mommie wouldn't fight it. She gave Daddy a divorce. It wasn't long after the divorce until he married the young girl, but he was all mixed up and wouldn't stay away from Mommie. Mommie was so weak that she'd believe everything Daddy said.

I was still going to school and something had happened that made me the happiest girl alive (even with all the hurt over the divorce of Mommie and Daddy). The tall handsome boy I'd met when I was 13 years old had grown taller and better looking and had joined the Army. I got a letter from him and I think the words that were written in that letter are still etched in my heart. (After 41 years.) For almost 7 years he'd felt the same about me as I did him. He had written that he had loved me since the Easter Sunday he'd laid eyes on me for the first time. When he was hanging around our house so much with my brother, he said, it was to be near me.

My life is a lot happier now, but I still miss Daddy so much. Mommie is making plans to leave for Michigan to live with her brother. Daddy is bringing the young girl home to live with us. Mommie is taking the youngest child with her. Our lives are so mixed up. The only thing I had to look forward to was the letters I get from Orville.

The school year was drawing near to the end and I'd be graduating from the eighth grade. I don't know how I ever made it. I went so little time to school. But I graduated with honors. I wanted Daddy and Mommie to be there, but only Mommie was there. Daddy didn't want to leave his new bride.

As I got ready to leave for graduation, I remember, Daddy had promised several months ago to buy me a watch for graduation. As I'd wanted a watch for so long. Needless to say I didn't get the watch. I thought, "At least Daddy could be at my graduation." All the other students' parents would be there. But I knew I didn't count with Daddy anymore. It seemed I was all alone in the world and I wasn't even important. I thought, "If I just had something different to wear." As I didn't even get a new dress to wear. We graduated in caps and gowns, but I still would have loved to have a new dress as all the other girls has a beautiful new dress to wear under their gowns.

My mother was at my aunt's house about a mile away from our house waiting for me. So on my way to my aunt's house, I said to myself, "I'll see if Auntie had got something new I can wear." When I got there I asked her if I could wear her watch, she said, "I've got something better." She goes into her bedroom and brings out a beautiful necklace and bracelet, made from sea shells. I thought this was perfect but oh how wrong I was. Mommie and I go on to graduation and as the graduation march starts and

we start marching down the aisle, I think everyone was looking at me. For the necklace I had on that was made from seashells was clinging so loud that everyone was wondering what it was. Oh, how I wish I would have just fallen dead, as I heard some people whispering and laughing. But I knew I had to go on as I knew I had an essay to read. I wondered how am I ever going to get thru this night.

When it come my time to read my essay, I marched on the stage just as tho everything was fine. I just keep saying over and over within my heart, “Oh God, don’t let them remember the clinging of my necklace.” The essay I had written was written on “Honesty”. It took me about ten minutes to read it, after I started reading it I forgot about the clinging of the necklace. So after I was thru reading, the people clapped and clapped – some stood. Then I felt so happy, that the events of the evening, with Daddy not coming, the clinging of the necklace didn’t even matter. Then I was happy I didn’t fall dead while walking down the aisle. The evening was soon over and as Mommie and I walked back to my aunt’s house, we talked and wished things were different. How much happier the events of the evening would have been, if we had been a family. Mommie stops at my aunt’s and I go on home. Daddy had come home from the house of the girl he had married as he hadn’t brought her home yet – for Mother was still staying with us.

After graduation Mommie made plans to leave. the day she left to stay with Daddy’s brother and his wife for a few days, until she could leave for Michigan, Daddy brought his new wife home. The hurt my brothers and I felt was almost unbearable. It was late in the afternoon when Mommie left and Daddy brought his bride in. We had

never met her and she was only three years older than me. We were very cold towards her and that made Daddy very mad. My brothers and I were sent to bed very early. We couldn't go to sleep because we were crying so hard. Daddy kept hollering and telling us to stop crying and we couldn't, we were hurting so bad. He came into the little bedroom where we were at with a belt in his hand and said if we didn't stop he would whip us. My brothers and I put the corners of the pillow in our mouths to muffle the sobs. I was so miserable. If I hadn't gotten away from the girl Daddy married I think I would have killed myself. I talked to Mommie and she decided to let me go to Michigan with her and Daddy agreed. This made his new wife happy for she disliked me as much as I disliked her.

The day arrived for Mommie and I to leave for Michigan. It hurts me so much to leave my little sister and brothers. But I know I have to get away. I'm now sixteen years old and I want to get away from Daddy and the girl he married and try to make a better life for myself, so I can help my sister and brothers to get away as they grow up. As Mommie and I start to leave my sister and brothers start to cry, but they don't beg us not to go. For they know just as soon as Mommie and I can find a place to live (as Mommie already has a promise of a job at the Firestone Rubber Company in Flat Rock, Michigan where her brother is boss) we're going to come back and get them as Daddy has already said we could. But oh, how our plans go astray!

We board the Greyhound bus in Pineville, Kentucky early in May of 1945. We ride all night and arrive in Flat Rock, Michigan about 12:00 noon on Sunday. My uncle and his wife meet us and are very pleased to see us. Mommie went to work at Firestone

Rubber Company as promised the very next night, with her brother and sister-in-law. My uncle and his wife have three children so I'm given the responsibility to care for my baby sister who is thirteen months old and my aunt and uncle's children who are a little older. The responsibility is great because I have the housework and most of the cooking to do – but I don't mind, if it will help to get my brothers and other sister with us.

In a few weeks Mommie starts looking for a house to rent, but in the meantime Daddy starts writing saying how unhappy he is and what a mistake he has made. He says he misses us so much and he wants to divorce the girl he married and come back to Mommie. As usual Mother falls for his line and believes he means what he's saying. SO she sends Daddy money for him and the children to come to Michigan. He gets a job where Mommie is working and for a few weeks I begin to think he means what he says about making us a secure family again – but oh! – how wrong I was.

Soon he quits his job. He leaves us all there on Mommie's brother and goes back to Kentucky to the girl he'd left us all for. But not before he'd gotten Mommie pregnant. So Mommie was left with seven children and one on the way and no one to care for us. Her brother quit his job and took his family back to Kentucky, leaving us in an empty house and in a strange place. We have no money to buy any furniture with or even to pay rent on the house since Mommie will lose her job as soon as they find out she is expecting a child. The only bright spot in my life and I think that is what kept me going was the letters I received every day and sometimes two or three letters a day – from the boy I had met that beautiful Easter morning, almost four years ago. It seemed by his letters he was the only one who really cared for me. He had asked me to marry him and

I'd said yes. But now I was torn between the love I had for him and my responsibility to Mommie and my sisters and brothers. I was so scared and hurt I didn't know what was going to happen to us. Daddy had written and said he had found a little house and had moved into it with his wife and she was expecting a baby also and if Mommie wanted to she could bring me and my brothers and sisters to him until after Mommie had her baby. So we packed what clothes we had and Mommie and all of us kids boarded a bus for Pineville, Kentucky. That's where Daddy was living. Mommie dropped us off at Daddy's and caught a bus on into Harlan to another one of her brothers, hoping to stay with him until after she had had her baby.

After I was Daddy's a few days, I told him that I was getting married in October when Orville comes in on leave. He got really upset and told me I'm not, that Mommie needs me to help her with my baby sister who isn't quite two years old yet. Since I'm 16 ½ years old he said I had to do what he said. Oh how miserable and unhappy I was. It should have been the happiest years of my life, but it wasn't. I'd go off into the woods and walk for hours and hours and think, not knowing what to do. Just sit and close my eyes and wish I could go back to the time when I'd see the light in the window. Such peace and a secure feeling I had then. I wonder how could so much happen in such a few years. I thought if this was growing up, I wish I'd never grown up.

Daddy moves from Pineville back near Balkan where we had spent seven happy years before he had remarried. Come September I started back to school, since Daddy had said he wouldn't give his consent for me to marry I thought I'd finish school and Orville would wait and understand. But before he came home on leave, the last of

October in 1945 I'd decided I would quit school and slip off and marry him. But Daddy found out my plans by opening my letters and reading them before I got them. I was so unhappy. I begged God to take my life since it had no meaning to me. But now after forty-one years I can say thank God he didn't for I've had so much love and peace in my life so many friends and all my brothers and sisters and their families and mine are so close in spirit and body. But I will tell more that happened between 1945 and 1986.

Come last of October, Orville comes home on leave. We set up all night and talk and make plans for the future. He doesn't have an engagement ring to give me, but he gives me a ring he was wearing before he leaves at 4 o'clock in the morning. He tells me he will be down on the one o'clock train that came close to our house every day at one o'clock. He asked me to meet him at the train depot. I never knew I could have ever been as happy as I was at that minute. But it was short-lived. Daddy's wife saw Orville kissing me good-bye and she told Daddy when he got up about 8 o'clock. Daddy made me feel so dirty. He called me such terrible names. He had always told me to never kiss a boy, but I loved Orville so much. I told him I was going to marry Orville and he said we'll see about that. Daddy left about 10 o'clock and never got back until late in the afternoon. I still planned on meeting Orville at 1 o'clock, but Daddy's wife kept telling me all morning that he wouldn't be there. I would ask her what made her think that and she would say, "I just know." She was right. I met the train. He didn't show up. That's been almost forty-two years ago and to this day I haven't seen Orville or found out why he never showed up. But I've always believed my Dad had something to do with him not keeping his promise.

I was so heartbroken I quit school and went to work in a boarding house, where my Mother was working at that time. We both worked until it was getting close to time for the baby to be borned, then I went back home to stay with Daddy. Mommie went to her brother's house to stay until the baby is borned. I have to help take care of my stepmother and my brothers and sisters until her baby is borned. Mommie had already had her baby and I'd went to her brother's every day and cared for her until she was able to take care of herself and the baby.

Again Mommie is making plans to leave Kentucky. She has another brother living in Cincinnati who has said she could come and live with him and his wife until she could find a job and a place to stay. Same as the first time she left, she wanted me to go with her. This time she was leaving all the kids with Daddy except the newborn baby.

This time we board the one o'clock train leaving Harlan for Cincinnati. This time I knew I was leaving for good, but I was leaving behind someone I'd never forget. I think I cried all the way from Harlan to Cincinnati. I knew I was going to start a new life and I was praying to God to guide me into the right one.

As we wait for the train from Harlan to pick us up and take us to Cincinnati, I turn and look in the direction of where my four brothers and two sisters were living with our father and his new wife, wondering if they would be taken care of, because since Daddy had remarried and Mommie had moved out of our home and Daddy brought his new wife to live with us, I became a mother to my brothers and sisters.

The first winter Mommie was gone was a very long winter and we didn't have enough bed coverings to keep us warm because Daddy had sold a lot of our things. Daddy's new wife had brought enough bed coverings from her home to keep her and Daddy warm. The room where my brothers, sisters and I slept had only one bed. We didn't have enough covers to keep one bed warm. My sisters and I slept in the bed and I made a bed on the floor with old coats and all the clothes and rags I could find for my brothers. After the rags, coats and clothes were placed on the floor, I'd put an old blanket over them and my brothers would lie down and I'd put more clothes on top of them and a quilt to weight the rags down. I'd tell my brothers to lie very still so the clothes and rags would not get rolled off them.

But it's warm weather now so I don't have to worry about them getting cold. So before winter arrives again, Mommie and I are hoping to be settled in Cincinnati in a warm place and with a job so we'll be able to bring them to live with us. I guess that's what gave me the courage to leave Kentucky and my brothers and sisters. I wanted to get where Mommie and I could find work and a place of our own where we could be all together again (except Daddy). I knew I'd worry and miss my brothers and two sisters, but I was glad to be getting away from Daddy. Oh, I still loved him, but I didn't like him.

He had hurt us all so much.

Hearing the whistling of the train as it nears the station where it stops to pick up passengers brings me back to the world I'm about to leave. This is really happening, I thought. I'm leaving a place and people I cared for so much. I thought when Orville comes home from the Army I won't be here. I'll never know what happened that made him not come back the day he promised.

The train arrives at the station, Mommie and I and the other people board the train and are seated. As the train starts to pull away from the station and picks up speed as it pulls away, I lay my head back against the back of the seat and listen to the sound of the wheels of the train. They seem to be saying, "Good-bye, good-bye." My heart is breaking but yet I realize it has to be like this. I close my eyes and start thinking of happier times in my life.

Remembering when we lived in the one-room log cabin nestled about two miles in the woods. It was so beautiful. Yet we didn't have any material things, not very much to eat, but we were happy. Mommie would take us for long walks among the trees. We'd explore small caves and saw where the wild animals had slept and had eaten their food. Sometimes we'd spend almost all day roaming through the woods picking wild berries and nuts. One day, we saw a bear, at a distance. Mommie didn't seem scared, but later she said she was really frightened. We turned and moved very slowly to a clearing in the woods, where not too far away some men were cutting down trees to make a clearing of the ground to plant corn in. Mommie said the noise of the men cutting trees probably kept the bear from pursuing us. Needless to say she never took us too far in

the woods anymore.

A few days later we were playing near the edge of the woods in a path that fed off of the mountain. Mommie was with us. My two older brothers, my baby brother Sam who was 18 months old and myself. Mommie said it was almost time for Daddy, so she was going to the house to build a fire in the ole iron cook stove so she could cook something to eat before Daddy got home. She hadn't been gone too long before we saw a bear coming up the path. My two older brothers and I ran as hard as we could toward the house leaving my baby brother setting on a quilt playing with some sticks and rocks we had gathered. We were screaming for Mommie. She ran out to see what was wrong. I was telling her the bear had gotten my baby brother, Sam. Mommie almost fainted. She ran around the house toward the place where we were playing. Falling and getting up as she went. When she got almost to where we were playing, she met Daddy coming up the path carrying my baby brother, She was so relieved, she started to cry real hard. Daddy always wore a big black hat, so what we saw coming up the path was the top of Daddy's head, with only the hat showing. We didn't wait to see any more, we thought it was the bear we saw a few days before in the woods. Daddy was so angry with us, Mommie was too relieved to be angry, Daddy cut a switch from a tree and would have whipped us if Mommie hadn't talked him out of it. That was the last time we were allowed to be that far from the house without Mommie. We didn't live there very much longer until the house burned with everything we owned – which wasn't very much.

As the train nears the station to pick up passengers, it blows it's whistle and brings me back to reality. I was smiling. Mommie asked me why I was smiling and I told

her just something that happened a long time ago. It was scary then, but now I can laugh about it.

As Mommie and I settle down on the train for our long ride to Loveland, Ohio, I lean back in the seat and listen to the clickety clickety of the train wheels on the railroad track. Watching the smoke trailing behind the train from the ole coal stoker in the engine that was pulling the cars we were in. Taking me away from home? No! not home, it wasn't home anymore. Since Mommie and Daddy has divorced. But it hurt so to be leaving my brothers and two little sisters. I had to keep telling myself it wouldn't be very long til Mommie would fo back and get them, just as soon as she found work and a place to live in. Mommie reaches over and touches me, which brings me from the thoughts I was dreaming about and tells me to look at the beautiful scenery on the hills and meadows we were traveling thru. The hills were so pretty. The apple trees were in bloom and beautiful houses were scattered along the hills and men were plowing on the hillside getting ready to plant their crops of corn and vegetables. Mommie had wanted me to see the beautiful scenery thinking it would make me happy, but it made me very sad, for my mind went back many years when we lived on the farm and were so happy. I turn my head to keep Mommie from seeing the tears in my eyes. For I knew in my heart I would never feel as secure and happy as I felt when I'd watch the light in the window.

We arrive in Loveland, Ohio about 10 o'clock the next morning. Mommie and I and my two month old baby sister. Mommie only had fifty cents left, not enough to buy my baby sister's milk, since she was nursing the bottle. Mommie was praying her brother would help us til we could help ourselves. We didn't know where he lived, and

we knew we would have to walk for we had no money to hire a cab to take us there. Mommie asked someone at the depot where Jesse Miracle lived and the man she asked pointed to a gray house just about three hundred yards from the depot and said, "In that gray house with the long porch on it." Mommie said, "Thank God, now we don't have to walk far." But her joy was soon turned to hurt, for when we knocked on her brother's door and he and his wife came to the door and saw Mommie had a baby and me with her, they weren't very friendly. They thought Mommie was leaving the baby and me with Daddy. They invited us in and told us we could stay there for a few weeks, but I would have to help do the housework and help with the kids. He told Mommie she'd have to find a job soon. He told her of a place that was hiring. A place where they made over shoes and rations for the boys in the war – which was World War II. He also loaned her a few dollars to buy the baby's milk, for which Mommie was very thankful. I, same as Mommie, knew we weren't welcome – so when dinner was ready we only ate a little since we had no money to pay our way. We both were very hungry because we hadn't eaten anything since early the day before. After dinner, Mommie did the dishes while I fed the baby. After we were in bed that night (we slept together) Mommie heard me crying, she tried to console me by telling me things would get better, that she'd find a job and a place for us to live and she'd go get my brothers and two sisters and we'd be a family and do things together. I wanted to believe her, but I couldn't. I knew she'd never break away from Daddy, that he'd follow us to Ohio just like he did when we went to Michigan.

The next day Mommie goes to Solo the factory her brother told her about. It was

about three miles away and she walked there and back. Hoping if she got a job, there would be someone who worked there that would give her a ride to and from work. Since she already had factory experience, they hired her and told her to come to work that night. She started at 50 cents an hour. But as happy as she was you'd thought she was starting at a dollar an hour. But it seems our happiness and good luck wouldn't last us very long. Mommie's brother and his wife decided they were going to move back to Kentucky. We didn't know they were planning on moving until a truck came to move them. Since they were only renting the house all they had to do was move their furniture. Mommie had already gone to work when the truck came for them and their furniture. I didn't know what to do. They took everything in the house. I didn't even have a chair to set in and hold the baby, since I was taking care of the baby for Mommie. I took the baby and went to a house nearby and asked them to let me use their phone so I could call Mommie. When I told her what her brother had done, she was quiet for awhile then she told me to stay in the house with the baby until she got home from work, which would be about 12:30 at night and come daylight she'd try and find us a room to live in til we could do better. I was crying when I hung up the phone and started to leave the lady's house where I was calling from. I asked her if I could borrow an ole chair to set and hold the baby til Mommie got home from work. Her son carried the chair since I was carrying the baby. It was getting dark and I was so scared and lonely. I wish I could just close my eyes and die. I think I hated my father then, more than anything for what he'd done, that had caused us to be in the condition we were in.

I made the baby a bed in the floor from our clothes, and got her to sleep and laid

her down. I was sitting in the dark crying when someone knocked on the door. I was so scared I didn't want to answer it, til I heard the voice of the lady from where I'd phoned Mommie. When I opened the door, there were more people with her. They started carrying chairs, a bed mattress, stove, couch, table and chairs, cabinets, dishes, curtains – everything we needed. They put up curtains and all the furniture in place, dished in the cabinet, hooked up the stove and last of all, a load of groceries. I sat and looked in awe, I couldn't believe what was happening. I knew I'd fallen asleep and was dreaming. They had even brought a crib bed for the baby. I was crying so hard from joy that one of the ladies took the baby from my arms and said to me these three rooms of furniture belongs to you and your mother, and no one can take it from you. Also the house has already been rented in your Mommie's name. I wanted to call Mommie and tell her, but since she'd be home (home!) soon, I'd let her be surprised. I knew God had provided once again for us. He had made a way where there was no way. My few years (17) had been hard for the last three years, but God always made a way and gave me courage and hope to go on. At that moment I thought my heartaches are over, now we can go get my brothers and sisters and we'll be a family. I was so happy.

When Mommie came home, I had the lights out when she walked in. She said, "Why are you in the dark?" I turned the lights on, when she saw the rooms full of furniture she sat down and started crying so hard she was shaking. She just kept saying, "Thank God, thank God." I took her into the kitchen and showed her the refrigerator and cabinets full of food and she started crying again. It was almost 1:30 in the morning. Mommie said, "I'm going to cook us something to eat." At 2:30 in the morning we were

setting at our table eating fried potatoes, biscuits and bacon and making plans to go get the rest of the children.

A few weeks later the company Mommie worked for started hiring – but you had to be 18 years old to get a job. I lied about my age, since the company didn't require proof and got a day job. My mother worked nights so she took care of the house and the baby days. The company would let me off 30 minutes early so I'd get home before it was time for Mommie to leave. Things were working out great (so I thought). We were writing to the children and sending them a little spending money. What I didn't know was that Mommie was writing to Daddy and Daddy to her. Making plans for him to come also. He said he was going to divorce the girl he married. (They already had one baby, a girl, and another on the way.) Then he and Mother would get married again. When I found out about it I was really upset. I wanted my brothers and sisters, but I knew Daddy would only hurt us more. That he wouldn't do what he said. I cried and begged Mommie not to bring Daddy up, since he had got someone from Kentucky to bring the children up. She wouldn't listen to me. Came time for them to come up she took a bus and went to Kentucky to bring them back. I stayed home and took care of my baby sister, which was about three months old. So many good things had happened to Mommie and me in the last six months, now I felt like she was going to destroy it. I was right, as she was soon to find out. She went to Kentucky and brought the children and Daddy up. His wife went back home to here dad. I was so happy to see my brothers and sisters, but I was too hurt at Daddy to be happy to see him. Mommie got back on Sunday with the children and Daddy.

I had gotten up early that Sunday morning and cooked about all day, fixing so many good things for them to eat. They arrived about three o'clock in the afternoon. I ran to the car to meet them. We were so happy we were all crying. I took them in the kitchen where I'd already put the food on the table and they started eating and talking at the same time.

It looked for a while that maybe we would be a whole family, but after Daddy had been there a few weeks he began to get restless and decided he wanted to go back to his second wife in Kentucky. I was glad to see him go, since he wasn't taking the children with him. Daddy was drinking a lot and Mommie was giving him money the children needed. I'd try and tell myself that Mommie loved Daddy so much she couldn't help herself, but Mommie was a weak person. She'd believe anything Daddy told her. A few days after Daddy was gone, Mommie told me she was pregnant. I was so angry and embarrassed I wanted to die. I thought to myself, I'll just leave. I'll find someone who'll let me live with them and work for them for my keep. I started looking in the want ads hoping to find someone who wanted a live-in babysitter. I felt so ashamed and disappointed in Mommie and very, very angry at Daddy.

In the few months we'd been in Loveland, I'd met a boy whose sister lived next door to us and I liked him a lot (not love). He didn't know anything about the way things were in our family and I didn't want him to know. I kept trying to make him mad so he wouldn't want to see me. Finally, he left and went to New York. He wrote me but I wouldn't answer his letter.

When Mommie was about five months into her pregnancy, she had to quit work.

My older brother quit school at 15 years and went to work at a turkey farm so we'd have enough money to live on. But it still wasn't enough. I was still working at Solo, so I got a job in a restaurant working nights from five o'clock until eleven or twelve so we could keep the other children clothed, fed and in school. My brother and I either one didn't keep enough money from our wages to even go see a movie. It took all that we made to take care of the family. There were a few kind people close by us who helped us a lot – or we still couldn't have made it.

I had no friends. I didn't want any. I didn't want them to know what a mess our lives were in. I felt dirty, unloved and wasn't deserving of any good thing in life. I knew God wasn't pleased with the way Mommie and Daddy lived, and I thought that made me bad and dirty. I always wanted a decent place to live and a family I could be proud of.

I loved Mommie and Daddy but they didn't seem to see or care how they were making us children feel.

Mommie was having a hard time with pregnancy, so she had to quit work. That put all the responsibility of taking care of Mommie on the eight of us children. My younger siblings would gather up pop bottles and sell them to the store to help all they could. Another one of my brothers (Gideon) who was only 13 years old quit school and went to work for a man who was building houses. My brother's job was digging ditches. He would work from daylight to dark and come home so muddy and tired. He sometimes had to go without eating all day.

I'd made friends with a girl where I worked that helped a lot, for I'd go to the movies with her every Saturday or Sunday. She would pay my way to the movies because I didn't have the money for pleasure. It took all us children could make to pay rent and but food. Still that wasn't enough. As Mommie got farther along in her pregnancy, she had to stay in the bed most of the time. Plus working at two jobs, I had to take care of the house and cook for the kids.

One Sunday my girlfriend invited me to her house to spend the day. Mommie said I could go. So after I'd cooked the kids something to eat, I went to my friend's house for the day. That's where I met my husband-to-be. He was visiting from Flemingsburg, Kentucky. I enjoyed myself so much that day. Come late in the evening, my friend's sister, her husband and Hazel (my soon-to-be sister-in-law) brought me home. When I got home, my friend's brother (the visitor from Kentucky) was with us. He asked me to go to the movies with them since they were all going. I asked Mommie if I could go. First she said no. I and my friend kept asking and she finally said I could. So that's how I met my husband who I married four months later (and lived with 51 years).

When Mommie wrote Daddy and told Daddy I was talking about getting married, he came back from Kentucky to talk me out of getting married. I knew I couldn't get married and leave Mommie and the kids unless Daddy would take care of Mommie and the kids. He'd been writing and telling Mommie he was going to divorce his second wife and come back to us but he lied to us so much, I didn't believe him. Even if he did, someone was going to be hurt either way for him and his second wife had one child (18 months) and another one due in a few months.

Mommie got so bad, the doctor put her to bed. The baby wasn't due for about three months. When Daddy heard Mommie was so ill, he came back. It came a time for Mommie and Daddy to decide between her life or the baby's or maybe both would die. So the doctor induced labor. (All this was done at home since we didn't have medical insurance.) The baby just lived four minutes. It never did breathe. So it was taken away without even a service. To this day (year 2001), we don't know where it was buried. But God does. About four days after the baby was born, Daddy went back to Kentucky to get a divorce from Cleo, his second wife.

While he was in Kentucky, I got married (May 29, 1947) and Mommie was able to go back to work. One evening while Mommie was getting ready for work, my baby sister who was about two years old was playing on the porch around an ole oil cook stove, which she'd seen Mommie light with matches many times. She gets a match from the kitchen and tries to light the stove. She has oil on her from playing around the stove so when she tries to light the stove, she sets herself on fire. A passerby ran up on the porch and put the fire out but not before she was severely burned. For over a year she

hovered near death.

Daddy got the divorce and returned back to Ohio while Nancy, my baby sister was in the hospital near death. (It's only by the grace of God she is alive today, 2001.) Soon him and Mommie get married again. My husband and I was able to get us an apartment of our own. He had a good job on the Pennsylvania Railroad and we were expecting our first child. Finally, life seemed good. We had three rooms of nice furniture (it was paid for). Life was a lot easier.

But then my dad gets the mind to return to Kentucky to the coal mines taking all of us with him, telling my husband how much money he could make in the coal mines. Since my husband knew nothing about the coal mines, he believed my dad. I begged him not to quit his job and follow my dad for I was raised a coal miner's daughter and I know what it was like living in a mining camp and seeing my mom try to manage on what my dad earned. But my husband wouldn't listen to me and off we went to the mines in Harlan County. We sold our furniture then we had nothing but a new baby and a suitcase full of clothes.

We arrive in Kentucky in August of 1948, no place to live and no job, with both Daddy and Mommie – twelve of us in all. We go to my mom's brother's house setting about a mile back in the woods on a small mountain, a two-room log house. With my uncle, his wife and five children, us twelve, here I am homeless again, only this time with a two month baby. I can't work even if I could find a job since jobs for women in Harlan County back then were impossible to find.

My dad gets a job in the mines but my husband didn't. we all had to still remain

at my uncle's because we didn't have a house to move into or any furniture to put in a house. I cried a lot and begged to God a lot to help us. I wanted to go back to Ohio for I felt like I'd find a job and we could get a house and furniture and be on our own. But it wasn't to be at this time. My husband had a .22 pistol that my cousin wanted to buy. So my husband sold him the pistol for \$20 but he didn't want to go back to Ohio. He wanted to go back to Flemingsburg, Kentucky where he was raised to work in tobacco. So we took the \$20 and bought two tickets to Maysville, Kentucky. We arrive about five o'clock PM. My baby was out of milk and I only had two empty bottles, so we stop in a little café. We only have enough money to get two cups of coffee and fill my baby's bottle with milk. I gave him one bottle and since he was so tiny and sick he spit it all up. So I put the other bottle in a bag and start walking to Flemingsburg which was about 19 miles. It was getting late and the sun was going down. We were so hungry and tired and the baby was crying. We'd walked about a mile when the bag in which I was carrying the bottle got wet from the bottle and the bottle fell out and broke. We had no money and we were 17 or 18 miles from my husband's sister's house and dark was coming. Not only was my baby son crying, I was also. I didn't know what I was going to do when a car pulls up beside us and the man speaks to my husband and asks him where he was going. The man knew my husband – it was someone my husband had stripped tobacco for. So the God-sent man (I believe God arranged it for the man to take us where we were going) took us to my husband's sister's house. At last we had a place to sleep that night and milk for my baby. It was whole milk fresh from the cow and it only made my baby sicker. My husband was no help for he was young and didn't know how to provide for a wife

and child, so I still felt alone. Night came and went. I didn't sleep very much for my baby was so sick. The next morning, my sister-in-law's husband went into Flemingsburg and got a whole carton of Wilson Canned Milk and some clothes for my baby. So after I put my baby on Wilson Canned Milk, he started getting better. My sister-in-law made him some clothes (diapers) and let us stay with them for a while. But my husband still wouldn't try to find work. His brother kept on to him to find work so he could take care of us. After a few weeks, my husband, baby and I went to stay with his cousin and his family. My husband helped strip tobacco for his cousin and since his cousin's wife was sick from an operation, I did all the housework and cooking for several weeks. At least we had a place for now to stay and food to eat. We stayed there til in late January when my mom wrote and told me they had gotten a house in the mining camp and had moved in and my husband could get a job now. So with just a bag of clothes and just enough money to get us to Pathfork, Kentucky, Harlan County, off we went again.



About the Author

Sarah Katherine Wilson Rigdon (1929–2020) was born in Bell County, Kentucky, to Garrett Wilson, a coal miner, and Rachel Miracle Wilson. The oldest of ten children, she grew up in the Appalachian mountains during the Great Depression, in a three-room log house where she would later recall watching for the glow of her father’s miner’s lamp at dusk.

Those early years in Bell County shaped her resilience, faith, and work ethic. As the daughter of a coal miner and the eldest child in a large family, responsibility came early. She left the mountains in 1951, part of the great migration of Appalachian families seeking work in the industrial North, and settled in Ohio.

There, she built a life with her husband, Omar Rigdon, and raised five children. She worked nearly four decades as a sewing machine operator at Clifton Shirt Company, balancing long factory hours with raising her family. A talented seamstress, vegetable gardener, and gifted Southern cook, she carried the traditions of the mountains with her.

A devoted member of the Primitive Baptist Church, Sarah’s faith anchored her life. She treasured returning to Kentucky for church gatherings and annual associations, maintaining deep ties to her Bell County roots.

At heart, she was a storyteller. In her later years, she wrote of her childhood in Bell County, calling it *A Light in the Window* — a reflection on hardship, family, and the enduring grace that carried her through life’s storms.

Her greatest joy was her family, and her steady faith remained the foundation of her life.

