

Wacky Tales and Insights From A Rural Childhood: 1934-1950

I. Introduction **SLIDE 1: Wacky Tales and Insights from a Rural Childhood**

- I'm happy to be here and honored that you would take the time to listen to some of my farm community tales and thoughts.

- I do have some stories to tell, but first I'd like to set the stage by introducing the setting out of which they came.

SLIDE 2: O'Daffer Farmhouse

- I was born in 1934 in a farmhouse 2 miles from the town of Weldon, Illinois. Old Doc Marvel came from town to the farm in a snowstorm to deliver me.

SLIDE 3: Doc Marvel and young Phares

- We were very poor and had almost nothing, except the big farmhouse, moved there earlier by my grandfather.

SLIDE 4: Telephone, Aladdin Lamp, Wash Tub, Bathtub

- We didn't have a telephone, so we had to go to another neighbor who did to call the Doctor for my delivery

- We had No electricity, so no lighting except small kerosene lamps. It was one of the greatest days ever when my father found enough money to buy an Aladdin Lamp, which had a wick like a modern day camping lantern. We thought we had died and gone to heaven.

- We also had no running water, and no bathtub. It was pretty hard to sit in a small round washing tub, but we tried to do it.

The second greatest day ever was when my father found someone who was throwing away an old bathtub, with ornamental legs. We couldn't hook it up to running water, but we put it on the porch, and delighted in carrying water to pour in it so we could take what we thought was a real honest to goodness bath.

SLIDE 5- Outdoor toilet, chamber pot

- With no indoor toilets, you can imagine the consequences. We used chamber pots at night if we had to, and endured the agony of taking them out the next morning. And it is true- we used the Sears Roebuck catalog as our toilet paper in the outdoor privy- overjoyed when it was at its newest and we could find the order pages which were softer than the hard shiny ones.

SLIDE 6- Cobs, coal, and stoves, radio

- One of my jobs when I got older was to carry cobs and coal into the house every night in the winter to feed our cook stove and heating stove. If we got too much coal in the big living room stove and the wind came up- as it often did in the winter- we couldn't control the burning of the coal by trying to shut the flue off and the stove would get red hot.

Many a time I was scared to death that the stove would set the house on fire and burn it to the ground.

- We took hot bricks to bed and slept in a down comforter to keep warm.
- We had a battery radio, but because we had little money to recharge or get new batteries, what we listened to was rationed. The Saturday Night Barn Dance, The Lone Ranger, and Lum and Abner were allowed.

SLIDE 7- Ritz Crackers, Donald Duck

- In 1934, the year I was born Ritz crackers were all the rage- for town people with money, that is. They cost 19¢ a box.
- Donald duck appeared for the first time in a "Wise Little Hen" cartoon, and to the shock of many, without pants- but with no access to a movie theater, we didn't know anything about it.

SLIDE 8-Gallon of Gas

- And a gallon of gas cost 10 cents, but since we farmed with horses and drove a horse and buggy rather than a car, it was no big deal.

SLIDE 9- Bardot, Loren, Boone

- I didn't care then, but later was more interested that Sophia Loren and Brigitte Bardot were born in 1934. And Harriet was happy that Pat Boone was born in 1934 also.
- Being poor on the farm, I learned to live simply and wasn't preoccupied with the need for "things." You feel pretty positive when you think you have everything you need.
- To complete this setting of the stage, I'd like to read a poem I wrote that helps put my feelings about the farm in perspective. It's entitled "The Farm and Me."

The Farm and Me

I liked living on a farm, with roosters, ducks, and goats
 And enjoyed slopping hogs and feeding horses oats
 I loved calling cows to come and had milking down pat
 The cows gave lots of milk for us, and plenty for the cat

We planted the seeds and helped the new plants grow
 And we cut weeds from fields so none would ever show
 At harvest time we gathered grain to fill the larders up
 Satisfied with a job well done, we even praised the pup

We took in the fresh air and relished most of the work
 Seeing animals meet a new day was yet another perk
 We provided all of our own food with no need for things.
 I loved the basic simple life and the security it brings.

But not all was fun upon the farm I tell you for a fact
 As for cleaning barn stalls no one wanted in that act
 Cleaning chicken houses bared smells hard to believe
 With odor as the spreader spread too gross to conceive

We worked from dawn to dark the day was never done
 When hail ruined our crop we looked harder for the fun
 Castrating hogs finally broke the pleasure camel's back
 And rising at five o'clock was enough to make you pack

So as I grew up learning and became full of farming lore
Insight came to me once, and later appeared a lot more
A farmer I was not going to be, come inferno or a flood
It was plain as the nose on my face it wasn't in my blood

II. Fire Adventures on The Farm

I've mentioned how our coal burning stove almost burned down our house, but there's more about "Fire on The Farm"

About A Lightning Fire

SLIDE 10- Bill Odaffer's Barn

When I was 10 years old, I was sleeping upstairs in our old farmhouse one night during a pretty severe thunderstorm.

Intermingled with the sounds of the thunder, I heard my father shouting up the stairwell, ordering me to throw on some clothes and get to the car as soon as I could.

I was so sleepy and startled that I wasn't quite sure what was going on, but I knew it was something about a fire, and an emergency.

As we roared down the road, we could see flames in the sky over a mile away. Finally we saw it. Bill Odaffer, my father's cousin's barn had been struck by lightning and was on fire!

All of the neighbors were there, but no one could stop the barn burning to the ground.

We comforted Bill and Ollie Odaffer, and drove home in despair, with some of us thinking we were glad it wasn't us.

Now they say that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. Well, you can discard that myth. Two years later, after Bill had completely rebuilt his barn, it got hit again by lightning and burned to the ground. The second time, in my mind, was an exact rerun of the first.

There was talk in the neighborhood that Bill might want to consider putting lightning rods on his next barn, but as I recall, for reasons beyond everyone's comprehension, he never did.

Ever after this bizarre chain of events, I think the coming of lightning in the middle of the night while I was sleeping upstairs in our old farmhouse gave new meaning to what my Sunday School teacher, Ernest Dickey, always said about "standing in the need of prayer."

More About Fire on the Farm SLIDE 11- Garden and Gosling Fire

After harvest, it was fine to burn the dead grass off the garden on a quiet day, but if the wind suddenly came up, as it often did, a garden fire could get out of hand.

And there was a large gasoline tank just east of our garden, and if you are familiar with the Midwest, you know that the winds always blow from west to east.

One quiet summer day, my mother took me with her and set out to burn off a small southwest corner of the garden.

Out of the blue, a good ole strong west wind came up.

I was just over 2 years old at the time, but I've always had this feeling that I vividly remember this incident.

My mom and I were the only ones home. As the wind came up, and as the fire started blazing she ran in the house, placed me in the kitchen, and shut all the doors.

Then she ran to the garden to try to stop the blazing fire before it got to that tank and, in her mind, blew us all to kingdom come.

Using superhuman force, beating the fire, running for water, and throwing dirt, she did finally contain the fire just short of the gas tank, and before having to deal, again in her mind, with a scorched earth aftershock. (I know all this because it happened again later when I was older. Remember, "Fire incidents did strike twice in our community.")

When she returned to the house, she found me under attack by a baby gosling—whose box I had knocked over— and I was screaming bloody murder.

I was miraculously saved by the firefighter hero of 1936, but I have always been leery of garden fires and geese!

II. Wind Adventures on the Farm **SLIDE 12- Wind and Windmill**

The garden fire was not the only event dictated by the wind on the farm.

It may seem strange that the windmill would be fodder for a feature farm story because it was such a simple thing— a way to pump water out of the ground for horses, cattle, and us.

But the story generates from the windmill's simple on/shut off device—with it's macabre accomplice, the high wind.

The device was a smooth stick handle tied to a wire that went up to a brake on the propeller on top.

When you wanted to shut the windmill off, you pulled the stick down against the tower piece, thus tightening the wire and putting the brake on the propeller to stop it.

A very high wind could turn the propeller so fast that it would either ruin the pump or go flying off the windmill if it wasn't braked by pulling the handle down— and that took "three men and a boy."

If the windmill was on and a strong wind came up, calmness did not abound.

My mother approached this as impending disaster. "Go turn off the windmill! Hurry!" she would shout, as if the lives of all of us entirely depended on completing this task in at least one millisecond.

The intensity of it all put the fear of the Lord in me, especially since I, being a very fast runner, usually got there first (even though a strong wind blowing at a rate equal my weight tried mightily to keep me from getting there), and usually was unable to shut it off.

I can still feel the relief that ensued when a couple of us were able to pull that stick down and literally bring the propeller to a screeching halt.

I think the windmill experience must have helped me learn to deal with stress and pressure, because there sure was plenty of it – with garden and windmill- when the wind began to blow on the farm.

IV. Water Adventures on the Farm SLIDE13- The Dredge Ditch

My mother-- probably because of her experience of very nearly drowning as a teenager-- was deathly afraid of the dredge ditch that passed through our farm.

She seemed to feel that if any of her children got near the ditch, it would take a couple of gulps and completely swallow them up!

She must have transferred her image of the spring rain ditch (which could get pretty violent) to the lazy summer ditch, because for whatever reason, it was like pulling teeth to get her to let us “go down to the ditch.”

The fear of the ditch was heightened by the fact that land area under the bridge often served as a camping place for Gypsies that came through the area. Since the bridge wasn't far from our house, and Gypsies had a penchant for coming to a nearby house to beg or “borrow” things, my mother was in a dither when the Gypsies arrived.

She would send my sister Jane or I to the door to tell the Gypsies something like “my mother is busy and the workers will be here any minute for dinner,”

The dredge ditch, in some strange way, got associated with the Gypsies—giving it an even more ominous character.

My mother would have totally freaked out if she had known that the local homeless guy, Freddie Gale, who walked from town to our dredge ditch about every other day in the summer to fish, was a member of the LGBT community.

In the end, I was able to gain freedom to explore and enjoy the dredge ditch in both summer and winter, but my mother's fear of water, in a small degree, must have transferred to me, and I admit to grabbing my kid's arms when they got too close to the edge of a river or lake.

Suffice it to say that finding a way to not totally take on my mother's fear of the "ditch" may have been an experience in developing courage for me.

A Related Observation: In Indian/Buddhist philosophy, the key five elements of life are Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Void. In Chinese, Feng Shui means literally "Wind and Water." And Greek philosophers felt all matter was composed of earth, air, fire, and water.

So I guess these fire, wind and water experiences on the farm weren't far off. My roots are deeper than I thought.

Dealing With Cold Blooded Animals on the Farm SLIDE 14- Tale of a Cold Blooded Animal.

Whenever a brave, but unaware, snake made its way into our yard and was spotted by my mother Ruby, the result can only be described by the phrase, "all hell broke loose!"

"GET THE HOE! GET THE HOE!, "my mother would shout, in her loudest and most authoritative voice, causing the chickens in the yard to scatter to the winds. All the troops (children, and whoever else was there) mobilized immediately, and rapidly delivered my mother's weapon of choice — a garden hoe.

It was as if the President of the United States had learned via the red phone that the enemy was within our gates! We must defend ourselves against the attackers! And Commander Ruby led the assault.

With approximately 50 quick and vigorous chops, seemingly given in the time frame of about 5 seconds, she made triply sure that the snake had met its demise, if not its total dismemberment.

As quickly as it had started, calm reigned again, and it inevitably became my task to dispose of what was left of the snake.

You can now probably understand how a fear of snakes quickly developed within me, and still affects me today.

Yet, the snake experience also helped me develop resourcefulness, because as I grew older, I would plant a dead snake, which I had shot with my BB gun, in the most appropriate place, and wait in excited anticipation until my mother spied it.

Many a dead snake got totally demolished in its afterlife by Ruby's trusty garden hoe.'

A Related Observation: SLIDE 15-Symbols of Physicians/Medicine

Snakes have served as symbols throughout history. They often stand for fertility or creative life force. Since snakes shed their skin, revealing shiny new skin underneath, they have been symbols of rebirth, immortality and healing. In fact the symbol of physicians once was Asclepius, the God of Medicine, carrying a staff with a serpent wrapped around it. Today it is usually a staff carried by the Olympic God Hermes, with two serpents.

Maybe if my mother had known this, she would not have been so anxious to cut up all those snakes!

Lesson From a One Room School SLIDE 16- Tale of a CIPHERING Contest

At PVS, the teacher would have us go up to the blackboard and to do long multiplication or division calculations.

If you finished first, you took your seat and waited on the others. I was hands-down the fastest cipherer in the school.

When we visited the "town school" in Weldon and a ciphering contest came up, I thought "No sweat, "I always finish first."

Lo and behold, I was still ciphering away when a slight girl named Ada Katherine Pearl was already sitting down, with a big smile on her face.

I learned humility that day, and that there is always someone in this world who can do something better than you can.

Active involvement and developing self knowledge—in PVS!

P.S. Many years later, when I was a Professor of Mathematics

at Illinois State University, my friend, Ada Katherine Pearl, knocked on my office door.

I was very quick to make it clear that, under the circumstances, there would be no ciphering contests in the mathematics department that day.

Related Observation: In thinking about education today, one wonders what value is gained from trying to perform a calculation as fast as you can. What do we all do when faced with calculating 368×49 ? Yep, we pop it into the calculator, usually on our cell phone in our pocket, and it immediately prints 18,032. Even if we don't use a calculator, speed is not near as valuable as accuracy.

Mystery in a Local Methodist Church SLIDE 17- **Mystery in a Methodist Church**

My friend, Hobart Sailor, was a preacher's kid, and a master of mischief.

Everyone called him "Fiddle," but no one seemed to know why.

At any rate, I remember one of my first introductions to Fiddle's brand of mischief.

We were sitting in church one Sunday, behind one of the stalwart ladies of the congregation. I think her name was Lillie.

The setting was rather peaceful. Fiddle's father Dwight was in the middle of a long sermon, and we were getting bored, if not nearly asphyxiated by Lillie's greatly over-applied perfume.

All of a sudden, I thought I saw a very fine stream of water emanate from Fiddle's mouth and arch over the pew onto Lillie's hat.

Upon questioning, Fiddle whispered to inform me that if you moved your jaw right, you could spray!

I was amazed at this revelation, and decided to experiment. Lo and behold, I could spray too!

I was in a "thine is not to reason why" mentality, and only later learned that there is an opening into a saliva gland inside the cheek, and that the proper motion of the jaw would activate it.

Fiddle and I proceeded to spray Lillie's hat, but occasionally missed and got a little of Lillie.

I would guess that Lillie carried the mystery of the "rain in church" on that Sunday to her deathbed, or alternatively, may have interpreted it as "an act of God" commemorating her Baptism by immersion.

Related Observation:

The act of stimulating the salivary glands underneath your tongue into spraying a concentrated jet of pure saliva is called **Gleeking**.

Usually, it happens when you yawn. There are articles and videos all over the internet about gleeking. Less than 1% of people can gleek on command.

Fired from a High School Mixed Chorus Class SLIDE !8- Tale of a Mixed Chorus Caper

"Spray Fiddle," as I called him on occasion, was the cause of the only time I was ever kicked out of a class in high school.

He had found a very old ham and cheese sandwich in his locker that smelled to high heaven, and brought it to Chorus class, which met

from two to three o'clock in the afternoon.

As Fiddle brought out the sandwich in the middle of our singing of "Go Down Moses," and began his antics in reaction to the smell and his pretense to eat it, I found it extremely funny and became uncontrollably tickled. Of course, Fiddle kept a straight face.

As the sandwich found itself in odd places doing odd things, and I was somewhat overwhelmed with the humor of it all.

Miss Harmony (name changed to protect the innocent) forthwith asked me to leave and go to the principal's office.

I met our very stern, no-nonsense principal, Ernest Dickey, on the stairway leading to his office, and he asked me why I wasn't in chorus.

I told him all the smelly details, and, without a reprimand, he told me to go sit in his office until the period was over, and then go to my next class.

Lucky for me, Mr. Dickey had been my church Sunday school teacher for several years, and was convinced that I was a "fine young man," Not in need of dramatic punishment.

Other students who got into trouble in class often fared much worse, so I learned early the value of "having connections."

Related Observation:

For the record, I am not the only one who has "gotten the giggles" See this video of someone you will probably recognize. (Anderson Cooper giggling)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFGLrT4Oxrk

Giggling uncontrollably is also sometimes the manifestation of a serious disease. If you're living with a neurologic condition such as dementia, stroke, traumatic brain injury or MS and are experiencing unexpected outbursts of crying or laughing you could have Pseudo Bulbar Affect -

PBA. Nearly 2 million Americans with certain underlying neurologic diseases are estimated to suffer from PBA.

Reparation in the Local Graveyard SLIDE 19-Halloween and the Weldon Cemetery

A Halloween tradition in Weldon, Illinois where I grew up-- one that appears to border on being destructive mischief-- was to upset Annis Yates's outdoor privy on Halloween.

Before passing judgment on this one, you have to understand that in Weldon, this act had happened for so many years that it was expected!

Even among many of the adults, who always helped Annis put it back up early the next morning, there may have been Disappointment if this annual tradition had not been fulfilled.

Why Annis, you might ask? Well, Annis had an approach to young people that simply invited an upset privy, and her reaction to the finalization of the event was a sight to behold.

Ronnie Edwards, a high school friend of mine who was later to own the local fertilizer business and most of the rest of the town, tells of the time he and a group of friends upset Annis's toilet on Halloween.

The next day Annis primed up a little and went to knock on Clifford Edwards, Ronnie's father's, door.

Annis asserted that she had information that Ronnie had upset her privy the night before, and asked if this was true. Cliff called Ronnie into the living room and asked "Did you upset Annis's privy last night?"

Ronnie responded, "No Sir, I did not!"

Ronnie said that it had always bothered him that he had "slightly

misrepresented the truth,” because, as he put it, “I drove the getaway car, but it was true that I wasn’t the one who upset the privy.”

Many years later, as a prosperous adult, Ronnie said he was walking through the Weldon Cemetery and saw Annis Yates’s gravesite.

Her small, stained, stone was broken, and the site was in ill repair.

Ronnie said that he bought her a new gravestone, beautified the site, and placed a large bouquet of flowers in memory of Annis.

It was his reparation and atonement, but without the mischief in the first place, that old stone might still be broken and ugly.

Related Observation:

Many of the more intelligent animals from crows and keas(Parrots) to chimpanzees are especially prone to mischief. Not surprising that people are too. I can’t imagine a crow making reparation, however.

The Tale of the Errant Train SLIDE 20- Tale of the Errant Train

And then there was the time that my life was threatened when I was hit by a train! I was about 14 years old and employed by Don and Hubert Lisenby, who owned the Shell gasoline station in Weldon, Illinois. On one hot summer day, Don asked me to take the whirligig mower to his bulk gasoline storage plant near the railway station about a block from downtown Weldon and mow the weeds near the plant and along the railroad track. The whirligig mower was gasoline motor powered and had a large, unprotected propeller like blade that did a great job cutting tall weeds, and I loved to use it. With the birds singing and the bees buzzing, I began pushing the noisy mower along the side of the railroad track. I moved away from the track and

stopped to watch an old train with an engine, a caboose, and six or eight box cars slowly leave the station, traveling west toward Clinton. After it passed,

I resumed my mowing along the track, going east back toward the station. Unbeknown to me, however, the old train stopped and began backing up, back toward the station. With me going east, oblivious to the train because of the noisy mower, and the train backing up east at a faster pace than me, it was inevitable that a collision would ensue. All I recall is that, all of a sudden, I was struck from behind and went tumbling down the inclined bank of the railroad track, accompanied by the mower with the blade still whirling. Luckily, or by the Grace of God, I missed the mower and the mower missed me. Great concern ensued from the train station operator and the conductor. Bruised, but basically unhurt, I was treated even more kindly than I deserved, and the great train incident was over.

Conclusion SLIDE 21- My Dad, Me, and the Farming Community

Someone once said that “our fears paint the heavens for us.”

That may be true to a degree, but so does our joys and mischievous experiences.

I can truthfully say that I didn’t panic when I met my first rattlesnake in Arizona, I love windmills, I gave my kids and grand kids a convincing argument that lightning is natural and beneficial, I love bonfires, I can swim a couple lengths of the pool, I realize that there is always

someone better than me with anything I try to do, I try, unlike lightning, to not make the same mistake twice, and I am looking for ways to make retribution for my sins.

The Farm Community! Some problems, some healthy fears, but also some great joys, and a great place in which to grow up!