Velma Lou Petty of Harleton

by

Linda Petty
For me, the most inspiring and resilient member of my family was my Aunt Velma, my Daddy’s older sister. In the summer of 1920 when Velma was just 14, she was doing the cooking. The other kids were working in the fields and she took care of the house. Their mother died the year before and everyone had had to pitch-in since. One day she got lunch ready a little early. When no one showed-up to eat when she thought they should have, she found a white sheet and climbed up on the roof. The wind caught the sheet and she almost lost her footing. From out in the fields they saw the sheet billowing in the breeze and thought there must be an emergency at the house. The boys unhitched the horses from the plows and rode them loping back to the house to find out what was wrong. Although her daddy seldom became angry with her, this was one occasion on which he was, and he lectured her about being so self-centered and thoughtless.

One of Velma’s teachers was so impressed when she discovered Velma had read all of the books in the small library at the Harleton School that she checked books out of the Marshall Public Library for her precocious student. Everyone at the school claimed she was the smartest student to ever go to Harleton Public Schools. As a middle aged woman, she told me how as a child she climbed to the highest point of the roof on summer nights to stargaze and dream about faraway lands that she read about. She wondered what her life would be and if she had a destiny. Her teachers all told Poppa Petty that she was so smart she must go to college.

She was very close to her daddy. When Velma was a child, she much preferred helping her daddy repair some piece of farm equipment than learning to make a cherry pie with her mother. Her mother died when she was only 13. Yet, she never mentioned that or much about her mother in all of the years that I knew her. Her older sister, Katie Lee married and moved about 30 miles away during the year before their mother died. Velma was then the oldest girl at home.

Back then in East Texas, when a mother and wife died, the oldest girl would have become mother to younger children and servant of the men and boys at home. Velma would have been a near slave for the next ten years had she had a different father. In most households, women did all of the mothering, housekeeping, cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and sewing with the assistance of none of the appliances ready-made clothes that we have today. They washed by boiling clothes in a huge iron pot over an open fire in the yard. She had to hang each piece of laundry on an outdoor line to dry once it was rinsed. When it was dry she folded or ironed it. Everything was made of cotton and everything had to be ironed. There were no electric irons until the late 1910s. They had several solid iron irons that they heated by setting them in the fire on the hearth. They ironed with the hot one while heating the other in the fire. She would cook three full meals a day. Field hands needed pork meat, eggs, grits or potatoes, biscuits and gravy for breakfast. The midday meal was the biggest most complete meal with meat, potatoes and several vegetables, bread and pie. Supper, eaten after the day’s work was done, was the same as dinner, just a little lighter.
While growing-up, their daddy had seen many widows responsible for little kids as well as for themselves. No man was happy to see sisters-in-law move into his household. Many widows were forced to live in homes where they were not welcome. If a woman’s family was unable or unwilling to take her in, she was forced to survive on the charity of her church and community until she could find another husband. Some widows were driven to prostitution to save their children from starvation in these times. Their daddy felt men could make their way in life if they were willing to work hard; however, he believed a woman needed an education to ensure her survival, and certainly, her dignity.

Velma finished a girls’ boarding high school in Marshall. Her daddy arranged for her to enter the local college and live with and be the assistant to Mrs. Homer Price. Reece was working in Marshall so he stopped by the Prices to see Velma every Saturday. He knew that her work for the Prices paid for her courses and her room and board, but didn’t provide her with spending money so he gave her several dollars a week.

Homer Price was the publisher of the Marshall News Messenger. My understanding was that Velma was with Mrs. Price almost constantly when she wasn’t in school at the College of Marshall. She felt she learned so much about being a gracious, compassionate, sophisticated, and educated human being from Mrs. Price. She thought so much of her that she named her daughter after her. The Prices had no children and they soon became her surrogate parents. The Prices opened the world to her. She came face-to-face with many of the national and state celebrities, who came to visit them because of his position as editor of a regional newspaper and because of their liberal political activities.

Aunt Velma told me many times about the day she came running breathlessly into the back door after school one day to discover someone having tea with Mrs. Price. When she was introduced she was surprised to meet Mrs. Carrie Catt, the leading American woman in the Suffrage Movement. Mrs. Price and Mrs. Catt had become close friends 20 years before when they were demonstrating for the vote for women. They achieved the vote in 1920, but that was just the beginning for Mrs. Catt as she became active in the international movement for women’s rights. Mrs. Catt visited Mrs. Price for several weeks, and she took a long walk every day through the quiet tree lined streets. Almost every day Mrs. Price asked Velma to accompany Mrs. Catt so she would not get lost. Mrs. Catt talked with Velma about women’s rights and about her dreams of a day when the world will be egalitarian and men and women would work side by side as equals.
Velma also spent many evenings listening to the humor of Will Rodgers as Mr. Rodgers was a friend of Mr. Price who visited regularly. Houdini and Charles Lindbergh stayed with the Prices as well while Velma lived there. Houdini thought she was cute when she was embarrassed so he was always pulling something out of her ear or nose. Marshall had an active magic club and Houdini encouraged it by his visits. He always stayed at the Prices when he came to town.

Several of the national figures whom Velma met at the Prices invited her to move up North to improve her prospects. Instead, Velma took a teaching job in the Karnack White Public Schools teaching the first three grades. She wanted to stay near her family and the Prices. There was also a fear that she didn’t want to face—she was afraid that she was just a country girl. She had never even been to Dallas. She loved the kids that she taught but had some trouble with a few of the mothers. A mother who had a child in her class got angry because of some minor issue with Velma. She came to school with her child and stood outside calling, “Missssss Petty, come on, Missss Teacher, Ah’m goon beat yore arse! Missssss Petty, Ah knowed yore too scared to face me!”

She circled the school yelling her challenges to Velma. Finally, Velma emerged running headlong at the mother who turned on her heel and ran home never to challenge her again. Her methods back then worked well as she had no more trouble from parents. She earned credibility with those backwoods, uneducated people by being willing to fight. They allowed her to teach without interference.

During the same period, Aunt Velma told me about a young man whom she was in love with who lived 20 miles away from Karnack. She told me when she was only in her 50s. They were in love, but he had no money and was still living at home. He didn’t have a car of his own. He had to borrow his father’s car. His father didn’t allow him to use it very often. The young man did not want to have to admit that he didn’t have a car. Sometimes he would wait until his father went to sleep and he would just steal the car. He pushed the car a couple of blocks away before cracking it. He had too much pride to tell her. Of course, Velma knew none of that. She only knew that sometimes he stood her up. Finally she had had enough and broke it off. She burned his letters and tried to forget him. She never forgot him, however. He told her 40 years later that he had had to steal his father’s car to keep their dates, but he was too embarrassed to tell her back then. They were both so sorry for what he threw away because of his pride—the stupidity of youth.