

## Hand-Me-Down Kid

By **Terril L. Shorb**

My childhood included a stretch of living at or below the poverty line. The oldest of six children and head chore-boy on our small, subsistence farm in northwestern Wyoming, I drove tractors rather than sedans right up to my junior year of High School. Not once in all those years did I get a whole can of soda to myself and rarely wore clothes off the rack. It was more like wearing them off the back of someone I knew. This role as “hand-me-down” kid first caused embarrassment, and then later in life, a curious kind of pride.

It is said experience is the best teacher. And I’ve got to say that living on the edge is a pretty effective teacher’s aide. My Mother was a magician of the “can-do” spirit. She was the Queen of re-use, and on our farm little was wasted and most things enjoyed interesting new lives. An Uncle once joked that his Levis, which had served well in his many roles as irrigator, hunter, and back-hoe operator, would finally get an education when I wore them to school.

I wore blue-jeans rolled into cuffs and shirts whose shoulders lines hit me mid-way to my elbows because I wasn’t lanky like my older relatives. One of the smart-mouths in English class asked loudly one day how come I kept shrinking. I rode the school bus home that night and announced to my Mother that I wasn’t going to wear anymore hand-me-down clothes. Fine, she said, adding with a grin, as long as I completed all my wood-chopping, hog-slopping, egg-gathering, water-lugging, and other chores each day, I was welcome to take on extra projects from neighbors for extra cash. Needless to say, there simply wasn’t an extra minute or ounce of energy left at the end of the day. I felt defeated and even ashamed to go to school, where I expected to be the butt of jokes.

One day I was visiting my maternal grandfather, who presented me with several pairs of Levis. They were in good shape, but because Grandpa was huskier, the pants

were roomy enough for me-and-a-half. I was about to rudely refuse when he handed me something else: a hand-tooled leather belt with a silver buckle—one of several he won earlier in his life as a champion bronc rider. “This oughta cinch up those britches,” he offered. Suffice it to say I practically paraded my hand-me-down pants and that belt around school and drew admiring glances and comments from a few boys and girls!

From that time on I had a whole different attitude about wearing clothes that had worked for someone else. I realized the shirts or pants or jackets came with stories from a hard-working life: “These pants were worn by a man who helped to dig the big canal from the Buffalo Bill Dam.” Or, “This flannel shirt was there the day my cousin got the eight-point elk up in Sunlight Basin.”

I was hopelessly hooked on clothes that had been out and about in the world. A tiny rip on the back side of one denim shirt from my step-father vividly brought to mind, every time I slipped it on, images of a rangy old Hereford cow who knocked him up against a corral post when he tried to separate her from her calf for vaccination purposes. My imagination was off its leash around those 'here-you-go' clothes because, unlike store-bought versions, they've been tested by life, just like the people who wore them.

Nowadays, I look for hand-me-down clothes in thrift stores because I've grown up and moved on from the people who used to pass their garb onto me. I still enjoy the sense that each time I purchase a new-old piece of clothing, I'm also walking out with a little bit of living history whose next chapter we will write together.

And there's another thing about hand-me-down or thrift-store-pre-owned clothes I appreciate. I was reminded of it the other day when I cruised the aisles of a favorite second-hand store for long sleeve shirts for the coming autumn. Two rows over, in the boy's section, a mother handed her ten-year-old son a twenty dollar bill and told him to find his shirts for the new school term. I watched as the boy prowled the racks, tried on and then selected a half dozen shirts. He paid for the whole fall wardrobe with the single bill. Outside, where he rejoined his Mother, he was fairly vibrating with excitement, eagerly showing her what he had found. They moved off to a saggy old Ford pickup, and the kid still wore a huge grin as they pulled away. I offered up a silent thank you to

all the families who had donated clothes, recalling how important it is in young lives to know people care enough to hand you down—or along—the very shirts off their backs.



**Terril L. Shorb** believes he was very fortunate to have grown up on a ranch in Southwestern Montana and later to have experienced life both in the urban sphere and on a subsistence farm in northwestern Wyoming. He has been a journalist and most recently a teacher at Prescott College where he founded the Sustainable Community Development program and continues to work with students toward a more sustainable *Homo sapiens*. His writing has appeared recently in *Green Teacher Magazine*, *Whole Life Times*, *Kudzu House*, and *Cargo Literary Magazine*.