

## **Inheritance**

by James Seawel

I come from a long line of po' folks. Understand, I am not a Yellow Dog Democrat running for office in 1980s rural Arkansas, so I am under no cultural obligation to parade my forbearers' poverty around like a prized mule. But the truth is that my parents, not just my grandparents, remember living in homes without running water or electricity. Ah, my southern roots.

Roy Clark, of *Hee Haw* fame, can still be heard on the airwaves of my old Ozarks stomping grounds. The country crooner's vivid lyrics about gut busting field work mostly fall on nostalgic ears these days, but for many of my parents' generation, the words carry them back to a real place and tougher times.

In John Grisham's *A Painted House*, it was the Spruills, not the Seawels, who ventured down from the Ozarks to the flatland as seasonal sharecroppers. My foothills kin who have read the novel report that the Jonesboro native nailed it.

My father well remembers riding the cotton sack that my Granny Vival tugged all over the hot, mosquito-infested Missouri boot heel and the humid, cottonmouth-riddled delta of eastern Arkansas. From his earliest years, his life goal—and one she encouraged—was never to pick cotton.

Southern, rural poverty was a fact of life when my grandparents were born in the rural Ozark foothills. The one quasi-exception in my lineage would be my paternal grandfather, whose family owned fertile river bottom land along the Eleven Point. Still, he knew hard work and being cash-strapped as well as his neighbors. My mother

dubbed her father's childhood as "a sort of genteel poverty." My other grandparents' hardships carried no such modifier.

All of my grandparents came from what is known locally, and with a fair amount of pride, as being from "the old families." They were southern enough to know good blood meant something, but too penniless to have anything to show for it. They relied on their character and reputation to speak for them. Southern pride in their day didn't mean waving the flag of a defeated army (a more recent Civil-Rights Era practice of bigoted resistance they found appalling) but of having self-respect even if they, as my granny once said, "didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of."

My ancestors made their way to what is now Northeast Arkansas long before the Civil War, which qualifies us as an "old family." One branch arrived before the Louisiana Purchase, many others shortly thereafter. Both sets of grandparents, Great Depression survivors of the rural south, lived close to the land. Although they hoped history would not repeat, they deep down knew they would land on their feet if the economy ever went "snake belly up" again. They longed for the solidarity of spirit their people embodied during the lean years, but they refused to romanticize the humbling era of widespread destitution.

"Good old days my foot," Granny V, who eschewed antiques as much as she did rooms without central heat and air, often declared when some forgetful old soul waxed nostalgic about the days of yore. She still cooked, dressed, and spoke like an old hill woman, but she did so in a modern, if basic, kitchen.

My familial and cultural backdrop forms the way I think. (Seriously, my Grandmother Shirley insisted we reduce, reuse, and recycle ages before it became trendy, and I still think of her when I save a dog a bone.) Over the recent Christmas break I made it home for a few days. LaToya, my 2008 Tacoma, apparently felt it time to act a fool. She's fourteen years old, which in car years qualifies her for Medicare. The old gal sports just shy of 300 thousand miles many of which were logged on washboard-rough dirt roads

and logging roads in the Ozark and Mark Twain National Forests. I should probably show some grace for the most faithful female companion I've ever known, but her need for a thousand bucks worth of repairs got me to fretting about finances, nonetheless.

Full disclosure: I can afford a new car, but à la Grandma Shirley I'm partial to my payments-free lifestyle even if my radio switches to AM static when I make a sharp left. In light of the mechanic's dire warning about the updates my four-wheeled friend required, I began to reminisce about my grandparents and their siblings. One of the many stars my mother will have earned in her heavenly crown is that she made sure my brother and I got to know all of our relatives. We spent time not only with immediate family, but with extended family on both sides of the tree. (Well, we avoided one old goat who had a proclivity for shit-stirring. Otherwise, we knew all of my great aunts and uncles who lived in or near or regularly visited Randolph County, Arkansas.)

There was no shortage of floral clad old ladies to fuss over us, kiss our cheeks, hug our necks, and bless our hearts and as just many old men in plaid flannel to play the obligatory "got your nose" trick on us, insist on firm handshakes, and inquire as to the wellbeing of our beagles.

By the time I came along, the dwindling Condict-Elkins clan, my Grandmother Vival's people, met frequently at her home or at my Uncle Raymond's. They told stories of the old days and cooked and consumed great quantities of simple, but delicious down home "vittles" prepared by my grandmother, Aunt Gladys, and Aunt Ruby. Fried Fourche River catfish, fried quail (back before cattle farmers' non-native fescue grass made the foothills fowl scarce), biscuits and gravy, loads of garden veggies cooked down with pork fat, and cobblers, cakes, and pies aplenty among many other delectable dishes may have been served on any given weather-permitting Sunday afternoon.

The old-timers had survived childhood poverty, world wars, the Great Depression, and stillborn babies. None of them had ever lived on Easy Street. Even when things grew better and the nation experienced boom times, my people didn't live high on the hog.

Instead, they passed their golden years in modest homes on fixed incomes. But for the life of me, I cannot remember a single time they didn't have just a big ol' time laughing and carrying on.

Long before country group Alabama memorialized the sentiment, my relatives (and scores of poor, working class southerners) regaled my age group with Depression-Era stories of survival.

Well, somebody told us Wall Street fell  
But we were so poor that we couldn't tell.

The aptly designated Greatest Generation in my family and community were wont to remind us, blessed (or *spoiled*, depending on perspective) young'uns, that when city folks, politicians, and newspapers started talking about The Depression, the dire straits they described didn't sound like news in the Arkansas backcountry—it simply sounded like life. But it was newsworthy that folks with regular wages and enough money to set aside had been affected enough by whatever was going on to notice.

When I was a child in the 80s and 90s, the ten Seawel siblings of my Grandpa's era were in their 80s and 90s and all but one of the surviving siblings lived in or around my hometown. All of them belonged to the same little country church and wouldn't have missed Sunday services for all the gold in California.

My Great Uncle Clifford's next-door neighbor, Miss Juanita Kerley, was a revered, retired "old maid schoolmarm." The designation is not PC today, but not even the Democrats in Maynard cared back then (and they were legion). No one would ever have disrespected Miss Kerley, leastways not to her face. Legend held she could reduce a "full-growed man" to a sniveling little boy with a single withering gaze.

Miss Kerley (reserved, astute, and a staunch Baptist) took to raising her windows ever so slightly when the Seawel siblings gathered under the shade of the maples next door.

After the last of that generation had gone to glory, she sent word to me of the pleasure she had derived from being entertained and serenaded by the singing, storytelling Seawels.

The message went something like this. “It was with such joy that I listened to those old Campbellites fellowship.” (She would not have used the pejorative term for members of the Church of Christ had she and I not been on a friendly sparring basis.) “They’d tell the funniest stories and when those played out, they’d sing familiar hymns long into the afternoon. They bantered back and forth as siblings will do, but I never heard a quarrel. It was evident how much they loved life, the Lord, and each other. They were truly rich.” Miss Kerley pegged them. What she didn’t have to report, because we all knew it, was that these old-timers were as poor as Job’s turkey and as broke as the Ten Commandments. Save whatever pensions a few of them collected as a result of having once been temporarily displaced hillbillies working factory jobs in Yankee cities, most of them had to scratch and claw their way through life on fish and game and produce from their own gardens. And, a few of them received a hand up from Uncle Sam by way of commodity beans and “gubmint” cheese.

An observant boy in love with my little hometown, I asked a lot of questions about why things were as they were. For instance, some weekends the café in downtown Maynard was emptier than a banker’s heart. On others, old jalopies and pickup trucks were stacked so thick you couldn’t swing a cat.

“Well, son, the old folks get their Social Security checks on the third of each month. They’re celebrating,” my dad explained. The pattern held throughout my child and teen years—every first weekend of the month.

All of my paternal great aunts and uncles by blood and marriage have gone on now. When they passed, there was nothing much to inherit except maybe a family bible, some sepia-toned family photos, the odd shotgun, or a leaky old jon boat hanging on for

dear life by the power of J-B Weld and prayer. Family goodwill was too precious and the memory of the deceased too sacred to quibble over who got what.

Nowadays, when worry comes and fear tries to take root, I think back to my elders. I raise the windows in my mind, and hear old folks laughing, singing their favorite hymns, and thanking the Lord for whatever food they had.

My Grandma Vival made me multiple quilts before she passed and left me her “chicken and dumplings” bowl (amber colored with a chip in it), and a plate featuring a songbird. The latter was a part of a set she’d won from hawking something like a half-a-million gallons of Avon’s Skin-So-Soft in her retirement to widow women, working women, and Weight Watchers from Warm Springs to Walnut Ridge.

Before my Grandpa Quimby passed on his 100th birthday, he bequeathed me some old fishing lures, a two-man saw, and a stack of old bible commentaries as full of silverfish as they were of King James English.

I cherish each item, not so much for what they are, but for whose they were. My primary inheritance, though, is not the former belongings of my grandparents, but the abundance of memories I will forever hold dear.

Memories of the meals my grandmothers cooked and the blessings my grandfathers offered over them. Memories of the daily devotion to blood they modeled, come hell or high water. Memories of their shared faith in a heavenly Father, who they hoped would someday reunite us When the Roll is Called Up Yonder in a land devoid of sickness, sadness, or pain.

Whether I spring for a new truck or run the wheels off this one, when I reflect upon my life, one thing is clear. I am already rich.



**James Seawel's** essays have been featured in *Arkana*, *The Bitter Southerner*, and *Tales from the South*. He was nominated by *Arkana* for Best of the Net in 2021, and his editorials frequently appear in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Currently he travels with the U.S. Military as a civilian counselor. James grew up in the Ozark foothills, absorbing the stories of his family and community.