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THE JASPERS

By

Lois Lane

In October, 1908, Mary Ann and John Jasper sold their farm near Carthage, Missouri and followed one of their older daughters, Sarah Bauman and her family west to the New Mexico Territory to homestead. Their three youngest girls and youngest son came with them. "Free" land sounded so good on paper. Mary Ann also wanted to get their son, Lee, away from the underground lead mines at Joplin, which were the major employers for the area. All the family but Lee came on a passenger train. He rode in an emigrant car with their household goods, farm equipment and livestock. The engine would disconnect and push him and this car onto a siding and up to a water tank to refill his livestock water supply as needed. They brought a team of mules, a couple of mares that were broke to the buggy or saddle, and some milk cows. They hoped to buy hogs and chickens locally.

They detrained at Buchanan, a bustling little town with two hotels, a general store, a garage, a stockyard, and a population of maybe fifty. They loaded their household goods in the wagon, harnessed and hooked up the mules, Lee and his sister, Rebecca, rode the horses and drove the cows behind the wagon. They would come back later for the farm equipment and other stuff. It was about fifteen miles to Sarah's house, an all-day trip with a loaded wagon. They camped, if possible, near water, wherever darkness caught them. It was October 8, and pretty nippy after sundown. No one ever told me what their reaction was to this wide country. There were no fences from there to the Capitan Mountains. No trees, they soon learned about cow chips and mesquite roots and forgot about shades and rivers or springs. Settlers were pouring in by the train load. The big ranchers were less than thrilled.

As soon as possible, they made the trip to Roswell, the county seat, where John, Mary Ann, Rebecca and Rose filed claims. Grama

Valley and their post office at Schroder were part of Chaves County at that time. They were each allowed to file on 320 acres. Later they were allowed an additional 320 filing. Lee and Grace were not yet twenty-one and could not file.

While in Roswell, they stocked up on everything they might need for the next six months, flour, sugar, corn meal, coffee beans, all in 100 pound sacks, as well as seed for planting a field and putting in a garden. Going to town was serious business and at least five days roundtrip. The first day they would try to reach a small rock house about a mile below the current Y formed by the Fort Sumner highway merging with U.S. 285 from Vaughn to Roswell. Weather, wagon breakdown, and teams who got loose and went home during the night were only a few of the things that could rearrange their schedule. Otherwise, they would spend the next night in the wagon yard in Roswell, take a day to do their trading and make the same two-day trip home. They took the opportunity to meet and visit with other

newcomers and exchange information. Roswell was the trade center from the Caprock on the east to the Hondo and the Capitans on the west, to the railroad on the north. I guess Carlsbad, (formerly known as 'Eddy'), was the focal point to the south. At times they would go to Portales to get livestock, feed, and other necessities. *They had to cross the Pecos River near*

Fort Sumner. It presented a hazard anytime of the year. In the spring it might be flooding, and the rest of the year it was a quagmire of quicksand that could swallow a team and wagon in a matter of hours. The first night's camp would be at a grove of cottonwoods southeast of now extinct Tolar. The next camp was in the wagon yard in Portales with the following day spent trading for a load of bundles or sacked grain. The next day got them back to the cottonwood grove and the final day, brave the Pecos and home.

Material for building a house came from a number of sources. Many lived in half-dugouts, an area dug out of the ground, maybe 10'X12' or bigger, depending on the energy of the digger, with a

pitched roof of lumber and a foot of dirt on top of it. It was warm and a place to live. Some actually built lumber steps going down to the door. Others dug steps into the ground which was from six to eight feet below the surface. It might be a cow hide or a piece of canvas hung over the opening or a real frame and door, usually scrounged from an abandoned building in the area. Cows falling through the roof were an occasional hazard. By 1910, many people were leaving the area, having found the life too hard and the ground unyielding to farming and not enough acreage to run livestock. Many left furniture, tools and other hard to move items with a neighbor, vaguely planning to pick them up sometime. They abandoned their houses, dugouts, whatever, which those remaining tore down or moved to their own homesite to use. They didn't have money to buy luxuries like window sashes with glass panes and door knobs and hardware.

The Jasper family bought a four room, two-story house from a departing family who was in a hurry to leave and hauled it by wagon to

Mary Ann and John's claim site. It was attached to the two room, single-story house they had built on arrival. Rose and Rebecca had one room claim shacks on their claims as did Lee, who filed when he turned twenty-one.

Most of these homesteaders were from Texas and the other southern states. They refused to adapt to any local culture items such as chili, jerky, adobe and burros, which could have made their lives easier. Why they didn't freeze in their home shacks, with cracks big enough to throw a dog through, is an unsolved mystery. Those shacks did have one advantage, they were easy to move. Jack'em up, pull a wagon under them and you were ready to roll. All the out buildings at the home I knew, plus the main house, had been homestead shacks. The bunk house, the chicken house, the saddle shed, the blacksmith shed, and the grain storage sheds had been the homestead shack of a family member or someone who started out and left.

John witched for water for his family and for the neighbors. He witched using a peach tree limb which he held out in front of him. The limb would twist and bend down on its own when he crossed a source of water. This did not always work as water was extremely hard to find. He bought an old well drill and he witched and Lee drilled. They were from an area where you drilled a well and you had water. They had not reckoned with this area where the water was in veins and you could drill within three feet of a vein and have a dry hole. On the twelve sections plus parcel of the land that became their holdings (5 homestead by John, Mary Ann, Lee, Rose and Rebecca, 2 homesteaded by Lee's future wife Myrtle and her sister, and 5 purchased from homesteaders who left and from the government. The government land was known as "Taylor Grazing"), there were sixty-four holes with three wells strong enough to merit windmills. The water was so gypsy, it had a horrible taste and was so hard it would not mix with soap, that it could not be used in the house. Only because there was nothing else, did the livestock drink it. When it rained, they would drink out of the

dirt tanks and water holes. The house had a corrugated metal roof and a gutter around the roof line. When it rained, the water ran off the roof, into the gutter which emptied into a gravel and charcoal filter. The filtered water was then gravity fed through a pipe into the cistern.

The cistern was built by hand digging a hole in the ground, 7 feet in diameter and 15 feet deep. Lee built a special cylindrical form that sat inside the hole. Concrete was poured between the form and the side of the hole to make the concrete walls. The floor was also poured out of concrete and then the whole thing was plastered to try and make it waterproof. At times, it was painted with paraffin which hopefully sealed the cracks. Rain came in a downpour and would fill the cisterns. In winter, we would fill washtubs with snow which was dumped into the cisterns until they were full.

We were always very conservative with water usage. My mother, Myrtle, washed dishes on the stove. Two dishpans were filled with 1 inch of water and then heated. One pan had soap for the wash, and

the other was for rinsing. When the dishes were done, the rinse water was saved to be used for washing the next time. The used soapy water was poured out on the plants. We bathed in one inch of water, which was also used to water the plants.

The house and out buildings had three different locations during their tenure as one well would play out and they would find enough water to merit a move somewhere else. They drilled for other people as well, having about the same luck in finding water and it being worth the cost. As soon as they got housing solved, Rose and Rebecca began teaching. Grace taught for a short period before marrying at nineteen. She was never part of the struggle to hold the place together. There were plenty of kids and the communities scraped up enough material to build a school house (around 1910 to the late 'teens). All labor was donated and by one means or another, they got the \$30.00 a month to pay a teacher, who lived with whoever had a spare room and could feed an extra mouth. Being a territory made getting a salary from the

government a little tricky. From Raton to Mesilla, from Blue Water to Gladiola, for the next thirty-eight years, Rebecca taught. Rose taught until 1927, when she was married. At each of their funerals, older people came from a distance, their reason being, "She was my teacher". They taught during the winter, went to school during the summer at Las Vegas Normal School, and sent money home to help Mary Ann and Lee hold on. Eventually they both earned degrees. Rose had a hip injury as a young girl which left her crippled. It would not heal. The only concession she made to it was she traveled by buggy rather than horseback. At the end of World War II, she was one of the first civilians eligible for treatment with penicillin. For the first time in over thirty years, she did not have to deal with an open wound.

Lee worked at anything he could find. Cutting posts, later building fence, cutting and hauling fire wood from near Corona, working with a team and fresno, (a piece of dirt-moving equipment), to help build the roadbed for the railroad between Lubbock and Clovis

School in 1940. It was a one room school about four miles down the draw which had been struggling to have enough students to operate. By the time Vonnie and Lois started school, so many people had left that Lois started first grade at age five and another little girl was started at age four to make up the minimum of eight students necessary to hold the school. When Vonnie finished eighth grade in 1940, Lee and Myrtle bought a little house in Fort Sumner. Vonnie started high school and I started sixth grade. Talk about culture shock! Neither of us had ever had another person in our grade since first grade, and now were in a class of 25 or 30. Vonnie did better than I did.

Lee stayed in Grama Valley. He took care of Mary Ann and the place. We came home on weekends. Vonnie had been driving since he was about eight and as soon as I could reach the clutch, brake, and gas, I learned. We had plenty of space to practice and the cattle soon learned not to count on us stopping just because they were in front of

us. By the time we started to Ft. Sumner, we were pretty good mud and snow drivers and anything else that came along. Mary Ann died September 14, 1941. We continued to make the trip, forty-five miles each way, from then until I graduated in 1946. Vonnie graduated in 1944 so I got to drive after that. World War II came and went with all the heart break and tragedy that go with war. Vonnie did not become a service man. I started to UNM in 1946, second culture shock. You can only have so many. Vonnie started NM A&M in 1947. Our parents and aunts were determined we would finish college and have easier lives than they had. I transferred to NM A&M in 1948 and graduated in 1950. Vonnie graduated in 1951. From that time on, we were never in Grama Valley except between jobs, to visit, for holidays and to help with branding and shipping. Rebecca died August 12, 1966 and Rose died October 3rd of the same year. The place was leased to others to run cattle as Lee, age 78, was unable to do the heavy work. In 1972, Lee and Myrtle moved to Roswell because Myrtle was in bad health physically and mentally. Myrtle died March 14, 1975. Lee continued to

live alone until 1978. He was ninety when he went into a rest home in Roswell. Vonnie was killed in a car wreck January 30, 1982 and Lee died December 1 of that same year at the age of 94. All the people mentioned here except me, are buried in the Fort Sumner Cemetery. The place in Grama Valley has become part of a large ranch again. Its scars- the blown away fields, the gullies that used to be roads, the holes of the half dugouts and cisterns are slowly healing. Vonnie will be remembered for his fiddle playing, Lee for his love of singing, Myrtle for her good cooking and religious convictions. I liken myself to a mesquite- lots of thorns and not much shade above ground, hard wood that makes a hot fire and long roots below ground. My roots will always be in Grama Valley, SW De Baca Co., NM.