

## **BUSY DAYS: DADDY'S WORKSHOP**

On rainy days when he couldn't be outside, my dad worked at his shop in the barn, making repairs and "piddling" as he called it. Because he had the hands of a craftsman and was mechanically inclined, he could make or fix almost anything. If he didn't have a part, or the material he needed, he would improvise out of something he had on hand. He was an inveterate "saver" and never threw anything away if he thought it would come in handy later.

His cluttered workshop was a treasure trove of old tools, and the walls and shelves were lined with jars and cans, filled with an assortment of screws, nuts, bolts, nails, and gadgets of all kinds. Daddy had a large assortment of small hand tools he had collected over the years. Some were probably fifty years old or more. He always bought the best quality he could afford because he said that in the long run it was the cheapest way to go. And he took care of them and had a place for each tool in a drawer or hanging on a peg-board on the wall so he could put his hands on whatever tool he needed to use. He said it was a lot less expensive and less wasteful to take care of things, so he took time to care for and store his tools properly. He kept an assortment of rags, oil, a sharpening stone, and a file handy to sharpen his hoe or shovel before going out in the garden in the brisk air of early spring.

Daddy often reminded us kids about the safety of putting tools away properly, such as not leaving a rake or hoe with the tines or blade turned up for someone to step on. At the end of the gardening season, he usually made a careful check of handles on his hoes, rakes, and axe to be sure they were still firm. If in doubt, he replaced the handle. He kept all of his tools, oiled, clean and sharp, and told us that they would last two or three generations if they were properly cared for. Before winter set in, it was always our job to rub all the wooden handles of his tools with linseed oil to make them last longer and prevent them from becoming brittle.

I doubt that he ever considered himself a craftsman, but he was. He wasn't afraid to roll up his sleeves and take a crack at whatever needed fixing. I would say he had an above average ability at solving problems and keeping repairs made around our house and for his parents, who lived across the highway from us. Not only did he want to save money, he felt he would take more care and probably use better materials than if he hired something done. He had several step-by-step "how to" manuals illustrating home fix-it repairs.

Daddy built a lot of things after he retired from the railroad – trailers and wagons to haul things behind the lawnmower, birdhouses, and storage boxes for his skill saw, air-compressor, and drill motor. He built two rose trellises – one near the back porch and another near the side entrance to the carport. No ordinary trellises, but ones with a flair that had triangle designs in the middle. He had an artistic eye and liked to create pretty things. He painted the trellises white and then planted beautiful red climbing roses, which family members and visitors enjoyed for years. In the springtime, these climbing

roses created a beautiful backdrop for photos. He especially loved roses and dug rose beds and planted a variety of several rose bushes around the house that produced red, yellow, pink or white blooms.

One winter, his fishing buddy Johnny Fisher gave him a little round, pot-bellied wood heater to heat his shop. He liked it a lot because he could go down to the barn and fool around instead of staying in the house on cold and rainy days. Puttering around in his shop was an absorbing hobby for him as he repaired something that was broken. I still have the ice-cream dipper that he fixed for me. When the plastic handle cracked shortly after I bought it, he told me to give it to him and he would put a new handle in it. Every time I use it now with its sturdy wooden handle that he had saved from something else, I think about his craftsmanship. It is sturdier now than when I bought it, and will probably last another generation or two. Once I took him a stainless steel pot with a cracked and loose handle to fix. Using boat glue, he returned it to mint condition and I am still using it today.

He was also pretty adept at fixing small motors, especially on his lawn mower and tiller. After repairing some lawn mowers or tillers for neighbors, he soon gained a reputation as a repairman. When his neighbor Newman Darby suggested that he should go into the repair business, he painted a large white sign and put out in the corner of the yard by the highway that proclaimed, "*G. O. Cox - Lawn Mower and Tiller Repairs.*" Soon he had more business than he really wanted. But it was challenging and he got a lot of satisfaction out of making things run again. He bought several different manuals for various motors and spent hours reading and studying how to make repairs on various types. When he stepped back from his finished job, he enjoyed a great sense of accomplishment from his handiwork.

In 1968 Daddy hired Dell Tipton to build a boat port to house his two boats – a camouflage-painted fishing boat and a red and white ski rig boat. The port was built using pipe for standards. It had a heavy aluminum roof, with rafters and shelves overhead where he stored his decoys and other fishing gear. At that time the labor cost was \$731.91. It had a good cement floor. When the port was finished, he dug a water line and installed a three-foot long sink with a faucet and a shelf on either side. It was perfect for washing up when he and mother came in from the garden or for cleaning fish.

To me, he was an inventor, too. He built an excellent fish fryer, using four legs salvaged from an old-time washing machine, fitted with a deep black iron pot, heated with a butane torch before these became popular and were sold in stores. He used a meat thermometer to get his grease to just the right temperature and cooked fish to perfection – so good it would melt in your mouth. He became famous among our relatives for his tartar sauce recipe, which called for capers and was a perfect accompaniment for fried fish. While he was cooking the fish, mother was cooking the French fries at the house, and we were all helping to make the salad, and setting the table indoors. Sometimes when the weather permitted and it was cool enough, we all sat around in lawn chairs down at the boat port. His fish fries became legend in our family! Dad always kept the deep freeze full of fish to have on hand when his sister, Eula Mae, visited from Kansas.

Eula Mae never wanted anything but fish – no fries or salad – just fish and a glass of iced tea because she and Bob could not get good seafood at Leoti.

In the summertime after working in his shop, he and mother liked to sit in their lawn chairs in the shade of the boat port, and watch the martins that flocked around several birdhouses that he built for them to nest in. He mounted three different houses on tall poles down near the barn close to the pecan trees. He and mother especially enjoyed watching the birds try to teach their young to fly. Sitting there he could see a number of things that were his creations – the barn with its compost pile beside the gate, his worm bed where he grew red wigglers for fishing, the basketball goal he put up one summer for Bub and Doug, a birdbath he created from a natural rock that was scooped out in the middle and held water, the pecan trees he and mother planted years before, the sturdy silver-painted clothes line poles made of pipe that he had welded, and the old abandoned chicken house down near the back fence.

One of the most useful things he ever built were the cement sidewalks—a long one from the house to the barn, and another that went from the house to the well house, where he eventually built a shower stall used by everyone in the family in the summertime. Douglas helped him build the shower in the well house, as well as some cabinets and shelves for storage and for bath towels.

Daddy built the well house when they had a deep well dug and had to install a water pump. He built the house large enough—about 10 by 12 feet—so they could install a new washer and dryer for mother, and later on, a large chest-type freezer to accommodate the fruits and vegetables from their garden.

In 1971 he built what he called a carport with three stalls – two for his vehicles and one for his small recreational trailer house that he and mother used when they went on weekend or even weeklong hunting or fishing camping trips. The open-front brick garage carport with a cement floor was pretty fancy, with a large walk-in storeroom in the back portion. Its walls were lined with shelves where mother stored a variety of items collected through the years, as well as winter blankets, clothing, and other household articles. Dell Tipton, Scooter Tipton and Mr. Bunn were hired to build the garage carport and Conrad and Douglas helped build the long cement driveway and then pavement out to the highway. Later he built a sidewalk to the side entrance and put up latticework and a rose trellis.

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## HUNTING AND FISHING

My father was rarely indoors when he could be out. From the earliest time I can remember, he was an avid outdoorsman and especially loved to hunt—deer, ducks, squirrels, dove, and quail—but he liked to fish equally as much, for bass and crappie in East Texas lakes or deep sea fishing down on the coast.

He always kept up with the hunting and fishing seasons in the newspapers and knew who was having the best luck on which lake and what “bait or plugs” the fish were being caught with. From my earliest remembrance he always subscribed to the *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream* magazines. He loved to read about big game hunts, the latest in gun legislation, hunting and fishing techniques, conservation movements, and just good old hunting and fishing stories. Often he would tell us about some character in one of these stories if it was extra exciting and had good hunting tips. For several years before his retirement, he planned a trip to Alaska, and subscribed to the *Alaska* magazine. Alaska was a big dream that was never fulfilled, but he spent hours dreaming about it.

When I was about four or five, we lived in Aransas Pass on the Gulf Coast for several years where Daddy was drilling shallow gas wells in South Texas. For some period of time, two years or so, my dad ran a duck club—something he had always wanted to do. When he made up his mind to start the club and had it all planned out, he had business cards and advertising posters printed which he put up in conspicuous places. Next he placed an ad in *The Houston Post* to advertise his new business. As a result, he got all the clients he could handle from duck hunters in every corner of the state. After advertising his services, he acted as a guide and rented blinds, decoys and boats, putting hunters in just the right places to have a good duck hunt. Fees from the duck hunters supplemented the family income in between the times he was drilling oil wells. He worked evening shifts so he could take shooters, mostly oil and businessmen from the Corpus Christi, Houston, and Dallas areas. For so much a day, he would haul them across the channel into one of the back bays where he had built from eight to ten duck blinds, nestled back in a marshy area with saw grass standing three or four feet high.

Summer and fall were special times when many leisure hours were spent working on his boats and duck blinds. Great loads of reeds, grass stalks and other material were needed to construct the blinds for camouflage. The work was hot and tedious, but his love of duck hunting made it all worthwhile. Besides, he always had an abundance of energy and enthusiasm for whatever he undertook to do.

Using a wooden duck caller, my dad learned to produce a sound like the call of a hungry mallard or greenhead duck. He enjoyed practicing and showing off his skill for calling in ducks. He had other types of callers too. With a lot of practice, he could call up rabbits, squirrels or crows. We kids sat around his feet many times, waiting to take our turn on his caller to see if we could produce the same sound a duck makes.

It seemed to my two brothers and me that daddy knew everything about duck hunting as he explained the basics to us. He told us why ducks would land coming in to the wind, that too much calling was worse than none, that you should sight and swing your aim through the birds to establish a lead, to always leave room in between decoys so the ducks could alight, and most of all, to always treat a gun as though it was loaded. “And always,” he emphasized, “make sure you know exactly what you are shooting at.” And more. He was never at a loss for words and he had theories on many subjects, particularly, a lifetime of recollections and an unofficial study on the ways, whys, and wherefores of wildlife and the great outdoors in general.

On some days he might explain the intricacies of catching bass or crappie. Sometimes we just walked along the Trinity, Angelina, or Neches riverbanks in the woods and he would point out signs of turtles, snakes, or squirrels. On other occasions he would relate some of his boyhood adventures in Kentucky and later in Coryell County, Texas, where the family lived several years when he was about nine to twelve years old. These stories were our favorites because we could use our imagination to identify with them.

Hunting, fishing and outdoor sports with only nature’s creatures for an audience provided many pleasurable hours for him over his lifetime and he loved telling about them. Love of the outdoors played an important part of his life.

Later on he put in untold hours hauling brush and posts to erect a duck blind for himself at his favorite spot on Lake Stryker, about ten miles from his home. Then he spent hours sitting alone, shivering in the cold duck blind waiting for the ducks to begin flying over. But he also enjoyed watching the sunrise and the clouds drifting overhead and listening to the rustle of the reeds and grass in the early morning breeze, or the fluttering wings of a fast-flying mallard or teal. It was just relaxing to him, hearing the water lapping against the sides of the boat—a great place to think and make plans for the day or week ahead.

He was one of the most ethical sportsmen I know, and would pass up shots at ducks or other game if he thought they were out of range, because he didn’t want to risk crippling them. Even if it meant going home empty-handed, he was happy just the same. He had several favorite hunting and fishing buddies throughout the years, but he was just as happy if he had to go by himself. In fact, I got up about four o’clock one morning and went with him to Stryker and nearly froze to death while we were waiting for the ducks to come in, all the while being unable to say a word. What a hobby! What dedication!

*(Add to this story some of the oral history hunting and fishing tales daddy told about).*

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## GARDENING

In the early years my mother always put in the garden every year because my dad was away from home working on the railroad, until he built up enough seniority to hold a job close enough to drive back and forth from Palestine. Mother always had our neighbor, Glenn Tennison, to plow up the ground and lay out the rows and then we kids helped her get the ground ready for planting. She did the majority of work most of the time until we grew older. Mother always laughed and told of the time when Doug was less than three years old and he was “helping” plant the garden. Upon inspection, she found he had planted the onions upside down.

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Until he retired, my dad never had much opportunity to garden in the four-acre growing space on either side of our house. But at the first warm hint of spring, he got an itch to start digging in the dirt. Growing vegetables became a hobby, just for fun. He didn't try to garden for profit, although one year his cantaloupe crop was so bountiful that he sold several bushels.

He usually grew enough vegetables to keep them supplied throughout the season, producing enough for eating, canning and freezing. One year he grew peas and corn on one side of the house and had a regular vegetable garden on the other side. He became so serious about gardening that he bought a large tractor as well as a garden tiller. Soon he was growing corn, peas, beans, squash, tomatoes, onions, cabbage, and bell pepper, as well as cantaloupes and watermelons. He also took a lot of pride in the strawberry patch that he cultivated and planted out between the barn and the house. There he grew large, juicy, red strawberries that kept everyone in the family well supplied.

Like all garden chores, weeding was the one that took the most time, and he got up early to work while it was still cool, before the sun got too high and too hot. Another problem he had with his garden was in trying to keep out the rabbits and other pests. Without a fence, it was an open invitation to small animals. He laughed and said he always tried to grow enough so that the rabbits and birds could eat what they wanted and still have enough left over for the family.

And he spent many happy hours running his tractor and keeping his place mowed.

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## OUR NEW HOME

*(There is an oral history about moving to New Summerfield. Find it to add to this section. He and granddaddy built the house, tearing down the one in Kilgore that Granddaddy owned, and moving it to Summerfield and rebuilt it – three rooms. Great nail keg story here.)*

In the spring of 1941 when Gilbert Cox decided it was time to put down firm roots for his growing family, he returned to the part of East Texas most familiar to him – not far from where he had worked in the 1930's during the great East Texas oil boom. In finding a place to build a home, one of his top priorities was settling in an area with good schools for his children. Summerfield had acquired a reputation for having an excellent rural school system under the superintendence of H. C. Schochler.

In 1941, my dad had saved enough money for a down payment on a five-acre tract he found at New Summerfield where he planned to build a house and put down roots. Gladys Darby Underwood sold him five acres of land two miles north on the Troup highway in the vicinity of a crossroads known long ago as the Pleasant Plains area. He made the purchase with a cash down payment of \$100, giving her four notes of \$100 each to be paid annually in four succeeding years.

It was February 1941, when my dad and his father Jasper Newton Cox roomed and boarded with the Summerfield postmaster and his wife, Roscoe and Hollis Edwards, while working on the weekends to build a small frame home. Douglas Tipton, a carpenter, also helped out with his labor at \$2.00 per day, the standard wage in that day. At the time, Daddy said he was only making \$8.00 a day. They put up the little house in a little over a week. While they were finishing it, we stayed over at Granddaddy's and Grandmother's for a week or so at Mexia. We had come up to East Texas from Corpus Christi where Daddy had previously been working as a driller for the Magnolia Oil Company in South Texas.

It was spring and the blue bonnets were in full bloom when we moved to Summerfield from Corpus where we lived on Leopard Street. "Beer Barrel Polka" and "San Antonio Rose" played over and over on the car radio as we made the five-hour drive. (Later Summerfield was renamed as "New Summerfield" due to the existence of a town previously given that name by the postal service). That first spring they had a plot of ground plowed up on the south side of the house and immediately planted potatoes.

Gilbert Cox, his wife and family were happy to settle in their first new home and especially loved the many wonderful new neighbors who were so helpful to them. Living across the highway were Mack and Jewel Tension, and their two daughters, Curley and Joann, and nearby were their neighbors, Newman and Eva Mae Darby, Tom and Ruth Tension, Boyd and Ima Tension, "Miss Effie" and "Miss Fannie" Gill, and the families of Floyd and Mary Richardson, Jimmy Thames, Frank Tension, Grady Underwood, and Marvin and Bertha Wallace.

*(Much more to be added here from oral history tapes, letters and notes that I made through the years).*

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Two of my dad's oft-quoted sayings were: "If it's worth having, it's worth working for" and "do a just day's work for a just day's pay." When he woke us up in the mornings at an early hour, he would say, "Roll out, roll out, it's a cold, cruel world"...meaning that we should get up and at our chores, or else getting ready to catch the school bus which came at an early hour. Another thing I often heard him say, "It's a great life if you don't weaken." I thought about that one a lot – I suppose if you weakened, you got trampled! Those are some of his sayings that I won't ever forget.

Many families this day and time never know the joy of doing without and enjoying the simple things of life. It's true that we worked hard and didn't have a whole lot, but so did everyone else around us. Nevertheless, our family enjoyed a closeness and love for each other that can't be measured. To this day all of us consider ours to have been a close knit family, and we visit as frequently as our jobs and family activities will allow us to do. Reggie, Doug and I usually talk to each other every weekend.

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### **RAILROAD RETIREMENT NOTICE**

G. O. Cox, Sr., engineer in the Transportation Department for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, retires October 31, 1974, after thirty-two years on the main line and locals.

He went to work as a fireman when the trains were run with steam for the old International Great Northern Railroad in Palestine, Texas, March 22, 1942. In 1950 he was promoted to the right side of the engine.

Formerly, Cox was an oil well driller for the major oil companies in Mexia, Wink in West Texas, and Pampa in the Panhandle. He worked on the first wells drilled on the Gulf Coast at Aransas Pass. He also worked on some of the first wells drilled in the great East Texas oil field in 1931.

Brother Cox belonged to the B.L.F. and E (later the UTU) and B.L.E. Brotherhoods for the past thirty-two years.

Cox is an avid fisherman and hunter and hopes to do lots more in the future.

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## CHARACTERISTICS

My dad was energetic and always enthusiastic about things. He also believed in work and when he wasn't off working for the railroad as an engineer, he saw to it that we always had plenty of chores to do until he returned home again. If he didn't leave something for us to do, mother would find something. There was never any time for us to get in trouble.

My dad was good to his parents and they visited back and forth everyday because they lived just across the highway from our house. Every afternoon as a signal that she was waked up from her nap, his mother opened her front door so that Dad would know it was time to come drink coffee, discuss the current events, and tell of the day's happenings.

Daddy was energetic and always full of enthusiasm about his hobbies and at any job he tackled. He could be quite jovial and loved a good joke. He also enjoyed telling jokes and laughed more than anyone at his own stories. There were times when he had a hot, fierce temper, but he never held a grudge toward anyone that I knew of. He could be very stern, but on the other hand, he had a very compassionate heart. He believed in always trying to improve your mind through reading good literature.

He liked to sing, a trait he inherited from his father and mother, and he always taught us the songs his father taught him, such as "The Shores of Ponchartrain," a large lake in Louisiana not far from where they once lived. At one point in his early railroad career, Gilbert Cox composed and wrote the lyrics for a railroad song, which he titled, "The MOP's No.69." He said No. 69 was their fast, crack train with one of the railroad's newest and best engines, operating on a track from Little Rock, Arkansas down through the Ozarks, all the way to San Antonio. He said that sometimes in those days of long ago he would get a long freight train for his run and once in a while he would catch Engine No. 69. He told how good it felt when he had a good steam engine and when he, the engineer, got all the cars strung out behind. He went on to tell his grandchildren about how the train talks to the tracks and just sings a song and how the tracks talk back to the train. He told about the old steam engines and how the crew learned to depend on each other. With all his grandchildren gathered around him with rapt attention, he once burst out and sang the song he had composed to them:

### *"The M.O.P.'S No. 69"*

When you see a freight train,  
Ballin' the jack down the line.  
And you hear the whistle blowing,  
You can bet you know where she's going,  
She's the M.O.P.'s No. 69,  
Heading for San Antonio,  
Looking for sunny skies.

She was snaking through the Ozarks  
Tipping over tip-top,  
And Little Rock will be her next stop.  
Headed for San Antonio,  
Looking for sunny skies.

The kids all laughed and clapped. We all thought he was so smart. He had an amazing recall and memory, another trait he inherited from both parents, but especially from his father, who told the old stories so compellingly that everyone listened with such rapt attention that you could hear a pin drop.

He never met a stranger, always had a firm handshake, and like his father, his word was his bond.

*(Write from oral history notes about the closeness between him and his father – because they had always worked together, and hunted and fished together.)*

Gilbert Cox lived in the home he helped build with his own hands for a period of forty-three years until his death on August 19, 1984. He is buried at McDonald Cemetery at New Summerfield, in the family plot near the graves of his wife's parents. His father, Jasper Newton Cox died September 21, 1974 and is buried in Rose Hill Cemetery at Tyler. After my grandfather's death in 1974, my grandmother, Eva Cox, at age eighty-five, continued to live across the highway in her own home until her son's death in 1984, at which time she moved to Tyler to live with her youngest daughter, Darrell Appl.

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