

MORE ABOUT BEING NINETY

From Bill Duren to My Friends at the Cardiac Rehab Center

And now ninety-one. Last year I wrote a piece, called What it's like to be ninety, as an expression of my thanks for the party you arranged for that special birthday. A number of you raised questions about my story, including: "How does one get to be ninety?" And: "Why did you leave out the information age revolution?" Those are serious questions; and I have a few serious ones of my own that I want to take up. So now, a year and a half later, I would like to come back to those questions, and add a few more recollections of my Pre-Cambrian boyhood, places, and times that have disappeared. I promise not to make a habit of it.

I am well aware of the danger of sequels. They never are as good as the original. I have no stories to top my account of mankind's first attempt to put a cat on the moon. But there is no end to stories of that Old South that was overrun and pushed aside by the modern age. And there is no end to the stories of childhood, displaced by adulthood, that universal affliction of the human condition. But let me begin by getting your first question out of the way.

How does one get to be ninety? The only real answers are: One day at a time; and it helps to choose your parents carefully. If I have my mother's genes I am already dead. But if I have my father's I still have a ways to go.

Seriously though, I will recount my story, though its precepts are standard stuff. I am not one of those disgusting people who have never had a day of sickness. I have had my share, but no heart attack. I inherited a strong immune system; so I don't contract infections readily, and when I do they don't last long. The only surgery I have had was on my teeth. The only prescriptions I take are one aspirin a day, and replacement hormone for thyroid deficiency. I am in this program for prevention, not rehab.

Back in 1929 Mary, my wife to be, was in graduate biology at the University of Chicago. She expected to teach in a women's college, where part of her duties would be to conduct a course in nutrition for prospective wives and mothers. So she took the medical school course in nutrition. They did not know then about the good and bad cholesterols, but they knew that the body needs cholesterol and produces it out of fat in the diet. Hence the practical advice on avoiding excessive blood cholesterol was to reduce the total fat intake in food. That rule still holds good today.

Mary did not become a college biology teacher, but I and our kids have had the benefit of that training. She updated that training by reading the column of Dr. Jean Mayer, the nutritionist of Tufts University. We both ignore, or take with a very large grain of salt, common newspaper articles on health and food. We do read the conservative medical articles in the Consumers Union Reports; and for years the Harvard Medical School Health Letter.

For all these years Mary has cut the salt and fat in recipes to half. We don't make a fetish of it, but cured meats (bacon, ham, Wiener and Bologna sausage) are virtually out of our diet. There is no place for salty-greasy French fries, chips, or such snack food. We drink 1%

milk and use whole milk for "cream". Ice cream has been replaced by frozen yogurt or sherbet. Many cheeses now taste too salty, so it is easy to leave them out, along with pizza. We do not take vitamin pills or anything else from that counter of health nostrums. We eat unusually large quantities of vegetables, simply cooked without fat pork. Unhappily, I find enough of what is left to eat too much.

We never got the tobacco habit. My younger brother and sister did. They are long gone now. I understand that, around 1945, Dr. Everts Graham of Saint Louis first advanced the idea that cigarettes cause cancer. I was at Tulane University in New Orleans, in whose medical school Dr. Alton Ochsner, following Dr. Graham, was one of the early passionate opponents of it. One of Ochsner's students at Tulane was Dr. Luther Terry, who later, as U.S. surgeon general, first posted the famous warning on cigarette packs. And I remember a seminal article in Science around 1950. In it Dr. Raymond Pearl and associates published a mortality table, based on recorded life histories, that compared the life expectancy of smokers with non-smokers. Without identifying the factors of cancer, emphysema, and heart disease, it proved conclusively that, on average, heavy smokers' lives are more than 10 years shorter. It is inconceivable that 50 years since then we still permit the nicotine addiction of teenagers. Only now in 1997 does it appear that public sentiment will support action to curb this. And guns for teenagers, too! Its amazing.

As for alcohol, prohibition was a major part of my father's and mother's religion. Also I was in training for football and track at Tulane. Neither Mary nor I ever touched it until after the repeal of Prohibition, Dec. 5, 1933, when we were 28. We both liked the romantic idea of wine and experimented as much as we could on my \$2400/year salary. I still consider wine dangerous, and meter it out to make sure it is in calculated moderation. At that level it has apparently turned out, by research starting with that Raymond Pearl article, to give some protection against heart attacks and strokes. If true, that was sheer luck for us.

When my competitive athletic days were over I experimented with various forms of outdoor exercise. I played tennis for a while. The most fun was fishing with pals along the Gulf coast. But the most compatible with being a father turned out to be gardening, hiking, and wildlife photography, which could be combined with kid photography. I firmly believe that exercise is as essential for the health of ones brain as it is for ones heart. The benefits I perceive from our aerobic exercises here at Cardiac Prevention and Rehab are more mental than physical.

But I think that exercising the mind itself is also important. I do not read for entertainment so much as for information, for listening to minds of the past, and for continuing my education throughout life. - - I stretch that to include the sports page! -- This is not a plan; it just happens to be what I like. I still do mathematics, though I have not published any research in years. What my mathematical colleagues around the country want from me is history and professional experience. So I publish some things of that kind. Also, when possible, I attend graduate seminars in my field in the UVa math department. I especially like to listen to young graduate students reporting on their work; and they seem to be flattered to have a grandfather take interest in what they are doing. In spite of these efforts I find myself slower on the uptake, weaker in memory, and more limited in what I can understand than

I used to be. But my old mind is better than it used to be in perceiving the general structure, in seeing the way things fit together, and guessing what might be provable.

That is all I can tell you since I can't tell you how to lose forty pounds. And I don't know how much, if any, of it was relevant to my getting to ninety one in fair shape.

The information revolution. In my earlier piece I wrote about technological innovations that have rushed upon us during my lifetime to change our way of life. I did not include an account of the modern communication era because it has been very slow developing; and, even now, it appears to be so incomplete that its real flowering belongs to you younger people, not to me. Or maybe to your grandchildren; for these questions are verging on the deepest mystery of all: human consciousness and its relation to the real world.

To show what I mean let me review a little history. Major components of the information technology, in approximate order of development are: the computer (which is really a language machine), the telegraph, the telephone, radio, television, communication satellites, the microchip, interlinked desktop computers, and now the Internet. The most spectacular of these innovations have appeared during the memory of you younger people. But they were well under way long before my time, and came on extremely slowly compared to the automobile and airplane. In fact the biggest single advance in the information age that I know about was the invention of printing with movable type in 1440. The book still beats all the electronic miracles for storing and communicating information. That may change but hasn't yet.

And computers are not really all that new either. The Chinese abacus was a real finger-driven computer, and it goes way back. The first successful European calculating machines to do arithmetic date back to 1623. And they soon broke out of arithmetic, to do general logical tasks, as the modern ones do. Leibniz in Germany designed such a machine in 1666. One component of all these old machines had to the mind of the human operator, telling it what to do.

Software to replace the human operator's direction was invented in France in 1805 by J.M.Jacquard for his famous loom that could weave automatically any fabric pattern prescribed by the inserted punched-tape instructions. The same sort of software was used in the old player pianos. The first computerable to perform an unlimited variety of tasks specified by that same punched-card software was invented by the Cambridge University mathematician, Charles Babbage, in 1835. His "Analytical Engine" was not built at that time because the government canceled his grant, but it survives on paper. A recently built model of it actually works. The binary digit (bit) language of modern computers was created by the logician, George Boole, and published in 1854. We call it Boolean Algebra. The ideas now used for coding information to make computerized banking secure are due originally to a very young French mathematician, E.E.Galois (1811-1832). [Most of these dates came from the book: H.H.Goldstine, The Computer from Pascal to von Neumann, Princeton, 1972.]

The hardware to implement these ideas lagged behind. Not until high speed electronic and magnetic components, for data processing and memory, were available in World War II was it possible to build computers powerful enough to be practical. Although these modern

machines were far more complex and powerful than the old ones mentioned above, I think it is fair to say that their basic ideas were at least a hundred years old.

A similar chain of events occurred in the audio-visual and communications side of the revolution. For example, what the telegraph had to be was spelled out in terms of the theory of magnetism by the mathematician, K.F.Gauss, a generation before the first practical telegraph instrument was made in 1845. And in 1864 the possibility of radio and television was pointed out by the theoretical physicist, James Clerk Maxwell, predicted by his theory of electromagnetic radiation, years before Marconi introduced the first commercial radio in 1895. Alexander Graham Bell patented the first telephone in 1876.

By the time I was a child the telephone had become commonplace for local calls. It hung on the wall. Lifting the weight of the separate receiver "off the hook" turned it on. But to talk you also had to turn the crank. Then Central would come on. Central was a real person so, after some good mornings, you would say: "I want to speak to Doctor Lipscomb." And Central would say: "He has gone out to see Mrs. Stevens, but I will tell him you called when he gets back." No telephone numbers were involved. Long distance calls and telegrams were rare because they were expensive, and people could think of few real uses for them. A telegram meant that a relative was dead. A collect long distance call meant that a relative was out of money.

Wrong numbers were not invented until Central was replaced by Operator, who didn't know anybody and insisted on having the number. But the wrong-number revolution did not really take off until push-button phones were introduced. I don't know what happened to Central. Maybe she died, or had a baby, or something.

Now the two arms of the information revolution, the computer and audiovisual technologies, appear to be merging; with the computer at the center. In fact the Internet is their merger. But we are still lagging behind in knowing what to do with all this new information that is becoming available. We mentally lazy humans are good at resisting new information. What do we want with any more? Only small parts of this use problem have been solved, although linking desktop computers to manage information has transformed the way business sends information; and has laid off a lot of typists, file clerks, and even vice presidents.

The experience of first radio and then television was that, although each was hailed as a great boon to education, in reality they replaced the active educational processes of reading, talking, and writing by passive reception of trashy gabble. The truth was that they were not introduced to enhance education. They were introduced to make money, and they made a lot of it. They also made major changes in modern life that were unpredictable at the outset. I think the same thing is happening with the Internet.

The Internet is in effect a stupendous library, millions of times bigger than any existing book library, able to store sights and sounds as well as words. It will be usable from anywhere in the world without having to "go to the library". At present it is being loaded helter skelter with any junk that the human mind can conceive, organized only by web sites. Many years will pass before the structure of this software is developed enough to realize the potential of such a superlibrary. Specialists, who know what they are doing, are already using it to advantage. But we ordinary Americans never did spend much time in

libraries; and we are not going to spend much time in this one either after the novelty wears off. All the same, nobody knows what it will do to us.

Adults. That is all too serious! Have I ever told you about my first scientific experiment at about age eight? It involved adults, of course. When I was three I had learned that you cannot believe what adults say. But this was my first systematic effort to prove it. I was growing up in a time when science was changing the lives of everybody. Everybody, that is, except adults. Adults never change.

One day I overheard my parents talking about something they called adultery. It obviously had something to do with adults, probably in the church, but when I asked Mother what it was she gave me the usual adult run-around. Adults are good at that. So when my father was out of his study I looked it up in his dictionary. That gave me another adult run-around. In the end I had to figure out for myself that an adultery is a place where they keep adults. That success taught me a never-to-be-forgotten lesson in self reliance.

Now there was this vine growing on the wire fence alongside our yard. The adults called it "Yard-a-night vine". But it was clear that it did not grow 36 inches in a night. I designed an experiment to prove this. Each day I tied a string to the fence at the tip of the vine. Then I went back next day with my mother's yard stick to measure the distance from that string to the new tip of the vine. I was right! In repeated trials that vine never grew more than 20 inches in a night. And most of the time it grew only 15 inches or so.

I told my parents about this, and any other adults that I could get to pretend to listen. That is another thing adults are good at. But they went right on calling it Yard-a-night vine. I thought I had failed. But my experimental results must have got through after all. After a while I noticed that the adults began to call it something else. They did not admit that they had been wrong; adults never do. But they quietly changed the name to Kudzu.

Columbus. The setting for that story and most of my boyhood was Columbus, Mississippi. It was typical of many southern towns of around five or ten thousand people; yet unique in its own way. Columbus had one special distinction. Its Franklin Academy was the first public high school established in the United States. I attended it briefly in its last days before it was replaced by a new high school.

Columbus sits on the last foothills of the Appalachian mountains that stretch southwestward through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama, and just into eastern Mississippi. The Tombigbee River, huge like rivers in that part of the country, is unable to find its way through the mountains. So it curls around their southwestern tip at Columbus. Westward across the river in a fertile plain there were large plantations growing cotton and cattle. Their owners lived in antebellum homes in town. Before the railroad was built river boats on the Tombigbee used to transport their cotton to the ocean port of Mobile, but that was before even my time.

Besides that first high school, Columbus had a state woman's college. The "I.I. & C" (Industrial Institute and College) it was called then. In those days an education was hard to get, and expensive beyond most farmer's means. As was the custom, cousins came to live with us to

attend high school or the college. I think my mother took in about six of these young relatives over the years.

Folks in Columbus. We thought we were special, but we were probably like the folks in any other plantation town in the South in those days. As anybody could see, there were four kinds of folks in Columbus: Girls, those strange stuck-up creatures who would grow up to be even stranger women, and us boys who would grow up to be men. And people were also divided into white folks and colored folks. This seemed natural. It was the way things always had been, and we did not think of it as a PROBLEM any more than day and night, or wet and dry are. And everybody understood the unwritten, but strict, rules about how to conduct yourself with the other kinds of people.

Also even a boy could recognize four layers of white people. At the top were the old families, richer in land and dignity than in money. An old family name assured more status than money did. As everybody knew, they formed an unofficial aristocracy whose influence was dominant. Their large plantations were cultivated by field hands living on the plantation, who I knew were descendents of slaves. But in my mind that was history "before The War". Naturally, this history was given slight treatment in school.

Much more numerous than the plantation owners were the small farmers who owned farms of 40 to 320 acres on hilly clay land. My relatives elsewhere in Mississippi were among these people. Their work force was themselves and their families, no blacks. It was an uphill battle to make a living on poor land and in competition with cheap negro labor on large plantations. These folks showed up in town, mostly on Saturdays, when they could usually be found around the courthouse, or the farm supplies store.

The blacks from the plantations also showed up in town on Saturday. They stayed with their teams in a sort of common parking lot. It was off limits for white boys like me, but I was dying to know what they talked about. I knew Charley Atlas, head black man at Mount Gomer plantation. So I worked my way within earshot of him and found out. A man from another plantation came up to him. "What y'all got to eat up there at Mount Gomer?" Charley wasn't going to disclose any abundance of good food, which would bring uninvited visitors. So he replied cautiously: "Oh, we got a few peas." That was what they talked about.

My father was one of many who had sought escape from the small farmer's hardship. They found it in education to become teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, merchants, or bankers. These professionals and business men, ex small farmers, formed the third kind of people in town. The blacks' main relationship with them was as house servants.

The education of these people was Biblical, with an overlay of Greek and Roman classicism. So the virtues they cultivated were the Christian virtues of piety, humility, kindness, and love of fellow man; with an overlay of the classical virtues of poise, dignity, propriety, and serenity. I now think these words describe the kind of gentleman that my parents were trying to bring me up to be by vague example, not by those words themselves of course. I never could live up to my mother's concept of a gentleman, who was defined by obligations, not privileges.

Later I came to recognize another kind of southern gentleman who was defined by privileges, and by his honor. His honor oozed from his every pore. He too had obligations, an obligation not to vaunt the superior status that he knew he had. He cultivated a refined and modest speech for this purpose, and an attitude of chivalry towards ladies. His manners were those of the aristocratic old families, but I think they harked back to the knights of the Middle Ages. He could be a charming and cultivated friend. But, the more I got to know him, the more I did not want to be a gentleman.

-- When those ex-farmer professionals assumed leadership, the Old South became the New South, but that had not happened at the time I am writing about. And their servants became a class of blacks who were distinguished by refinement and education from the field hands. The new black middle class has emerged primarily from those house servants, but was not an entity then. --

The fourth kind of white people were the "red necks", "hill billies", "peckerwoods", or "poor white trash" as the blacks called them. They were the poor whites, farm laborers, share croppers, lumber mill or railroad workers, and mule drivers. As a laborer, such a man was in competition with the negro at miserable pay, and had only his white skin to show superiority; no land, no money, no education, no social status. To make things worse, he could not take a job digging with a shovel because that was a negro's job. And his wife could not take a job as a domestic, either to nurse children or to do housework, because that was a negro servant's job. -- Most of the race hatred against the negro came from these people. Back then I was not aware of race hatred, as such. I just thought their talk was mean and ugly according to the way I was taught. --

As it used to be. I was aware also of some ways in which my small-farmer kin folk tried to show that they were better than the red necks. My grandmother would not let my grandfather put her girls to work in the fields. Moreover they could not go barefoot like common women. Her girls had to have shoes, even if shoes cost more than they could afford. And her girls went to school.-- Those shoes turned out to provide a real distinction. For they protected against hookworm disease, which was so debilitating among the poor country people of the South. --

As I could plainly see, women were the strong people among both the blacks and the whites. This was true even among the women of the old families who had been brought up not to do a lick of work with their dainty hands, and played dumb and helpless to let their men think themselves important. But they could take charge if they had to. Miss Mary Billups took charge of their family plantation at about age twenty. I knew her because our house was in the same block as the Billups family home, and my mother made a deal with Miss Mary that I would watch our cow eating Miss Mary's grass, but not her flowers. I was reading James Fenimore Cooper's noble-indian stories that summer, so Miss Mary's flowers did not prosper.

With some exceptions, the men of these old families appeared to me to be weak, pompous, stuffed shirts. They did a lot of drinking, and this led to gun fights, which were news in The Columbus Dispatch. Some of these stories were not appreciated, and the guns were turned on the editor. I remember him hobbling down the street, after partial recovery from one such event, carrying a huge revolver on his hip. He was still

defiantly calling them as he chose to see them. The Dispatch did not choose to report as news the Saturday night fights of young black men carving each other up with knives or razors. We heard about them over the servant network.

Church, rather than religion, was important in Columbus. There were few Jews or Catholics, so bigotry took refuge in the discrimination of Methodist from Baptist. My kid cousin, Sarah, saw a man coming our way across the street. "A Baptist! I can tell 'em by the way they walk." Blacks, mainly house servants, belonged to my father's church. The nurses of small children sat with their white families. The other black members sat in a separate balcony. It seemed natural. That was just the way things were. - This small bit of partial integration was lost when blacks grew prosperous enough to have their own second-hand churches. --

Fishing, especially for bream in mill ponds around the floating logs, was an important part of male life. After all, sports on radio or television had not been invented yet, though we did not know that. There wasn't even any bottled beer! A fellow had to do something to get some time away from the women folks. But, even in the common experience of being male, we were segregated from the blacks. They fished for catfish in the river, and caught more fish.

The best bait for perch was fat cockroaches captured in baited cracker tins in the feed store. And that store was the best exchange of information about where they were biting. As every fisherman knows, the white crappie really bite if you can find just the right spot at just the right time in the spring. I remember seeing one such lucky fisherman returning with a fat string of crappie. An envious friend called to him: "Are they biting?" "Had to stand behind a tree to bait my hook."

Dead men. The distinguished men of Columbus included several Confederate generals. Sometimes it seemed that every man who had been in "The War" claimed to have been a general. So much so that one man was smart enough to get himself elected to Congress by proclaiming that he was the only private in the Army of the Confederacy. He was Private John Allen. As a kid I was once introduced to the great man.

General Sykes, who lived right across the street from us, died. His will stipulated that Boy Scouts were to be honorary pall bearers, and I was chosen. My mother was worried because I had never seen a dead person. But she needn't have been; it was no big deal. When we filed past him in uniform I couldn't see much difference except that his face was unnaturally waxy and pink-cheeked.

Many years later Mary and I were among early American tourists to visit Moscow during the Soviet regime. For some reason our group was accorded the special privilege of visiting Lenin's tomb, with Lenin, pink and waxy cheeked, lying there in the open casket. As we filed past with the throng of Soviet tourists, the huge soldier with huge rifle guarding the tomb was watching me intently. Presumably he thought I might show disrespect with capitalistic smirks; so I maintained a grave countenance. Actually he need not have been concerned, for I was thinking of General Sykes.

Mrs.Sale. She was principal of Barrow School in Columbus and taught the eighth grade. Her attitude was detached; she was not one of those openly loving and beloved teachers we remember. So it was not

until I became a college professor that I realized how remarkable she was.

She did her hair Gibson-girl style and wore high lace collars supported by whalebone stays. Her pinch-nose glasses were attached to a gold chain. She understood boys. And boys respected her. When she clapped her hands and called, "Boys, boys", everything quieted down.

For recess time she had a game call "running through" that I have not seen elsewhere. The boys divided into two teams on the play ground. The offensive team tried to run through the defending team and reach the goal line. The defending team tried to tackle all of them and prevent them from reaching the goal. The offensive score was the number that reached the goal line; the defensive score was the number that didn't. It got all the boys involved and it was great for working off surplus energy. You didn't even need a football to play it.

When a teen-age pregnancy showed up Mrs.Sale brought in doctors to give us complete and explicit sex education; one day for the boys, another for the girls. This was way ahead of the times in 1917.

The eighth grade was then the last year of required education. So it was a review with practical examples. Mrs. Sale decided I did not need the review. She set me to reading the school library which she kept in her room, starting with Charles Lamb's Tales of Shakespeare. I read it but I was much more interested in a book about the fifty famous battles of world history, complete with deployment diagrams. And in the wild animal stories of Earnest Thompson Seaton; and Jack London's Call of the Wild and White Fang.

To plant a tree in Columbus you had to dynamite a hole in the tip of the Appalachian mountains. Most principals would have played it safe and had it done when school was not in session. Not Mrs.Sale. She knew her boys would want to see it. She made a ceremony of it, with everybody standing back a safe distance. In my mind's eye I can still see that big clod of dirt rise up 20 feet before it fell back. But I did not see until I was an adult myself that Mrs.Sale was an extraordinary school principal. Not many can live up to her conception of that job, which is so very important in every community.

Mules. Mules have nearly disappeared; and it is too bad. There used to be almost as many mules as people in this country. They did hard jobs that nobody else would do. They believed in severe discipline. They had both character and humility. If a farmer tried to reward his mule on Sunday by hitching him up to a light buggy and trotting off to church, he could hardly get the stubborn mule past the field where he had been pulling a plow all week in the hot sun. The mule knew that was his duty; and to mules duty comes first. This was their contribution to human philosophy. Emerson wrote it down, and did not give the mules credit for it!

One of the mules' duties was to pull the ice wagon that delivered ice for the ice boxes of Columbus. When the ice man was inside a house, delivering his 25-pound piece of ice, or maybe 50 pounds if ice cream was to be made that day, we kids would sneak in the back of the ice wagon to get a chip of ice to suck on. Then the ice man would come back and scare us away; and the mules would pull the wagon to the next stop, which they knew by heart. -- I can still smell the cool odor of those 100-pound ice blocks sitting in wet saw dust. It is strange how permanent is the memory of those odors of childhood: the special smells

of june bugs, stink bugs, lightening bugs, the wonderful fragrance of a captured bee loaded with pollen, of my mother's sweet pea flowers, the special scent of a warm summer evening, of ozone after a lightning bolt, the oily smell of schoolhouse floors, the fragrance of sassafrass root, the scent of buttermilk, hot biscuits, the mustiness of an empty church.

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Mules' lives are rather sad. Artificially bred from a braying jackass as a father and a gentle mare as a mother, both sexes of mules are infertile. A lady mule can never expect to have her own little mulekins frisking around the barn. And the male mule can never prove his masculinity by getting a pretty girl mule in a family way. When tractors and pickup trucks took over the mules' jobs, which were all they had to live for, the breed was gradually allowed to die out. Mules couldn't do anything about it. Their last great day was in The Great Depression when forty acres and a mule got many a jobless man through it.

I once asked Charley Atlas which was smarter, a mule or a horse. Charley pondered the question carefully before he replied. He did not know on which side my sentiments lay; and he didn't want to offend me. Finally he allowed diplomatically: "Well, you can teach a mule more than you can a horse." I will settle for that definition of intelligence. And I would add that a mule can teach you more than a horse can.

Even a tractor and a pickup truck combined could not entirely replace a mule and his driver. My Uncle Foster was one of those mule drivers who could talk to his mule. He would pull down one of his mule's ears and whisper into it. Although the mule could not answer you could see that he understood and agreed. Then they would go to work. Their specialty was plowing a level furrow on a hilly field. Uncle Foster would call "gee" or "haw" , meaning "this way" or "back the other way", and the mule, with his nimble feet and acute sense of balance, would plow a furrow more level than any a surveyor could lay out with his instruments. All the neighboring farmers would get them to plow about every tenth furrow of a sloping new field, which Uncle Foster and his mule were both glad to do, free of charge.

I was learning to drive a car in that interim when mules and autos shared the road. My father was on the front seat coaching me when we came to a place where a dump wagon, drawn by four mules, was dumping gravel through open bottom hatches. It was going to be a long time before it could be moved. Although the passage on the side was narrow, my father and the mule driver said: "Go ahead". I tried gingerly, in low gear. But in the loose gravel my left front fender hooked onto the protruding hub of the front wheel of the gravel wagon. That turned me toward the mules. I jammed on the brake pedal. Only it turned out to be the accelerator! And I plowed in behind the mule on the rear corner. She - for it was a lady mule - reared up and sat back on the very hot hood of the car. And she squirmed back and forth the way mules do on the hot seat. To this day I don't know what what you are supposed to do when you have a mule sitting on the hood of your car.

She finally kicked herself loose, flopped on the ground and refused to get up. Her driver knelt down by her, pulled down one long ear, and whispered in it. Then he looked her in the eye to get her reply. "She is lying", he pronounced. "She ain't hurt." Actually, only her dignity was hurt. That was no way to treat a lady. We drove on without insurance claims, police reports, lawyers, or traffic courts. It was a long time ago!

A day remembered. November 4, 1918 was for me one of those days in life that turn out to have a character all their own, even without the special significance of one of life's rites of passage, such as a boy's first long pants. It was in the time of the great Spanish influenza epidemic. My minister-father came home every day with stories of more tragedies. Vigorous men came down with it and died suddenly. But it had not affected our own family. World War I was still dragging on, although news from the front had been good lately. And, as a supplement to our "liberty garden" at home, my father had rented a farm plot outside of Columbus to grow food crops for storing in winter: sweet potatoes, cushaws (a primitive form of winter squash), field corn for chicken feed, etc.

I was sent on my bike that day to grabble some sweet potatoes for dinner. It had been raining and my bike would not run in the muddy dirt road, while up on the bank the way was blocked by blackberry brambles. Somehow I managed to get there but encountered a new difficulty. When you grabble for potatoes you do not dig up the vine, but look for a place where a potato has grown large enough to crack the ground above it. Then you "grabble" that potato alone. The rain had erased the cracks. But, after some misses, I managed, and headed home with a sack of yams and cushaws.

I had to push the bike, and I was getting sick. Off in the distance I could hear some whistles blowing and blowing. After what seemed an endless time I got home with my sweet potatoes, and with the whistles still blowing. My mother took one look at me and turned white herself. For she knew I had it. She put me to bed and called Dr. Lipscomb. I am sure she prayed too. At that point the strong immune system that has got me to age 91 took over. My flu lasted only a couple of days.

Those whistles were celebrating what turned out to be a false armistice in the war. The Austrians, not the Germans, had capitulated on November 3 and the news had got to Columbus that the war was over. It wasn't; but the Germans surrendered a week later to end it.

White folks and colored folks. It is unrealistic to write about those days in Mississippi without facing up to the different status of the white and black people. As you will see, I do not intend to defend the white man's treatment of the negro there. But neither will I wring my hands in contrition. I was not of my doing. Nor will I claim to be free of race prejudice. Any Mississippian, indeed any American, black or white, who claims that is only blindly prejudiced. Back then we were all born into the system and took it for granted. We did not see it as a racial problem, as people do now, because that was just the way things were. We, blacks and whites, learned how to play the roles assigned to us. Many, blacks and whites, did that with kindness and fellow feeling; many others with arrogance, cruelty, or race hatred.

I want to convey something of what it was like back there to a young white boy with a rather unusual background because my father's main goal in life was to see political and institutional segregation in Mississippi ended. He was not a crusader, or protest marcher. Later he cautioned me not to play this Yankee game. For those who did lost credibility and trust among fellow white southerners, and respect by the blacks. But, unlike many who covered their doing nothing about it by

claiming to work within the system, he really did try to change it. My mother, on the other hand, accepted the system but impressed upon me our obligation to be kind to "colored people", and help them. There were many like her among educated Christian men and women in the South.

One day my father invited a friend, a black minister, to dinner in our home. Such a thing was unheard-of, and it threw my mother into a quandary. For her black servants would not know how to act and would be even more confused and embarrassed than she was. So she sent the servants home and served their dinner herself. Many years later my father felt it was the greatest day of his life when he attended, as a delegate, the conference that joined the (white) Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Church into the United Methodist Church.

Northern liberals, in their sympathy for the negro, have none for the poor white, and call for the justice system to treat him as an outlaw. Educated southern whites have always insisted that you cannot improve the well being of the negro without doing the same for the poor white, who in many cases was worse off economically. This policy division still persists; and I shall not try to resolve it. I want to relate two true stories about the hostility between poor white and negro, and of how my parents dealt with the problems they posed in our family. Then I want to tell two more about good people among these poor, uneducated folks. That will be my way of saying that these racial issues require deeper understanding than can be found in dogmatic positions of either side.

Two court cases. He was my Uncle Walter because he was Aunt Pearl's husband. He had risen economically from his poor white background to be owner of a saw mill. He horse-whipped a black laborer; and the man came back with a knife and stabbed him to death. My father said: "Let the court handle it." And my mother said: "Uncle Walter did not treat the the man right." Otherwise they kept it from us kids. But I learned that the Florida court let the man off with a light sentence because of the way he was treated.

A first cousin of mine and his wife had a small restaurant on the Chicago to New Orleans rail line. A group of northern blacks came in, demanding service. My cousin directed them to go around to the back to the "colored entrance". A quarrel ensued that ended when one of the blacks pulled out a gun and shot my cousin and his wife. She died. Again my father said no more than: "Let the court handle it." I never learned how it turned out, but I doubt that the Mississippi court was as understanding as the Florida court had been in the other case.

God don't want the taters. Mrs. Mitchell told this story about her young Sammy. Her husband was a poor share-cropper, and they had had little to eat that summer except sweet potatoes and cow peas. But on this day Mr. Mitchell had somehow acquired a few shells for his shot gun so they had squirrel for dinner. Sammy eagerly dived right in until his mother reproached him. "Sammy, we must wait until Father asks the blessing. If we don't, God might not like it, and might not give us anything to eat." That stopped Sammy abruptly, and he sat saying nothing for a long time. Finally he got it figured out. "Mamma, we can always eat taters. God don't want the taters!"

Granderson. As was the custom for servants, Granderson had a house on the street behind the fine old Billups home. A small alley ran beside his house to the back yard of the Billups home. The little barn at the back of our lot was just across the alley from Granderson's house. That barn was my work and play station. I went back there to practice my Boy Scout bugle. It must have driven Granderson crazy; for he was a wonderful musician. But he never complained. In fact it was clear that Granderson approved of me. Word to that effect came back over the house servant network. And I liked Granderson. But since Granderson was black, and I had no special business with him, custom restricted our conversation to polite formalities.

Granderson was a minister, but mainly he was the choir director. His was a singing congregation. On Sundays the white people would have dinner at midday after church. That was finished in time for the servants to go to their services in the afternoon. Granderson conducted such services at his house. And I could attend, so to speak, in the loft of my barn, eaves dropping through the crack under the roof overhang.

On a hot summer afternoon the members would assemble one by one on Granderson's front porch until they had a quorum. Then somebody would hum the key, and Granderson's big foot would start to tap. The music would begin, quietly at first, but growing louder and more assertive. Then a rich soprano voice would rise to state the theme; and pause for the low response of the male voices. Among them I could make out Granderson's. After several verses of this, that wonderful soprano voice would suddenly soar above them all to sing out the refrain; and the base response would be replaced by shouts of exhortation. This was the climax, but there would then be a sermon, not necessarily by Granderson. And this too would be punctuated by rhythmic shouts of approbation, support, and amen.

When Granderson died, his choir met at his house to sing him a loving farewell. I wanted to attend; and I am sure they would have welcomed me for this occasion. But I was too timid to ask. So I had to be with them from my barn perch, where I wept for my old friend.

They gathered and sang the old spirituals softly and lovingly, the ones in which Granderson had led them. Then they began to sing a special song that they seem to have made up for Granderson, quietly and nostalgically at first, until suddenly that glorious soprano voice soared with the refrain:

Oh Brother Gran
Brother Gran
You are goin' home to glory
And we hope to meet you there.

It was eighty years ago, but I can still hear that voice, bidding loving, confident farewell to Brother Gran. And in those eighty years we have at least come far enough so that blacks and whites can now be friends as fellow human beings, free of that color line that lay between me and Mr. Granderson, and between my father and his fellow minister of the African Methodist church.

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Well, there it is! My second dissertation on the road to age ninety. All on its own, with no help from me, it turned out, like the first one, to be a jambalaya of foolishness and seriousness. But perhaps that is the art of living: to join in harmony the innocent and the sophisticated.

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