

The older I become, the more I realize how grateful I should be. And the less apt I am at being timely about saying "thanks". I should have thanked Grandma for igniting my passion for fishing. She started it! She knew how to add drama on a fishing adventure when I was a tot. There was ritual too!

First, there were worms to be dug. Coffee grounds were dumped in a special place off the back porch and I was required to check often to see if there was ample stock. My first order of business was to always get a can full of "fat" ones. Goggle-eye obviously favored them. Cane poles were carefully examined as they came off the nails. Hooks, sinkers and bobbers were as valuable as dollar bills and needed Grandma's careful eye. A couple of buckets, a jar with holes in the lid for grasshoppers captured along the way and we were off along the path to Little Black River and the "rootwad".

A giant Sycamore had given way at the foot of a shoal creating some great habitat. It was a magical place. Clear, yet dark and mysterious, with "soap suds", depth and a hundred nooks for a bobber to disappear in. Grandma always out-fished me and invariably out-endured me. Rock skippin' was something I could beat her at though, and demonstrating it was part of the ritual. I was pretty good at examining fish entrails too when the day was over and the cleaning underway.... "what's this here grandma?" I was known to ask.

Holiday seasons and rainy weather does this to me, bringing on reflections and memories that are dear to heart. Grandma passed on in 1980 at the age of 80. A special era passed with her. She and Grandpa were heroes. Never saw Grandpa what he wasn't working in the fields, barnlot or garden it seemed. In the evening he'd be in his rocker with an ear cocked at the radio, pipe in hand. He liked Harry Carey and the Cardinals.

Grandpa called me "bub" and I followed him like a pup wanting an ear cuffed. Minute details about him are ingrained as if he were here just yesterday. There was a wagon ride with him when he and a neighbor from a few miles away met for a visit in the middle of a dusty road. Traffic in that day was near unheard of and anyone moving along at all required a long look and some curiosity,... "wonder why Hershel and Gladys are headin' out toward town today?" he might say.

Grandpa and the man I didn't know were well into the details on dry weather and livestock prices when knives were brought up. I was in total awe when both men just reached in their pockets and swapped knives with never so much as a glance at the merchandise. I knew Grandpa's regard for his knife was pretty close to what he felt for his dog Ike, and the swap just wasn't like the Grandpa that I knew. After all, I wasn't even allowed to hold his pocket knife, let alone open it!

I know now it was a way for men then to express kinship, trust and gratitude. I was thinking perhaps they hadn't seen one another in years, when in fact the visit went much deeper. Customs have changed, but men with long-standing friendships will understand! Getting on in life a bit now, I understand, and thanks, Grandpa!

Collecting eggs, churning butter, pulling weeds, checking rabbit traps and just being with my grandparents was heaven on earth then. My brothers and I were just a cross-hair under God in importance to them and we knew it with never so much as a dime given.

Grandpa had known what it was to work at a job at 50 cents a day and dinner, Grandma for less. He was gone in a heartbeat in 1959 and I really am only learning now, what he meant.

Grandma always got out a mess of fish or rabbits every time I managed to come home after I was grown. I knew a message about God would be part of the visit, but I had learned I was indebted. I'd eat a mess of fried rabbit with milk-gravy and buttermilk biscuits while she would ask pointed questions and nod with wisdom and grace. Ripley county was about the extent of

her worldliness and her eyes would squint with glee as I talked about streams around the Ozarks.

In hindsight, she'd be in my canoe on the next trip out, were I to be given that chance once more. I'd love to hear that whoop of her's as she brought a goggle-eye out of a shaded eddy! Thanks Grandma, for all your gentle answers, the spark flamed by your excitement over my successes and your endless devotion to family.

You would have liked them, my Grandma and Grandpa. Yes ma'm and yes sir, would have been a natural response. I heard it a lot back then.

As for my Dad, his recreation was never far from a saddle. There was no time for hunting and fishing with farm debt and four boys to feed. Dad, now near 80, is a WWII veteran and getting brittle. His war was in the Phillipines. It seemed Dad always had chores on his mind on Saturday mornings, while I daydreamed about farm ponds and big bass. He seemed to me at age ten to be more like a squad leader on a mission than a dad interested in his son's recreation. But what did I know about responsibilities?

Between feeding the hogs in the morning and cutting persimmon sprouts in the afternoon he often caught me chasing grasshoppers! Dad just couldn't understand why I would rather sit on a pond bank in the hot sun staring at a bobber then to put a bridle on a horse and ride with the wind.

But Grandma knew. Bailing twine stringers loaded with pond perch held trophy fish in her eyes! After I experienced my own war, in Vietnam, and my own taste of family debt, Dad's view on burdens came into focus a little more clearly. Never have heard Dad say anything but the plain, honest truth as he understood it. We could all stand to hear it a bit more. Thanks, Dad.

It was mom's brother that introduced me to the real fun though. Once every year or so in the '60's he and Aunt Janie would visit during the summer for a week or so. It was a grand time, with stories and laughter late in the night. He said he had a fishing trip planned! It was going to be smallmouth fishing from a johnboat seat, and I could go along!

Uncle Bill had little to spend, but he sure knew how to get his money's worth. He had hired one of the guides in Doniphan for 20 dollars and a sandwich for an all day float trip down Current River. Every brain cell must have been a sponge. The local put-in point was at the big eddy below town and there were 40 or 50 johnboats tied to the bank. Some with motors, gas tanks and even fishing tackle. Stealing from a boat hadn't been invented yet.

A photo of that view, had one been considered, would now be worth good money. And to consider that in 40 years any one of the boats there would be worth more then the entire lot, at the time, was unthinkable. Perched on the front of Barry Price's 24-footer, a new world was introduced. Those smallmouth won my heart on that trip even though the day ended with blisters and hand cramps. Life just couldn't get any better.

I have my own family now and streams are a part of it. I can just about throw a rock and hit the water from the front porch. Shoving a canoe off a gravel bar in the hot sun of July or in the snowfall of January is still just a notch under heaven.

I owe a debt to my heritage, but I've learned a bit about the pay back. My youngest son, Ryan, is seventeen now and still prefers to be fishing or hunting with dad than to be with his buddies or playing computer games. That's an accomplishment any father of a teenager would take pride in.

Ryan was in a canoe before he was in diapers. It wasn't long before he was standing and watching the action. Splashing in the buff at breaks was the first good sign. At three he had a rod and hookless lure. It was either pandemonium or chaos depending on his mood. Every fish demanded his release!

By five, he was all business between swimming breaks. He could lay a plug under a limb with anybody by the end of the summer. He was catching fish, too, but the big one's would most often catch him by surprise. A blowup at the rod tip was "scary" and the look on his face was priceless. A puckered lip and tears were inevitable on lost fish. Wanting to keep up with Dad was as plain as crushed feelings.

I was seeing me at his age, losing my shirt buttons, and swallowing a little harder. At seven he was up with the alarm clock and wide-eyed before coffee hit the cup. Comparing his tackle box with mine was the next good sign. Before the truck keys could be turned off at the put-in point he'd be out the door with a rod. By the time we'd launch, every fish in casting distance had been given at least a dozen invitations to be the first one caught. Catching the first, the most and the biggest were milestones to achieve. By summer's end, he'd done all three.

I sometimes wonder if he has a clue what he's been given and where it came from. He never knew Grandma, nor how it all began! Watching him from the stern as we fish is simply more than I can express in words. I wonder if she felt that way when we fished for goggle-eye at the old sycamore root wad.

There are perhaps greater rewards in life than having a son that wants to be like Dad, but I don't know what they are. One day, Lord willing, he'll be back there to watch his own children and perhaps grandchildren. If Grandma has anything to do with it, it will happen that way!