Excepts From "Childhood In The Ozarks"

Written by Bland Nixon Pippin
1945

I was born into a home steeped in poverty, and as far back as I can remember an invalid mother in it, unable to give me a mother's loving care and attention; a father weighted down with grief and responsibility to provide for and maintain a large family at a time when the whole country was wrapped in a blanket of deep depression due to the disastrous panic of 1873.

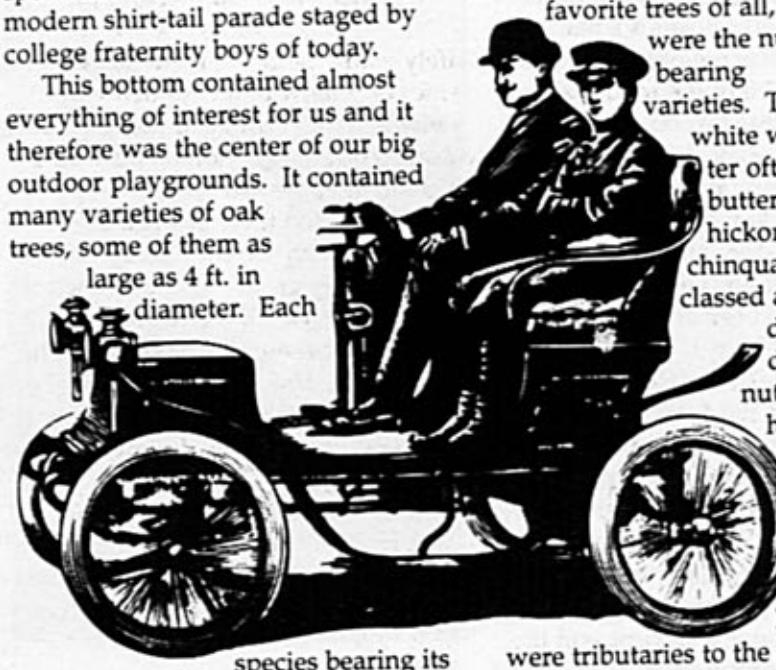
If the disposition with which I was born was influenced, modified or changed from that which it was destined to be, it was most likely due to adversities that permitted me to enjoy unabridged liberty and unbridled freedom to live in the closest contact with my natural surroundings. I hope I may not be considered tedious or unduly sentimental in going somewhat into detail in reciting my experiences in the early part of my childhood. Due to circumstances I naturally regard my childhood as having been divided into two distinct periods. The first part I choose to call my infant years--extending from birth up to age 7, and...when my mother died. The second, from the time I was put into my Uncle's home (William Bradford, who was married to Niah Tilley), and extending from that time on through my adolescent years into those of young manhood. During this second period I was subjected to an entirely different environment. I had to submit to restrictions and training, things to which I had not become accustomed.

In those infant years, my constant boone companion was my brother next older than I (Joseph Benjamin Pippin, also called "Jode"). He was nearly 4 years my senior. We were inseparable, and he enjoyed with me the same degree of liberty and freedom in our natural big outdoor play grounds. Throughout the spring, summer and fall months in all propitious weather, just as soon as we had finished our wholesome breakfasts which "Aunt Riah" (an African-American nanny) always prepared for us, we hurried to our stable--a chimney corner--in which we kept our fine selection of spirited, well groomed, and in many instances, highly decorated stick saddle horses. They were usually cut from young, straight, smooth paw-paw or hickory growth. After the sap came up in the spring, the bark on these woods could be cut through and peeled away making fancy designs in keeping with our artistic tastes in designing. From the bark of these same woods we made our whistles and flutes. We also peeled the bark into strips and tied them onto our stick horses for halters and bridles. Our horses were all named. When we had selected them by name for our morning mounts, being already attired in our finest riding habits, which was our everyday wearing apparel, we were ready to be off on our morning canter.

These garments we wore were made of meal sacks or often tow sacks. A hole would be cut through the bottom large enough to permit the head to pass through and at each side just under each corner holes were cut to accommodate the arms. These holes would be bound by cloth to prevent the cut sack from fraying or raveling. These simple garments slipped down over our little naked bodies arrayed us for our daily activities and were worn from early spring until frost in the fall.

Our morning horseback rides were always up the dim narrow wagon road that led through a densely shaded bottom covered with a variety of huge forest trees with large wild grape vines entwined about many of them, and hanging loose by the sides of others, with their tendrils anchored in the tree's tops and with their wide leaves spread out they formed canopies impenetrable to the noonday sun's piercing rays, and also were waterproof except to long, protracted, and violent rain storms. Attired in our sack riding habits and mounted upon our most spirited steads, prancing from side to side, kicking up our heels and "nickering" and squealing to imitate horses, and with a bark whistle or flute or perhaps an extra large whistle that gave out a coarse sound when blown to represent a huntsman's horn, we presented daily spectacles that would discredit any modern shirt-tail parade staged by college fraternity boys of today.

This bottom contained almost everything of interest for us and it therefore was the center of our big outdoor playgrounds. It contained many varieties of oak trees, some of them as large as 4 ft. in diameter. Each species bearing its own kind of acorn gave us the opportunity to gather them when they began to fall and to compare them, thus determining what kind of acorn grew on what species of trees. We tasted all of them and found that the chinquapin was by far the most palatable. For looks, the large bur oak acorn with its fringed cap was our favorite.



This bottom contained almost every specie of trees indigenous to this locality of the Ozarks. There were the wide spreading red elms and the lesser sized white elm, the bark of which was often peeled and steeped to make a "slippery" vehicle in which quinine could be wrapped to mask its bitter taste--hence the name, "slippery elm." There were silver maples, and sugar maples, the tall, stately ash, the doppled birch, the colorful sycamores with their white limbs dazzling in the sun's rays interspersed throughout the dense growth. Some of these sycamores had grown to proportions of 8 ft. In diameter. Some of the largest of them were found to be hollow, and my father had cut some of them, split them open and made feed and watering troughs from the hollow sections. Our most favorite trees of all, however, were the nut and fruit bearing varieties. The black and white walnut--the latter often called the butter nut tree--the hickory and the chinquapin--if it is classed as is proper to do so as the dwarfed chestnut. Also the hazelnut that grew on small bushes forming thickets in the gravelly hollows that were tributaries to the creek. Then there were the hackberry, the persimmon, the wild cherry, wild plum, crab apple, red and black haw, service berry and best of all our favorite paw-paw. In one part of the bottom where the growth of timber was less dense and the land more sandy in texture, our paw-paw patch was located. This was our favorite rendezvous in the fall of the year when the paw-paws were ripe. In favorable fruit years, I have seen the ground in the latter part of September and October so completely covered with fallen ripe, yellow, delicious paw- paw fruit that one could not step under the trees without stepping on some of it.

Then in locations favorable to their growth there were different varieties of wild berries. Along the creek bank and bordering hillside clusters of gooseberry bushes, black raspberry, black berry, and dew berry vines, each bearing its respective fruit in profusion almost every year. Farther up on the hill grew huckleberries and wild strawberries. The delicious flavor of the wild strawberry has never been equaled in the cultivated berry. Here and there were clusters of mayapple plants bearing their green apples that turned to a rich yellow color when they ripened in June, and were pleasant to the taste, even delectable fruit for some people. The

wild grape, both fall and winter varieties, hung in clusters from their entwining vines that grew it seemed everywhere.

Beside the narrow road that crossed the bottom stood a large hackberry tree. Hanging free from the side of this tree was a large grape vine securely anchored in the tree's top. This served for a swing. At this spot in the middle of the road that led directly under the tree, hogs had rooted up the ground. In the depression thus formed rain water would collect and the hogs wallowing in these pools so sealed them that water stood in them throughout the year. This hog wallow had been enlarged by the hogs rooting and wallowing until it extended as much as fifteen feet along the length of the road and encompassed its entire width, and was even wider about its center.

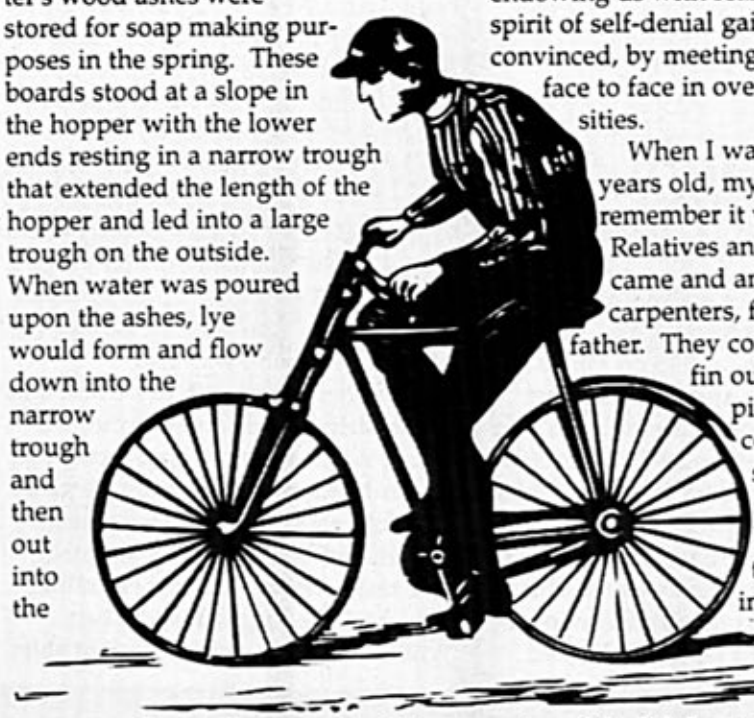
By grasping the grape vine swing in our hands, pulling it back as far as we could, then running forward and springing our toes, the swing could be swept out over the mudhole in the road. By repeating this process a few times, the swing would gain such momentum and height in its oscillations that upon freeing the hand holds when it had reached its greatest distance along the length of the road, and springing forward, the filthy mud puddle might be cleared in the leap. If it was cleared, the contestant won. If he dropped into the hole, he lost. You see, this was a game of ours. I, being the younger and smaller of we two, lost more frequently than my brother. However, dropping into the mire did not dismay us or particularly disturb us, for we usually landed on our feet, and such part of our shirtail garbs as became covered with mud and splashed with dirty water, didn't mean anything to us in the exercise of our indulgent freedom.

The bottom lay at a point farthest up the creek above our farm below. The creek swept across the valley from the bluff hillside on the right to the bluffs on the left, and thus in a graceful curve divided our part of the valley below from that part above where my grandmother Tilley (Elizabeth Tilley, widow of Wilson Tilley) lived. This Roubidoux Creek only had running water in it following heavy and rather protracted rains. Most of the year it presented a dry bed. However, it did get on violent flood rampages. When it ceased to flow again, holes along its course would contain water for a few days before finally sinking away. These remaining temporary pools not only furnished us our "swimmin'" holes, but they often contained the choicest fish held captives by the receding flood waters. We watched these pools closely and just as soon as we could see whether they held fish and the water receded to where we could safely wade them, we made brush seines of willow branches tied with peeled bark and dragged the fish out. We thus often went home with strings of choicest game fish.

We regarded the creek bed as being a very important part of our spacious play grounds. We roamed it from a point, called the Run-a-round, at the place where it turned across the valley to the opposite side and on down its course back of our farm to the mouth of Smith Hollow below, a distance of a little more than a mile. We sought the lightest and whitest chalk rocks found among all the other beautiful and polished stones, for the white marks we could make with them. Also the swirling currents in floods, piled up here and there great banks of fine sand leaving them with almost perpendicular walls on one or more sides. In these sand banks we dug and indulged our fancies in constructing homes and mills and cafes. We even dug back in the sand far enough, it if were sufficiently moist, to permit us to crawl into the holes and become buried up to our necks.

This scope of territory, with its varied interests including one other feature I have not mentioned, and that is the sloping hillside from the bluff above down to the level below, covered as it was with the dense timber growth and "deep tangle wildwood" and mossy rocks scattered in profusion among which wild ferns and a luxurious matting of wild flowers and root bearing plants grew--some used for medicinal purposes, one in particular, the ginseng, which we loved to hunt and dig and taste--formed a natural play ground that to my thinking is far superior to the most completely and expensively equipped play ground found in any city, especially for boys.

Our house stood on a sloping hillside that extended from the steep hill--at the base of which our road ran--down to the level below. In this level ground, back of which and just to one side of the house our paled-in garden was located. In those days the winters were not only longer but were much colder for longer periods of time. Snow began falling frequently in the latter part of November and never later than December and the ground was white almost continually until in April. Temperatures ran from zero and below for weeks without moderation. The snow would freeze until it would bear the weight of a horse without crushing. We had our crude sleds that had been used in lining the sides of the ash hopper in which the winter's wood ashes were stored for soap making purposes in the spring. These boards stood at a slope in the hopper with the lower ends resting in a narrow trough that extended the length of the hopper and led into a large trough on the outside. When water was poured upon the ashes, lye would form and flow down into the narrow trough and then out into the large trough. The lower ends of these boards resting in the small trough would become curved, due to the position in which they stood and the action of the lye upon them. When holes were bored in the curved up ends and a strong cord or rope attached, they made fine toboggans, which could be guided somewhat by the use of the cord and could be pulled back uphill by it. We rode our sleds and toboggans from the upper yard fence down to the garden below and stopped our descent by allowing our feet to crash against the garden palings.



Then we always had stored a generous supply of walnuts and hickory nuts and hazel nuts and chinquapins and popcorn. These not only furnished us with good protein food, but afforded much satisfaction in cracking, popping and eating. We also had buried in the ground big, brittle, juicy apples that had a delicious earthy taste that only buried apples possess. Also turnips, potatoes, and cabbage were preserved for winter and spring use in the same manner. Any one who has not tasted apples in the spring that have been buried all winter; or dug out of the turnip hold a large juicy turnip and scraped it into a fine pulpy mass for eating, has missed the most edible delights found only in fruits and vegetables so preserved through the winter season.

So, you see...although Santa Claus did not pay us periodical visits at Christmas time, like he did our neighboring children, bringing them "store candy" and "brought on" nuts, and pastries and fancy toys. He was with us every day, summer and winter, giving us vigorous, resistant constitutions, flowing health, independence, self reliance, initiative, knowledge gained first hand from nature, endowing us with realism and a spirit of self-denial gained only, I am convinced, by meeting life's problems face to face in overcoming adversities.

When I was 5 and a half years old, my father died. I remember it very distinctly. Relatives and neighbors came and among them were carpenters, friends of my father. They constructed a coffin out of dressed pine boards and covered the outside with some kind of black cloth and they lined the inside with some kind of white goods. Then around the edge of the lid they tacked a scalloped fringe of black material, which gave a finished appearance to the casket when the lid was in position.

I saw my father's body in the casket, and while relatives and friends were in tears, I felt no grief. It all seemed a matter of necessity. In my observation of life on the farm, I had come to know what it meant to be born into the world and what it meant to die. Birth and death seemed to be necessary counterparts for everything that lived. I felt no grief. I only wished my father had not died. The funeral procession was made up of horse-drawn vehicles and people on horseback. The casket was conveyed in a hack at the head of the procession followed by farm wagons--one of which was drawn by an ox team--hacks, buggies and people on horseback bringing up the rear.

It was the first funeral procession I had ever seen and it seemed like a lot of people and wagons and horseback riders together. It was weird spectacle, which became more so at the cemetery, for the ceremonies were conducted by the Grange, a farmers' organization to which my father belonged. Only men took part in the ritualistic conduct of the ceremonies. Some read from books, some carried large banners fastened to long staffs with heavy twisted silk cords. Most of them carried small banners tacked on slender rods about 3 feet long. These banners were in individual colors of yellow, orange, black, red

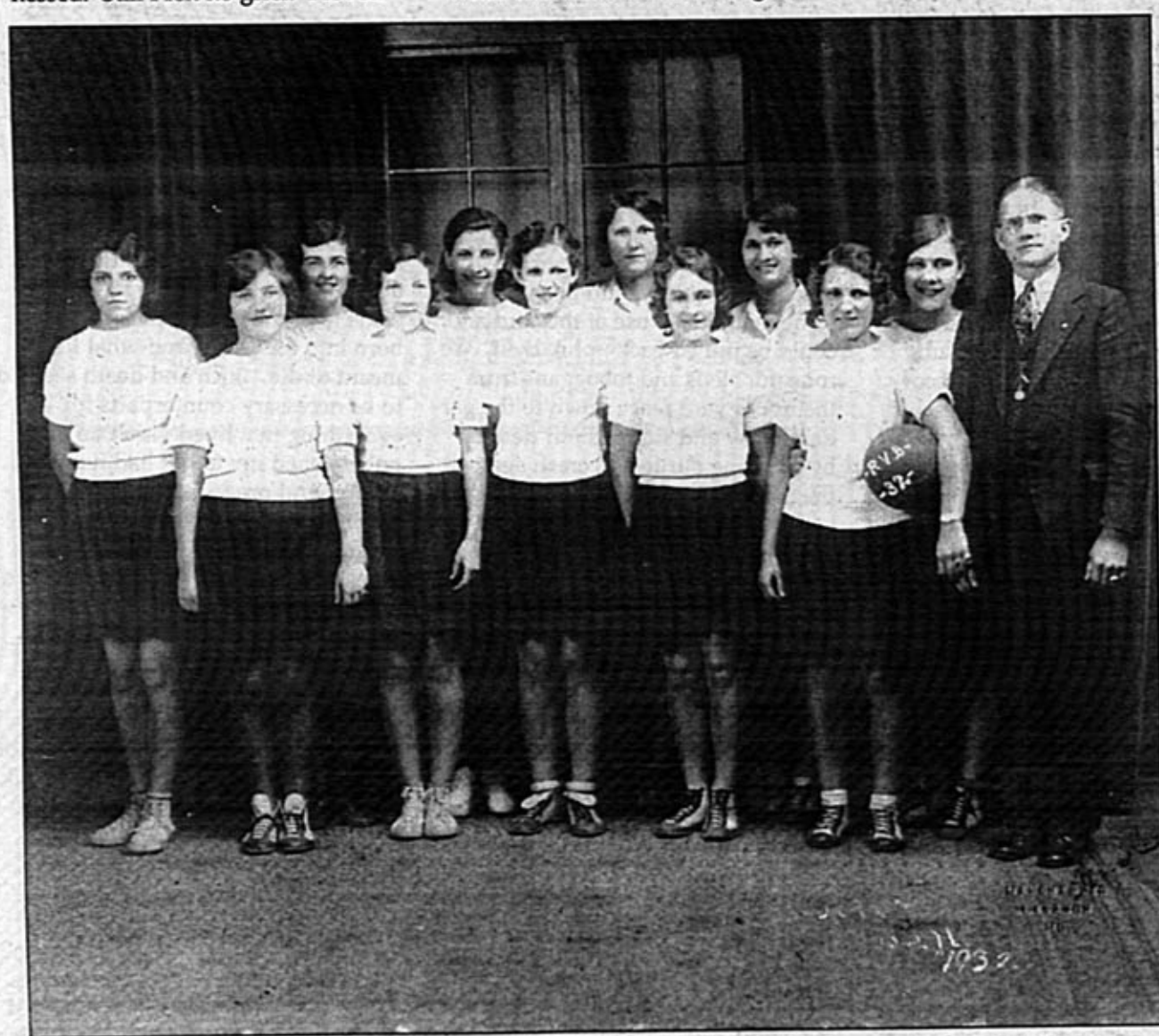
and white, with yellow appearing to be the dominant color. The men marched in a circle single file around the grave singing, and occasionally they stopped and planted their banner staffs in the ground in a manner to cross them diagonally. The varicolored banners encircling the grave presented a rather attractive spectacle to my young mind, but it was so strange and weird. People were in tears and some were moaning and wailing. I felt no grief. I wondered if all funerals were like this. I loved my father and only wished he had not died.

Two years later my mother died. There was a repetition of the casket making, the tears and expressions of grief by relatives and friends. The funeral procession was similar to that of my father, only not as long and the ceremony was void of the spectacular, for it was in charge of one man, a minister in the community. It was all very simple and quickly over. This was the second funeral I had witnessed. Still I felt no grief. I loved my mother and I wished she had not died.

The next day I was taken to my Uncle's where my future home was to be. My companion brother (went to live) on the home farm which had been managed and operated by an older brother since my father's death. I had only been to my Uncle's home twice before and this was the farthest I had been from my home. The environment of my new home was so different to what I was accustomed and loved that I soon began to experience a sense of loneliness and longing for my brother and our play grounds. When night came and one of my older sisters, who was also making her home with my Uncle and Aunt, stripped me and put me in a tub of warm water, soaped, scrubbed and rubbed my whole body, particularly my ears, I not only felt much humiliated but physically skinned. The task was not easy for her either for I protested vigorously. Then when she dressed me in a night shirt and tucked me in a nice clean bed by myself when I had been accustomed to sleeping with my companion brother, I felt my troubles were beginning. Then she bode me a good night, and I began to experience grief. I was soon quietly in tears and sobbed myself to sleep.

My brother and I were purposely not permitted to see each other for almost a month. The (separation) made it easier to "wean" us away from each other. After almost a month elapsed which I had spent in loneliness, unhappiness and secret tears, the family all went to church. Meetings were held monthly at the little school house where I had gone two terms to school. We rode in the family hack drawn by a fine team of horses. My Uncle and Aunt with my baby sister between them sat in the front seat and I sat between my twin sisters in the back. It was the first time I had ever been to church and also my first experience riding in a hack. I liked the ride.

When we got to the school house, to my delight my brother was there. We quietly got together and went out to the big old hickory tree at the back and slightly to one side of the house. Our meeting was pathetic. I found that he had experienced grief even more keenly than I had. We realized we would have to become accustomed to our new relationships and we agreed to try to make the best of circumstances. In the course of a short time the brother with whom he lived moved into an adjoining county. We saw each other quite infrequently after that. Time seems to assuage grief. "Sleep knits up the raveled sleeve of care." When he was about grown he went to Texas. I did not see him again until 1897 while I was a student in dental college. He went back to Texas and from there to Alaska. I had a letter from him in 1914, written from Juneau. He said he was leaving for the interior of Alaska and would be gone two years. I never heard from him again. I wish I knew what became of him.



The Richland High Grizzlies won the Pulaski County League volleyball tournament in 1932: (Back row, left to right)--Helen (Nelson) Mc Gee, Marjorie (Shockley) Knight, Claudia (Nelson) Briggs, Thelma Barton, and Freda Glawson. (Front row, left to right)-- Wilma Glawson, Genevieve Hawkins, Margaret (Elderidge) Mc Daniel, Genevieve (Foster) Jones, Fern (Moales) Warren, captain, and Coach Ralph Hamilton. Coach Hamilton is still going strong in his nineties and lives in Springfield. Courtesy of John Kinsley.

Pearl (Mitschele) and Andrew Thornsberry on his 70th birthday celebration held on August 26, 1945. Courtesy of Dr. Jerry Thornsberry.