

## Doc's Place

My dad and mom grew up on farms in northern Missouri. They lived just down the road from each other near the town of Salisbury. My dad never talked much about his experience at home when he was young, but he must have gotten some "dirt in his shoes", because he seemed to always want to own a piece of land.

His father was a true Missouri farmer. I remember visiting him on the old farmstead when I was about five years old. I have a black and white picture of grandpa Vardiman and his mule he used for plowing. Unfortunately, in the picture the mule's ears are sticking. Up directly behind my grandfather, giving him the appearance of having extremely large ears. He was able to support his family of four on 80 acres of farm land with a little extra income from raising chickens.

Grandpa Vardiman plowed his farm by walking behind his mule and using a one-bottom plow. All his farm equipment was either horse drawn or required heavy manual labor. He never owned a tractor.

The desire to return to a farm is apparently a common experience for men born on the farm. Many of my friends from high school and several of my relatives have tried their hands at farming, even when the economics weren't favorable. Many have had to supplement their farm incomes with jobs in town. Others have lost everything to bankruptcy.

Farming is more than just making a living, it's a way of life. Unfortunately, it takes a sizable inheritance, a lot of skill, and a little bit of luck to be successful in farming today. A farmer needs at least 640 acres or more of fertile farmland to support a family on a general-crop farm today. That's one square mile of land--one mile long and one wide, also known as a section.

I thought I was going to be a farmer. I spent three years on my dad's farm in southern Illinois during high school plowing, planting, and harvesting. But, I decided during my sophomore year that, "If I had enough money to go into farming, I didn't need to go into farming." Unless you inherit the land, buildings, and most of the equipment, it's very difficult to make a farm profitable. The

interest on borrowed money to start from scratch eats up most or all the profit. I must not have gotten enough "dirt in my shoes".

After working for the Ralston Purina Company for several years as a veterinary pathologist and frustrated by living in the city, my father was able to scrape together enough money to buy a small farm south of Columbia, Illinois. It was a gentleman's farm, too small to support a family, but big enough to absorb all his extra cash. The farm was located on the rolling hills of southern Illinois, about two miles from the edge of a bluff along the Mississippi River south of St. Louis.

"Doc's Place", as it came to be called by Eddie Stumpf, one of our German neighbors down the road, was 102 acres of toil and practical education. It was half wooded and half tillable. The woods, through which a small stream flowed, contained squirrels, rabbits, foxes, ground hogs, birds, and an occasional deer. Some of my favorite memories with my dad are rabbit hunting in the winter and tramping among the trees in the summer. We grew corn, hay, soy beans, and sorghum on the tillable ground.

Over the entire farm large funnel-shaped depressions pockmarked the landscape like craters on the moon. A few of them covered an area of four acres or more. Most of them were only one or two acres in size. There was probably a total of twenty of these depressions called sinkholes on our farm, both in the woods and in the open fields. Some filled with water during heavy rainstorms, others drained the water quickly into caves beneath the ground in their center.

Sinkholes are created by the dissolution of limestone layers in the ground beneath the soil. Water percolates through the upper 20 feet or so of fertile soil in southern Illinois and dissolves the limestone on its way to the river. Caves form within a few miles of the cliff along the Mississippi River along preferred routes of flow and soil is eroded into the cavities forming sinkholes.

By filling the cavity at the bottom of a sinkhole or blocking the path along a stream bed to a sinkhole, a farm pond can be created. A large pond was created near our house by this method.

Sinkholes added character to our farm. They formed a rugged topography with as much as a 40-foot elevation difference from the bottom of the deepest sinkhole to the top of the higher terrain. Most of the sinkholes were filled with trees because the slopes were too steep to farm. Grapevines grew up the trees and they made great places to imitate Tarzan or Jungle Jim. One could swing on a vine out over the sinkhole and fly 20 feet or more above the ground. Occasionally my mother would join us kids in swinging on the grape vines. One time when she swung out over the sinkhole, the vine broke loose from the trees above and she fell into the sinkhole, tumbling head over heels to the bottom. Fortunately, other than being shaken up a bit, she was uninjured.

Sinkholes were fun to explore as a child, but one always needed to be wary of snakes and small animals which may have been swept into the cavities during rainstorms. One also needed to be careful that it didn't begin to rain while you were in a sinkhole. We used one of the sinkholes on the farm to dispose of our trash. It never seemed to fill up, the trash slowly disappearing down the hole.

My dad bought "Doc's Place" with the intention to develop it into a working farm on which he could raise his family and satisfy his desire to return to his roots. He had planned to do much of the work himself, teaching his children how to work the land. However, because of the heart disease he had developed, he performed little actual work on the farm himself. Whenever he attempted to do any physical labor such as digging post holes or stringing fence, he would experience excruciating pain in his left arm. This pain, known as angina, was due to the restriction of the blood flow to his heart because of blockages in his arteries. In the 1950s many of the medical procedures to relieve these symptoms we take for granted today were unknown and there was no permanent solution to the pain. He could only look forward to a lot of pain and a likely heart attack and death in the years ahead. He took nitroglycerin when the pain was too difficult for him. He suffered several major and minor heart attacks before he died some ten years after giving up the farm.

During the three years that we lived on the farm, my dad depended primarily on me to do the chores. He worked a regular job at Ralston Purina in St. Louis and I went to school during the week. But, he would leave instructions for me for the evening tasks. On the weekend, he would supervise me directly and assist as best

he could. This was when I was between 13 and 16 years old. I loved it! I got to milk the cows, drive the tractor, plow the fields, and cut the hay!

In 1956 dad bought our first tractor. It was an International Harvester Cub. It stood about 4 feet tall and could pull a one-bottom plow. It was not a real farm tractor. My father expected me to plow two ten-acre fields that first Fall with a "garden tractor". I started plowing the first field in September after school and on Saturdays. It took me until the middle of October to finish it! Our neighbor, who owned an International Harvester M, could have plowed the same field in one day.

But, we didn't give up. Dad and I headed out one Saturday to work the second field. It hadn't been plowed for several years before he bought the farm and had grown up in weeds. The weeds were ten feet high in places. Sitting on the tractor one couldn't see over them to know in exactly what direction to drive. Even by standing up to steer you couldn't see over them. Dad drove to one end of the field and told me to stand up on the hood of the tractor. He asked me to direct him to the far end of the field by finding a tree and keeping us pointed at it. This was difficult to do because there was nothing to hold on to when standing on the hood of the tractor except the exhaust pipe and that was too hot to hold. So, we found a rag in the tool box and I gingerly balanced myself by lightly holding the exhaust pipe with the rag. Near the center of the field there was a large sinkhole that we had to skirt around, and the tractor leaned to the left, down the slope as we headed toward the far side. It was all I could do to hold on without burning myself on the exhaust pipe, keep my balance, and watch for the tree at the end of the field.

Finally, we reached the end, and looked back along the path we had taken. The furrow wandered in a drunken manner through the weeds to our position. It wasn't beautiful, and it wasn't straight, but at least we could now see from one end of the field to the other. The same furrow could now be followed, and the remainder of the field gradually plowed from this center line to both sides. We straightened out the worst of the wiggles and eventually I completed plowing this field six weeks later, by Thanksgiving.