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My Indian Childhood in Oklahoma

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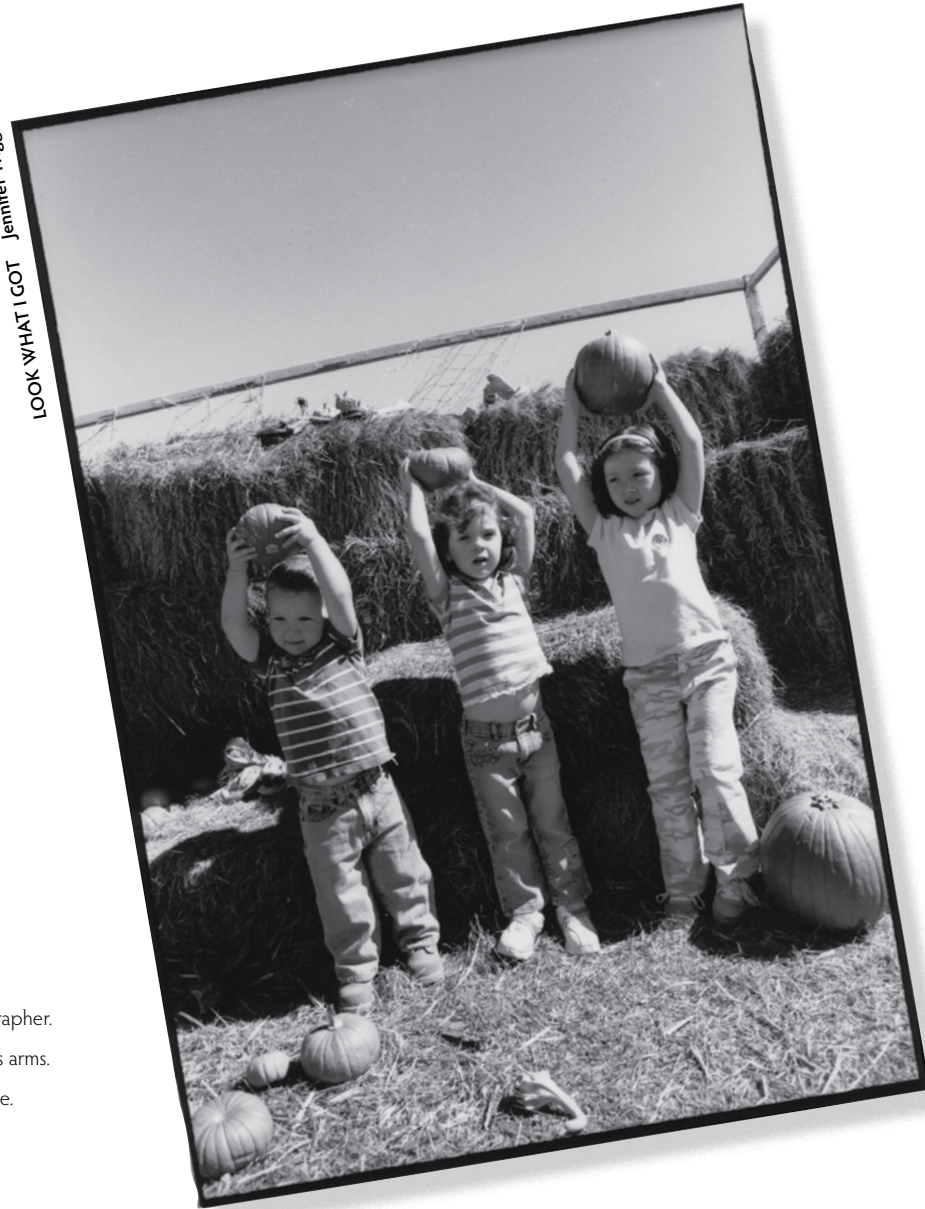
Blue

Misty Mix

Church railing is not the focus.
Smiling face is not for the photographer.
She is in her favorite spot: daddy's arms.
Wind entices blonde hair to dance.
Tree leaves stir up a melody.
Eyes closed against the sun.
If opened, reflections of delight would shine.
Lace adorned blue dress and red stripped blue shirt all against a blue sky.
The air must smell of country: fresh manure, honeysuckle, tilled earth.
Sunlight in their faces illuminates much, but not all.

The lens again will never capture these two.
Both gone now like the county background.
City grows up around the old barn and church.
Sunny day's peace broken by the transformation of change.
Touch the print and touch death.
The negative is all that remains.

LOOK WHAT I GOT Jennifer Triggs



My Indian Childhood in Oklahoma

Kathy Allen

I STILL HAVE VIVID MEMORIES OF GROWING UP AMONG MY INDIAN RELATIVES IN OKLAHOMA. In the late '40s and early '50s, before I was born, the state of Oklahoma had started removing the Native Americans from the reservations. The Government had built several blocks of homes for them, all one-bedroom, and my father, who was part Comanche and part Creek, qualified for one of them. We lived there in a community of Comanche, Apache and Kiowa in Oklahoma City.

However, I spent much of my childhood visiting my grandparents, who lived out in the country on a farm. I can still remember my Great Grandmother Minnie, even though she died when I was a child. I can remember her long braided hair and how much she looked liked the other Indian women in my neighborhood.

My grandparents had much to do with the training and character building of their grandchildren. My oldest brother Roy and I, often with our cousins Susan and Janine, visited them on weekends to help with the farm work. Grandma Ruby Nell used to give each of us a bucket and sent us into the orchard to pick apples, peaches, pears and cherries, always with strict instructions not eat any of the cherries. After filling our buckets, we took them to her to wash and remove the stems.

Of course, we usually ate some cherries. When Grandma Ruby Nell asked us if we had, Roy always said "no," but she knew he was lying. She would then lead us out into the front yard and tell us to break a switch off the bush. If we selected a short, thin switch, she would walk out herself, choose a longer, thicker one, and switch us with it.

It took us a year or two to figure out how she always knew we were lying. You see, the house had no indoor plumbing, no bathroom with mirrors, just an outhouse.

After the new, modern bathroom was put in later, we could go inside, look in the mirror, and see the cherry stains all around our mouths!

Grandmother Ruby Nell taught me many practical lessons: cooking, canning and sewing. Since she happened to be my Sunday School teacher, she also made sure I learned my Bible verses. Because I had trouble learning to read—I would see the words all run together on the page—she developed a practical way of teaching me. She always had green beans from the garden for me to snap with her in the evening. We would sit on the front porch swing, and she would say, "Repeat after me: 'The Lord is my Shepherd.'" Then she would have me snap each end of the green bean. Then the next line: "I shall not want," and I would snap each end of another green bean. We would continue until I knew all the lines, and got the green beans snapped at the same time.

My grandpas were also important in my life. After my parents divorced, when I was eight, Grandpa Wall came to live with us. He worked with my father's dad, who had his own carpentry business. It was what every hyperactive girl needed, two grandfathers paying attention to her. They would often take Roy and me to work with them on Saturdays. I learned to sand baseboards and to use a hammer.

Grandpa Wall used to tell me, "If someone is willing to teach you something, you should learn it. You never know down the road of life when you might be able to use it." Both grandfathers told me that they didn't care what I did for a living when I grew up. I could be a dishwasher in a restaurant if I wanted to, but I must make sure to be the best dishwasher they had. "If not," they said, "the pay check doesn't belong to you."

(continued on page 20, second column)

The Hem

Susan Blick

The fabric of a life laid flat
Pattern pinned then trimmed by cookie cutter
Edges raw and unrefined, folded in
Crisply pressed with a hot iron
And stitched together in latest fashion.
I have been sewn nice and neat
Within the current disguise,
A tenuous thread
Waiting to unravel.

Handwriting

Molly Boyce

Risky business, this putting words to paper,
Red blobs of throbbing ink, a stain against
Your soul, proof indelible of conscious intellect
And emotional barometer for all to gauge,
Yet, I cannot keep this pen contained.

My mother also demonstrated a strong work ethic. Finding herself divorced, with a small family and no work training, she began taking night courses in secretarial college. Meanwhile, she needed a job. She began working full time as a cashier at Turner's Grocery Store, just across the street from my elementary school. She made hot dogs every day, and we children could walk across the street and buy them for lunch as long as we sat on the grocery steps to eat them. The hot dogs cost five cents, and a 6-ounce cold Coca-Cola cost five cents. My mother would make the best hot dogs, with lots of chili, mustard, and onions. The kids at my school called her the Hot Dog Lady. She continued working there until she graduated from the secretarial college and got a job, as a secretary for an insurance company.

I worked in the neighborhood too. I did babysitting for the Indian families in my neighborhood, but I didn't get money. They always paid me with commodities, which were given to them by the state. In a circle on every item was a label that read, "Indian Reservation, Oklahoma." My payment would be perhaps a ten-pound sack of flour, a 10-pound sack of sugar, a can of powdered eggs (which had a greenish color) and a small box of lard or a block of chocolate.

One day at school I overheard two girls talking about making a whole dollar fifty babysitting. I went home and told my mom. After listening to me, she said, "Let's get out what you made when you went to babysit the other night. Let's see, a sack of flour, a sack of sugar a large block of chocolate, powdered eggs, one pound of butter and a jar of honey. Well, it comes to seven dollars," she said. "Which is better, one dollar and fifty cents an hour or seven dollar's worth of groceries?" I never complained again!

As I started into the eleventh grade in 1970, our school offered beauty college classes. My mother enrolled me. I really wanted to take auto shop because I had helped my brother Roy work on his car. However, Southeast High had a policy that, although both girls and boys could take beauty college classes, auto shop was only for boys.

The first haircut I did in beauty college was on a mannequin head with very long, black hair. The mannequin heads were new that year. Our teacher, Mrs. Haul, placed each one of us in front of a station with a new mannequin head bolted on it. She then explained how to comb and section off the hair with hair clips and trim each section a half inch all over the head. She planned for us to trim just a small bit of the long hair.

I began sectioning and cutting, sectioning and cutting. I ended up giving a short page boy haircut, not at all what Mrs. Haul expected. As I finished it, Mrs. Haul walked by, stopped, grabbed my scissors and comb, and screamed, "Your Mother owes me eighteen dollars! These are new and were supposed to last for two whole years!" All the time I was thinking, I was right; auto shop would have been better for me. I said to myself, "Now I will be kicked out of beauty college and will have to pay for this mannequin head."

Then she paused, examined the cut, thought a moment, and said, "This is the best haircut I have ever seen from a first-time student; I have girls who have been here for two years and can't cut hair this good. From now on you will be doing hair cuts

and helping me teach the second-year girls." And that's exactly what I did. Every once in a while a neighborhood woman would bring me a picture of a hairstyle, and I had to teach the whole class how to cut hair by looking at a picture.

Mrs. Haul said I was a natural born hairstylist, just like her. She told me I would make a good instructor for a beauty college, and she wrote a letter to the well known Paul Barnes, who had written the book Cosmetology, used by the beauty college. Mrs. Haul asked him to let me into his college in Oklahoma City, and soon I was enrolled. I was successful in my studies and graduated with a diploma, largely through the help of Paul Barnes, who received permission from the State of Oklahoma to administer the manicuring test to me orally because of my vision impairment. I missed only one question out of one hundred and twenty five.

In the fall of 1970, Mr. Barnes got me my first job, at The Country Club Barber Shop, owned by a country western singer named Conway Twitty. I have to say I didn't like working in a barber shop at all. I did, however, meet an interesting man whom I introduced to my single mom. They have been married now for thirty-some years.

Soon my life took a new turn. Conway Twitty owned a number of businesses in Oklahoma City, including a boat business named Twitty Boats, a restaurant named Twitty Burgers, and a night club called the Georgie Girl's Lounge. My parents leased the lounge. When I quit my job at the barber shop, my mother thought I could work at the Georgie Girl's Lounge. She wanted me to tend bar and go-go dance. The lounge had a stage, and disco was really in at that time.

You might wonder if encouraging me to work at the lounge was a good idea, but my mother knew what she was doing. You see, I was very shy and very small. I weighed about ninety pounds. I wondered who would want to watch me dance. Furthermore, I was not a good dancer and did not want to be. My mother would say I had a lot of rhythm, but did not know what to do with it. My parents then hired a professional go-go dancer to teach me. It worked. I became an excellent dancer, gained confidence and danced at the lounge for six months. My mother was there to watch me.

I worked one night with a new bartender they had hired, a pre-med student at OU, in Norman. He wanted to work weekends only. We worked together for only three months on weekends and were married in 1971.

That year marked a major turning point in my life. My husband and I soon left Oklahoma. My old days with my Indian relatives were behind me, but I missed them. Everything seemed to remind me of home in Oklahoma. Trying to cheer me up, my husband once suggested, "Let's go to see the movie Terms of Endearment." We did. It was about a young woman who had been close to her mother, grew up, married, and came down with cancer. I cried.

Whenever I saw pictures of hills and mountains like those in Oklahoma, I cried. When we visited my family in Oklahoma for the holidays and had to leave, I cried. However, with the passing of months and years and with the birth of my own children, the sadness and longing faded away.

Eventually I learned to find happiness no matter where I was, but even today those memories of growing up in Oklahoma are still vivid and dear to me.