

Diary of a Dust Bowl Child

by

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*On May 14, 1934 the Malennee family
left Oklahoma for a new life in southwestern
Colorado. This diary celebrates the 50th
anniversary of that trip, including sketches
of life and times in Oklahoma and Colorado.*

Lovingly dedicated

to

*all family members, many of whom have
developed, used and passed on the
pioneering spirit which made this story
possible.*

I - Life in Oklahoma

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Life in Oklahoma

July 1 - October 31, 1933

July 1, 1933

I'm not at all sure I'm going to like this move they're talking about. Papa says "it's a land of opportunity". Mama says to consider it a new beginning -- a "new chapter" in my life. Clarence is excited about the hunting he can do there. Kent is still thinking about it and Mary is too young to care.

Mama and Papa have been talking about moving west for several months. They've had long talks, muttering and mumbling far into the night when they thought we were asleep. Papa even went out to Summit Point, Utah last year with Uncle Everett and Homer McGee.

"Sweetheart," he said to Mama, "you should see the acres of land that are to be had just for the asking."

But Mama likes to plan ahead -- and she feels some responsibility for Grandma Ray and Aunt Lizzie, who would be left behind.

Papa says it would not be a good idea to move in the fall or winter, and there is still much to do. Maybe next spring?

July 5, 1933

Grandma Johnson gave me this notebook to use as a diary.

When I showed it to Aunt Alfa, she said, "Jean Eileen, during each school year I have my students keep a daily log, a diary. I find that it helps them organize their ideas and gets them into the habit of writing. You are an excellent student and have a good way of expressing yourself. Why don't you try keeping a diary?"

So I am -- the life and times of Jean Eileen Malennee, age 11, elder daughter of Paul and Zona Malennee, Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

July 19, 1933

Mama said, for about the fortieth time this summer, "I wish Papa would get rid of those mules before they hurt someone."

They nearly did today.

Nobody but Papa likes the mules. Old Jack and Nigger are onery to Papa, too. When he goes in the barn they try to kick him or squash him into the sides of the stall.

"But those are some of the best mules in the country," Papa responds in their defense. "Jack and Nigger are the best workin' span of mules around. You just have to know how to handle them."

We needed to know how to handle them today, I can tell you.

Mama had found a kitten wandering around the yard and told me to take it back to the barn. I threw a coat over my head to cover the kitten and me.

I was trying to be real quiet and sneak past the mules when the kitten started wiggling and hissing. The kitten jumped, taking my coat with it, and they both landed beside the mules' stall.

The surprise movement spooked the mules and pandemonium broke loose. The mules kicked and lunched, braying and screaming until they broke out of the barn.

Crossing the yard they hit the water pump and broke it off.

Mama heard the ruckus and came dashing out of the house just as the mules turned toward the spot where Mary Ruth was playing with her doll.

Mama really moved! She ran over and scooped Mary Ruth out of the way just as Old Jack thundered by.

The mules galloped on into the cotton field and around it for a while until they wore themselves out. Papa found them there when he came home.

Mama and Papa are having another of their late-night talks. About mules?

July 20, 1933

I am going to put snapshots in my diary when I can.
I would really like a camera of my own!

Here is a picture of us:



Mama Papa
Kent Clarence Jean Eileen
Mary Ruth

Our cotton crop isn't looking too good this year.
And it didn't help to have the mules gallop around in
the field yesterday.

"Not enough rain to make good cotton," Papa said.
It looks like he'll be right.

Mama has made small pickin' sacks so we can help her
when the cotton is ready.

August 2, 1933

It was hot today. Papa came home and said it was "hot as Hades" where he had been.

Papa works as dynamite man on the road construction crew. Now they are working in northern Lincoln County. Lincoln County looks like this:



I have marked where we live with an x.

Papa wonders if anybody will need a road foreman in Colorado or Utah. I wonder if they even have cars?

August 15, 1933

Snakes

Snakes are not my favorite creatures. Papa has bullsnakes in the barn to keep down the rats and mice. He keeps blacksnakes in the granaries. They are not harmful but they are big.

Today as I was feeding the cats I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye. I slowly turned my head and saw a big bullsnake rising above the stacked bales of hay. Its head was weaving back and forth as if looking for a tasty mouse for lunch. The snake and I looked at each other for a moment and then I left -- in a hurry! It can have its kingdom in the barn for all I care.

We have to watch for snakes when we walk to school, especially on warm days when we are barefooted.

"Stay away from the poisonous snakes," Mama warns. "Walk around them. They won't bother you if you don't bother them."

I walk around them.

August 23, 1933

Mama is still mad at me. I guess I can't blame her but I thought I was doing something nice.

It happened yesterday. Mama and Papa left early in the afternoon. They had some business in town before going to the Literary in the evening. They took Mary Ruth with them. Clarence and Kent were helping a neighbor.

I had finished the chores left for me and didn't have anything to do so I decided to surprise Mama with a sparkling shiny kitchen floor.

I moved the table and chairs as I swept, making sure I cleaned all the corners well. I looked in the usual places -- kitchen, back porch -- but I couldn't find the oil that Mama used to make the wooden floor shine. Then I remembered a can of oil I had seen in the shed. It had a shiny look on top. I decided that it would have to do.

I should have guessed that something was wrong. As I first put it on the kitchen floor it looked beautiful -- shiny black with rainbow highlights in it -- but I had to keep smoothing it out to keep it looking that way. After it set a while it was dull, gray and sticky. I finished the whole floor and was cleaning myself up when Mama and Papa came home.

Mama took one step inside the door, covered her mouth with her hands and shrieked, "Oh my goodness, Jean Eileen, what did you do to this floor?"

Mama walked into the kitchen, shoes sticking to the floor with every step, and sat down at the table. As I quietly left the room, she was just sitting there, shaking her head.

Papa explained to me today that what I had found was used motor oil he had been meaning to throw away. Mama and I spent all day on our hands and knees scrubbing the floor with hot water and lye. I wore out a scrubbing brush, two knees and Mama's patience.

And Mama just kept saying, "Oh my, oh my, oh my! Oh my, oh my, oh my!"

September 9, 1933

We are back in school, and Blanche Peyton is our teacher. She wants Clarence and me to enter the spelling contest this year. I think I would like that but Clarence doesn't want to.

"Will your folks be home this evening?" Miss Peyton asked as we were leaving school. I'll bet she's coming over to talk to them.

Later - same day:

Miss Peyton just left. She came to tell Mama and Papa about the spelling contest.

Papa looked at Clarence and said, "Son, if you'll go and win that spelling bee I'll buy you a gun."

"Okay, Papa," Clarence answered eagerly. He didn't even stop to consider. He has been wanting a gun.

September 10, 1933

Today Miss Peyton had Clarence start to study for the spelling contest. He and James Bannard went out on the cellar door south of the schoolhouse. James pronounced the words for Clarence to practice.

We don't use the cellar much except when storms are coming. The cellar is dug deep into the ground with only a small mound of earth and a stout wooden door showing.

I could see Clarence and James gazing across the flat fields re-living the last time that a cyclone had passed.

"Miz Peyton! Miz Peyton, there's a cyclone comin'!
A big funnel shape headed right this way!"

Miss Peyton ran to the schoolhouse door and quickly checked the horizon. She gathered all the children together and led them to the cellar. Everyone huddled together in the dank cellar, with the older students looking after their younger brothers and sisters.

Through a crack in the door we could see the sky darkening and hear the sounds of the rushing wind. Then there was dead silence for a minute before the winds started again.

The second time the winds stopped we knew that the

cyclone had passed. Miss Peyton cautiously opened the door and checked all directions before she let us leave the cellar.

It was a scary time! There were a few trees down and some roofing torn off the schoolhouse. Otherwise no damage! Thank goodness for the storm cellar.

Kent got a new pair of bib overalls from Aunt Lizzie. I think she favors Kent -- he's little, and I guess he needs someone to stick up for him.

September 12, 1933

Harvesting Peanuts

We started harvesting peanuts today. It is hot and dirty work.

Papa made a sled out of a grader blade for the mules to pull. He sits on the sled and it's pulled down a row of peanuts. After it cuts the tap root and pushes the vine up, we rake the peanut vines into wind rows so they will dry.

Then Clarence and Dolly take over. Clarence runs his little buckskin pony up and down the rows, whoop-whooping like an Indian and shooting at crows to keep them away from the drying peanuts. Clarence loves to do this, but poor Dolly is nearly run to death.

When the peanut vines are dry they are put into shocks, round piles about five feet high. After drying, the shocks are hauled by wagon to the threshing machine.

Papa thinks we'll have plenty of peanuts for pig and cattle feed this year. If any peanuts are left over, we'll take them along when we move.

September 20, 1933

The mules are at it again! All of Papa's favorite speeches about mules came to mind today.

"Good workers, and strong -- can outpull horses because they are full of fire and vinegar all day, they don't wear out! And not the least bit balky."

We can vouch for them not being balky -- they ran away with Clarence and Grandpa.

Before Papa went to work today he told Grandpa Malennee that he - Grandpa - and Clarence could use the mules and wagon to haul the rotting melons in from the field. The old melons would be used to feed the pigs.

All the farm machinery has had to be rebuilt to withstand the mules. It's lucky that the wagon was sturdy!

After hitching the mules to the wagon, Grandpa and Clarence drove them to the melon patch and loaded on all the melons that the wagon would hold. The mules were moving quietly, working together at pulling the loaded wagon. Grandpa and Clarence were congratulating themselves on how well everything was going when the excitement began.

With a rush of wings and a flurry of feathers, a small household of quail, barely missed by the mule's

hooves, flew out from below the front of the wagon. The mules reared, screamed and broke into a hard run.

"Oh, Paul, you should have seen it!" Mama told Papa later. "Grandpa was standing on the tongue of the wagon, trying to get control of the mules. Clarence was hanging on to the seat, shouting encouragement to Grandpa. And melons were flying out of the wagon like cannonballs shot from a gun."

"How did they get the mules stopped?" Papa asked in the moment that Mama took a breath.

"The mules just ran in a circle around the field until they were worn out. Then Grandpa and Clarence picked up the few melons that could be used and brought the team back to the barn."

"Sweetie," Papa said, "I know those mules are full of fire and vinegar. No real harm done -- Clarence and Grandpa handled them well."

He strode off toward the barn and left Mama muttering something about "no mules in Summit Point".

September 28, 1933

Papa loves the Literaries. He claims that he likes the stories, songs and poems but I think he likes them because that was where he first met Mama.

The Literaries are held at Osage School. Everyone goes, all dressed up, for an evening of "enjoyment, edification and enlightenment", according to the poster at school.

After one Literary evening I heard a neighbor chuckling over a story Papa told about the school-teacher with a wooden leg. The story went something like this:

"We had a teacher - I think I was in fifth grade - who had a wooden leg - a peg leg. I had heard adults say that the peg leg was her left leg.

One day I was talking to my friend, Haug, about it, and he said that he'd heard that I knew which leg was wooden. I said I did.

In those days marbles were valuable, and I had an agate that all the boys wanted. As we were talking, it came to me that I should bet Haug that the right leg was wooden.

"How can I tell for sure?" Haug asked.

"Hasn't your mother got a hat pin?" I said.

"Yeah, sure."

A few days later I saw Haug with a wonderfully-long hat pin -- the kind ladies used to hold the big wide-brimmed hats on their heads.

During class, as the teacher was walking between the desks, I saw a movement from Haug's desk. The teacher gave a yelp and went straight up in the air. With long, wide skirts flying, she came down on top of Haug. He had poked her in the good leg.

Outside at recess Haug said to me, "See, I told you you were wrong. Now give me that agate."

I handed it over. I said nothing more about the incident, but I knew who had been right.

September 30, 1933

People around here are starting to talk about the "Dust Bowl".

"Unless this country gets some rain on a regular basis," Papa said to a neighbor, "it's going to be in real trouble! Already top soil is blowing and piling up."

Aunt Opal said that when they were out for a drive they saw dust piled about two feet high beside the houses and barns.

"But the sorniest thing," she remembered, "was to see the rabbits trying to sit in the shade of a fence post. In the hot sun, a fence post doesn't provide much shade."

Our teacher says that the dusty conditions are being caused by farmers who have put too much land under cultivation. When we have long spells with no rain, the top soil can blow away because it has no long-rooted grass to hold it in place.

October 7, 1933

I was mad at Clarence today!

Since Kent has a cold and has stayed home, Papa has been letting us ride Dolly to school. We tie her out to graze during the day, and then ride her home.

We were in a hurry when we left school today. We threw the blanket over her back, grabbed our lunch buckets and climbed on.

Dolly must have known it was feeding time at home. As we came to the main road she pulled the reins out of my hands and jumped the ditch, which had water in it.

Clarence and I fell off, pulling the blanket with us and denting our lunch buckets.

"Mama," I said when I finally got home, "Clarence just got up and walked away. He wouldn't help carry the wet blanket -- he wouldn't even carry his own lunch bucket. I had to carry everything!"

"That wasn't right," Mama agreed. "The next time that happens, you leave the blanket and his lunch pail where they fall and Clarence can go back and get them."

As I went into the house I saw Dolly near the barn, waiting to be fed. She and Clarence have a lot in common.

October 18, 1933

Mama has been sick. I guess we kids were not supposed to know what it was all about, but I overheard a conversation. Accidentally, of course.

Papa met us as we walked into the house after school yesterday.

"Sister," he said softly, "I want you children to wash up and collect your night things. I'm going to take you over to Hemphills. Mama doesn't feel well."

As I walked past their bedroom I heard Mama talking. I heard the words "docton" and "miscarriage". I was worried. Mama works hard but she is seldom sick. In fact, we're all healthy except Mary Ruth.

We went to Hemphills and spent the night. This morning, after we came home, Grandma Johnson motioned for me to follow her. In the kitchen, by ourselves, she told me about the miscarriage -- that Mama had lost a baby boy. He was too small to live. His tiny body just fit in a shoe box. He had already been buried in the cemetery.

Mama stayed in bed today. I tiptoed in to see if she wanted anything, but she was sleeping.

October 27, 1933

"Okay, Papa," Clarence said. "Where's my gun?"

We had just come home from the spelling contest where Clarence and I had both won medals.

Papa took his shotgun off the wall and went to town. When he came home he had a .22 and a pistol.

"Here you are, son," Papa said, handing the .22 to Clarence. "Fine job, both of you, against the city spellers."

Now Clarence is in "hog heaven", as Mama says. It's nice to win a gun, Mama says, but the special "prize" is knowing you have worked hard and won. I think she meant that for me.

October 29, 1933

Papa took the cotton to be ginned today. Again the crop was so poor that he did not get enough "lint", on cotton boll, to pay for the ginning. He had to pay \$7 extra.

When he came home and told Mama, she said, "Paul, how long are we going to put up with this?"

"I'm ready to move when you are." Papa answered.

"Okay," Mama replied, "let's go."

The long-awaited decision has been made. Then came discussion and plans:

- 1) a sale to get rid of stock and machinery,
- 2) where to live over the winter,
- 3) a truck to move us, and
- 4) when we will leave.

I lay quietly in bed listening to their talk and wondered how the next few months of my life would be changed because of this day.

Getting Ready to Go
November 1, 1933 - May 13, 1934

November 2, 1933

The big decision has been made, and Papa isn't letting any time go to waste. At the supper table last night he told us the plans.

"We'll sell all the machinery and livestock," Papa said, "and any household goods we won't need. We'll keep only what we can take west with us."

"But, Paul", Mama reminded him, "what about those nice pieces of china and the Seth Thomas clock? I don't want to chance breaking those by taking them along."

"We can pack those in a sturdy wooden box and leave them here with Grandma and Aunt Lizzie," Papa replied. "I'm sure they can store a few things for us. But we must get everything ready for the sale. We have only two weeks."

Yesterday Papa went into the bank at Tryon to arrange for the sale. Handbills will be printed and put up, announcing the sale for November 18 -- my birthday! Wallace Linton will be the auctioneer.

"The auctioneer is very important," Papa said. "He can mean the difference between the sale being successful or not. Wallace Linton runs a good sale and we are lucky to get him on short notice."

It will be a busy two weeks -- because Mama wants everything organized and tidy. She's calling me now so I guess the rush is on.

November 10, 1933

This place is wild -- we have all been running around like chickens with their heads cut off! Papa and Clarence have been getting the machinery ready to sell. Grandma Johnson is going with us. She's sorting her clothes each day, trying to decide if the weather will be warm or cold. Mama is organizing things into three groups: TO TAKE, TO SELL, TO STORE.

The TO STORE stack is small -- a china platter, a glass candy dish, my toy china dishes, old pictures, the Seth Thomas clock, and a few other treasures Mama cannot bear to part with.

The TO TAKE group is on paper - a list:

cooking utensils	guns
dishes	clothing
pots and pans	mattresses
washtub	bedding
boiler	
Papa's carpentry tools	
Grandma's bird in cage	
Old Joe - Grandma's dog	
Flossie - our dog	

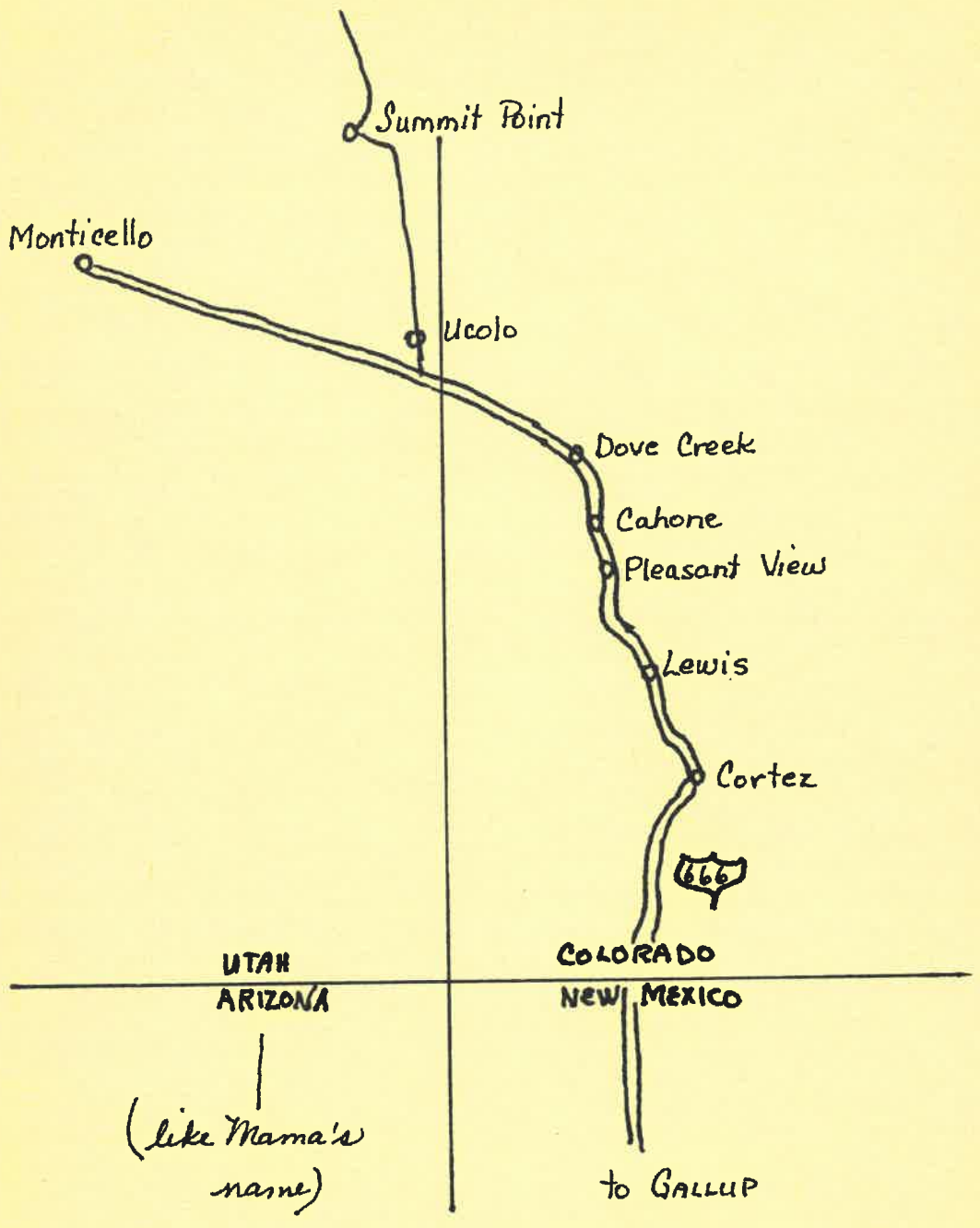
The TO SELL stack will go outside on sale day.

"We'll set up a table in the yard for the household items which are for sale," Mama said. "I don't want strangers trampin' through the house! What we don't want to sell will stay inside."

November 11, 1933

I heard Papa telling a neighbor that we're going to Summit Point, Utah. Why? Because Papa read Riders of the Purple Sage by Zane Grey and liked what he read. Two years ago he visited Summit Point with Uncle Everett and Homer McGee. When he came back he said the area was "full of possibilities". Mama asked him if it had trees? Was it hilly? She thinks Papa likes flat, barren places.

Anyway, I guess by this time next year we will know. A map of the area is on the next page.



November 19, 1933

I've had no time to write in my diary. And I am tired! The whole family is bushed!

We had a big day yesterday -- a successful sale on my twelfth birthday.

Lots of people came to the sale. Some of them came from as far away as Newkirk and Stroud. Horses, wagons, cars and trucks were pulling into the yard before we were finished eating breakfast. Everyone who came early wanted to examine the livestock and machinery before the bidding started.

"Heard ya' got some good brood mares for sale," one hearty fellow yelled to Papa, slapping him on the back. "I wanta raise some more mules to work my fields. Show me whatcha got!"

He and Papa tramped off toward the barn discussing mule qualifications. I could have told that fellow something about mules!

Grandma Johnson had three big pots of soup cooking outside. We had borrowed two of the kettles and scrubbed them clean. Very early in the morning we had filled them with water and started the fires under them. Grandma made chicken soup in one kettle, potato soup in another and beef stew in another.

It wasn't even noon yet when the first people, holding cups and crackers they had brought with them, started following the delicious smell right up to the bubbling kettles of soup. They sniffed and commented until Grandma said, "Go ahead and eat now if you're hungry. Use that dipper on the side of the kettle. Go ahead." From that moment on the soup kettles were busy.

At ten o'clock Wallace Linton started the sale. For several hours each different activity in the yard was done to the rhythm of his auctioneering. We walked and stinned, straightened and wiped to

"I've got ten now.

Who'll gimme twelve, who'll gimme twelve?

Last chance now, twelve.

Going, going, gone!"

The sun was low in the sky as the last wagon left the yard, loaded with Malennee animals and equipment. The sale was over. What a day it had been!

November 23, 1933

Everyone has been tired and touchy since the sale, and Clarence's escapade today with Grandpa didn't help matters any.

Because both Mama and Papa needed to go to town to complete some business, Grandpa Malennee stayed home with us kids.

I thought things were going fairly well. Mary Ruth was playing with her doll. Kent was trying to fix a broken clock he had been given. I was in the bedroom reading when I heard a terrible noise outside. Rushing to the window I saw Clarence coming from the pasture, moving as fast as he could. Grandpa was running close behind him, waving a rope and hollering, "I'll get you for that, you little so-and-so!"

Clarence darted into the house, barely missing Grandpa's grabbing hand, and scrambled under the big bed in the north bedroom.

For the next several minutes it sounded as if several families were moving in and out of that bedroom at once.

Creak, squeak, slam!

Thud, scuffle.

"You little ...!"

Squeak, creak, grunt, slam!

Thud, scuffle.

"Come outa there!"

I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to see what was happening! As I moved quietly to the bedroom door, I saw Clarence crouching under the bed. And that is where he stayed!

Grandpa would grab the bed and slide it over by the door. Then he would drop to his knees and feel under the bed for Clarence, who had moved toward the opposite side. Grandpa would jump up, run around the bed and push it back toward the wall. Clarence would move as the bed moved. Grandpa would again drop to his knees and grope for Clarence, yelling, "Come out of there or I'll beat the tar outa ya!"

It was not a pleasant scene -- I was frightened for Clarence -- but I did wonder how long they could keep it up!

After a long while -- it seemed like hours -- Grandpa suddenly stood up, took a deep breath and clomped out of the room and out of the house.

Despite my pleading, Clarence would not come out from under the bed.

"Grandpa will get me if I come out," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"But Grandpa is outside," I told him. "You'll be okay. Come on out."

"No, I won't." And he didn't.

Papa and Mama came home later in the afternoon to find Grandpa in the barn whittling and Clarence under the bed.

Mama, without even taking off her town clothes, went into the bedroom and spoke to Clarence. He crawled, dusty and tired, out from under the bed. They sat on the edge of the bed while Clarence told his story.

"I was sitting by Grandpa watching him whittle," Clarence said, "when he grabbed me around the neck and started scrobbling my nob! Really, Mama, his knuckles hurt my head and his arm hurt my neck! I wiggled free and tried to run away. He grabbed me again and said he'd show me what a real scrobbling was. I didn't want my nob scrobbed any more so I grabbed a rope and hit him. That made him really mad! So he chased me -- down to the pasture and back. I got under the bed and stayed there."

Mama gave him a long, searching look, wiped a smudge off his cheek and said, "Go wash up, son, and stay on your bed until supper. I'll talk to your Papa about this."

Much later, in one of their late-night discussions, I could hear Mama and Papa comparing Clarence's version of the incident with the one Papa had heard from Grandpa.

Mama had the last word. "Really, Paul, your father does tease the children!"

The matter wasn't mentioned again.

December 15, 1933

We moved to Agra last week. Since we live only three blocks from the school, I won't have to wear that awful long underwear. Mama made us all wear it when we had to walk two miles to Osage School.

Our teacher's name is John Alden -- like John Alden in the Mayflower story. He said he had seen Clarence and me at the Spelling Bee.

I lost the medal I won in the Spelling Bee. I guess Clarence still has his medal but he won't even let me see it. Why do I always lose the things I like best?

December 19, 1933

Being new in school, we had to be weighed and measured. I weigh 98 pounds and I am 5 feet 5 inches tall. The kids in class call me "String Bear."

"String Bear, String Bear,
Jean Eileen's a string bear."

Either people don't know that those names hurt or they don't care! I'm never going to do that to anybody, especially a new student.

February 24, 1934

Did I say things were not exciting around here? Well, we had some excitement yesterday. Exciting and sad! Our big dog, Collie, was bitten by a rabid animal.

Yesterday afternoon Mama looked out the window and saw Collie acting peculiar. He was restless, prowling around, growling at things -- not at all like our gentle collie!

When we got home from school Mama said, "Clarence, I think Collie is sick and maybe rabid. I've been watching her odd behavior, and I don't think we should wait for Papa. I want you to see if you can get Collie in the barn - but be careful! Don't let her bite you! I'll call someone to come and take care of her."

Clarence went outside while Mama hurried to the telephone. We saw Clarence run toward the barn, calling Collie to follow him. As soon as the dog ran into the barn, Clarence dashed out, slammed the door and latched it. Collie was safe inside, Clarence was safe outside.

Mama was on the phone. "Hello, may I speak to the Deputy Marshall." Pause. "Hello, this is Zona Malernee. I think our collie dog may be rabid.

Clarence has locked him in our barn, but I don't think we should wait for my husband to come home. Could you send someone over?" Pause. "Fine. Thank you very much."

A short time later, with our noses pressed to the window, we watched the Deputy Marshall walk to the barn, carrying a gun. No one said a word, but tears fell when we heard a single shot. Mama didn't have to tell us to stay inside the house. No one moved as she went out and spoke to the Deputy Marshall.

Supper was quiet. We don't know what kind of rabid animal bit Collie, but we do know that we have lost a friend. Collie won't see Summit Point.

March 10, 1934

THE 3000 - POUND MULE TEAM
(a tale according to Papa)

I had this team of iron-gray mules - they were big, strong mules -- and one day I hauled a load of cotton into town with 'em.

A mule buyer happened to be in town and, when he saw those mules, he came up to me and said, "If those two mules'll weigh 3000 pounds, I'll give ya" \$350 for "em."

I said, "Mister, you just bought yourself a span of mules."

He said, "Why do ya' think so?"

I said, "I got a smaller pain and they weigh 2940." That was Jack and Nigger.

I slid the harness off and led 'em onto the scales. They weighed just over 3200 pounds.

The mule buyer gave me a check and I took it in to old Minon Sloan at the bank.

Old Minon looked at the check and said, "Now, Paul, you know good and well that check can't be any good! Nobody is payin' that kind of money for mules in this time."

"Well, call the bank at Guthrie and ask 'em", I said.

Old Minon put a call through to the bank at Guthrie and explained what had happened.

"That's a mule buyer," the Guthrie banker said.

"Well, is the check any good?" Sloan asked again.

"I said, that's a mule buyer," the banker repeated and hung up.

"Well, Paul," Sloan asked, "what shall we do?"

"Put the check through," I replied. "We'll see if it's any good."

The check was good and I never did see another pair of mules as big as those.

March 15, 1934

This evening, after supper, we all walked to Freeman's to see if the truck was finished. Papa has spent a lot of time there discussing what is involved in this project.

Freeman's Garage is fixing a truck to move us west. The front part is a Pontiac Roadster convertible, the back part is a truck bed. They will join these two parts, putting a canvas tarp from the windshield back over the entire truck bed. The Roadster has rubber tires, with a spare. The truck has wooden wheels with steel rims, no spare.

Mama says we can pack the truck bed full and even hang things on the outside -- a waterbag and the pots we will use to cook with as we travel. Some of us will ride on top of the tarp, along with six sacks of peanuts that Papa wants to take.

We looked at the truck while Mama tried to decide if her TO TAKE stack would fit.

Grandma Johnson is doubtful. "I'll 'swan to goodness, Zonie," she said. "How are you goin' to get all those things in the truck?"

"Well," Mama answered, "we'll have to pack the most important things first, and leave what we can't fit in. That's all we can do!"

Everything that seven people, one dog and a bird
will need to live in Utah must fit in, on on, that
truck. This may be interesting!

Sunday, May 13, 1934

After all these months of waiting, tomorrow is THE day. Tomorrow we leave for Summit Point, Utah. The truck is packed, everything is ready.

This weekend many people -- family and friends -- have been dropping in to say good-bye and wish us a safe trip.

"Do you have enough food, Zonie? I brought you some sugar cookies."

"Now you be sure and watch out for those Indians! I hear they're vicious!"

"You say you're takin' peanuts? What'll you do with 600 pounds of peanuts and no hogs to feed?"

"Be sure to write us -- let us know how ya' all are."

"Do you mean to tell me you're going to ride on top of that load, Zona?"

"ALL the way?"

"Lawzy, these young'uns will be grown before we see'em again."

That may be so, but we are all ready and eager to go. Tomorrow!

The Trip

May 14, 1934 - May 21, 1934

Monday, May 14, 1934

Agra to Elk City, Oklahoma
(171 miles)

We left very early this morning. Papa is driving, of course. Grandma Johnson and Mary Ruth are riding in front with him. Mama, Clarence, Kent and I ride on top of the truck with the peanuts.

I'm glad I'm not in the front because Grandma has Old Joe and her bird in the cage. She has to yell at Old Joe a lot to get him to settle down under her feet. She holds the birdcage on her lap. I don't think Mary Ruth has a lot of room -- squeezed in there between Papa and Grandma. Mary Ruth is only five years old, and she's been sick so she can't ride on top with the rest of us.

When we left this morning, we first went south to Oklahoma City, where we picked up Highway 66. Mama says we'll be on "66" for a long time -- most of the way.

"Now look, children," Mama said, pointing out the state capitol building. "We may not be back here for some time, so look while you can."

We came on west to Elk City and we are spending the night in a little cottage. We stopped early

because Mama had to see the doctor about her ear-ache.

The first day of our trip was uneventful. We had some light rain, and it was rather windy, but no problems.

Grandma finally has the bird and Old Joe settled down. We must all get to sleep, so we can start early tomorrow.

Tuesday, May 15, 1934

Elk City to Amarillo, Texas
(144 miles)

We left Elk City this morning after an early breakfast. We had post toasties, meat, jelly, butter and bread. The weather was fine today -- no wind on rain -- and the roads were good. As we travelled, we saw jackrabbits sitting in the shade of fence posts, the only shade available. Where the dust could collect, it had drifted high -- by houses, sheds and fences. It is flat and barren in western Oklahoma and eastern Texas. As far as you can see in all directions, it is flat.

There was a problem this afternoon at the last gas station. Papa asked the owner to fill the tank with gas, which he did. When Papa gave him the money to pay for the gas - a twenty-dollar bill -- the owner said he would have to go up to his house to get change for the bill.

We watched him walk up the short drive to his house, go inside for a minute or two and come back toward us.

When he gave Papa the change, Papa said, "Listen, man, this is not enough money. I gave you twenty dollars."

"You gave me a ten," the owner replied, turning away. "And that's your change."

"We couldn't prove it," as Mama said later, "but we can handle it differently next time. From now on we will keep our money until the owner gets the connect amount of change."

We had over \$80 when we left Oklahoma. We pay about \$2 per night to rent a cabin. We do our own cooking. But we must have money for gas. I think Papa is going to try trading some peanuts for gas. We have plenty of peanuts.

Wednesday, May 16, 1934

Amarillo, Texas to Tucumcari, New Mexico
(134 miles)

Today we met some interesting people when we stopped for gas. There were several local men standing around, most of them complaining about the weather.

"Heck, we haven't seen any rain to speak of in two years. Everything has just dried up and blown away."

"You people came from Oklahoma? Are they still plantin' crops back there? I didn't even get out my planter -- just a waste of time! Nothin' will grow!"

"Feel that hot sun? See those heat waves risin'? Not a cloud in the sky as far as the eye can see. That's the way it's been for two years. I don't know how much longer I can stay here."

But there was good news! Papa could pay for his gas with a sack of peanuts. The owner of this station was delighted to have "goobers" for his family. He had been raised in the South and hadn't had good peanuts in a long time!

Before we got here (Tucumcari) we had to stop and soak the truck wheels in the arroyo -- the only

place we saw water. The wheels are wooden. After we drive for a few hours in this dry heat, the wooden spokes shrink and start falling out.

"Now, son," Papa told Clarence as the rest of us piled off the truck, "we'll block these front tires and jack the back end up so we can soak both wheels. They must be very wet so the rim will stay on. You take one wheel, I'll take the other."

Grandma set the bird cage in the shade of the truck and gave Old Joe a chance to run. Mama, Mary Ruth and I took our shoes off and waded in the water. Kent threw rocks at the little lizards as they dashed from rock to rock. We knew we had to continue our trip, but we were all sorry to leave our picnic-style stop.

"Let's go!" Papa yelled as he and Clarence replaced the tight, wet wheels. "We need to make Tucumcari tonight."

We did make Tucumcari. Everyone is settled down in our cabin, ready to sleep. Papa always makes sure that the guns are in the cabin before he gets in bed. He is carrying quite a bit of money. He's ready --
Good night!

Thursday, May 17, 1934

Tucumcari to Scholle, New Mexico
(110 miles)

We are in a cabin camp at Scholle, a Mexican village at the edge of the mountains.

We had a fairly easy day today. Mama thinks we are traveling at about 4000 feet elevation. We can tell the difference -- we are warm when we're in the sun, but cool in the shade. Our skins are tan -- especially Mama, for she has ridden the whole way on top of the truck. The rest of us have sat inside once or twice.

I think Old Joe and the bird are glad to be out of the Oklahoma heat. Grandma doesn't say much. She's never been one to complain.

As we came from Tucumcari today we crossed salt plains, lying white and barren between the mountains. I wanted to stop and get a sample to send back to Oklahoma.

There are a lot of Indians and Mexicans in this area. And Mama had her first business dealings with them.

Near the town of Santa Rosa we crossed the Pecos River. While Papa got the wheels soaking in the

niven we walked around a bit. Mama saw some Indians camped just off the road, with handmade pottery to sell.

The Indians saw Mama, too, and watched with interest while she walked back to the truck and pulled a small sack of peanuts off the truck.

The Indians didn't look wild, but Mary Ruth, Kent and I didn't follow Mama as she walked over to the Indians, carrying the peanuts. We could not hear what she and the Indians were saying, but Mama came back to the truck with two pieces of beautiful Indian pottery.

"Now, sister," Papa said, "You know how Mama loves pretty dishes. Help her pack the pottery away so we can get started again."

As we left the Indians were opening the sack of peanuts.

Friday, May 18, 1934

Scholle to Grants, New Mexico
(110 miles)

We traveled most of the day in the mountains, and it was hard, slow work. Sometimes all of us had to get out and walk, including Grandma and Old Joe. Mama, Clarence, Kent and I pushed the truck up one hill after another to find, at the top, that there was a slight dip and then another hill higher than the one before. Mama says we are only a little ways from the Continental Divide, where the elevation is 9000 feet. The elevation at Agra was 900 feet. No wonder this trip has seemed like an up-hill climb!

We crossed the Rio Grande River country. It definitely is not in the Dust Bowl. Near the Rio Grande River were green trees, gardens starting to grow and some flowers in bloom. Mama loved that!

Later this afternoon we had to stop and soak the truck wheels in a farmer's watering trough. While Papa and Clarence were taking care of that, the rest of us were resting and eating bread and butter sandwiches for a snack.

Grandma jumped up from the rock where she was

sitting and yelled, "Joe, where are you? Come here, Joe!"

Old Joe was nowhere to be seen. He had taken this opportunity to wander off, searching for whatever dogs search for.

Mama and Grandma got us into action. We ran in different directions, looking behind rocks and bushes, yelling, "Come here, Joe!" in five different voices. We must have looked like hungry chickens, rushing from bush to bush, looking for a tidbit to eat.

After a few minutes of this frantic activity, Mama let out a cry, "Look, Mama," she called to Grandma, "Kent's found your dog!"

Kent came from behind a shed, carrying Old Joe in both arms. Grandma let out a sigh of relief before she thoroughly scolded Joe and dumped him in the front seat of the truck.

By that time the wheels were soaked, and we were ready to travel again. For the next few minutes we could hear Grandma explaining in detail to Old Joe why he should not wander away and what would happen to him if he did.

Tomorrow we start downhill. Mama said we might make it to Parks' house in Contez tomorrow night, if all goes well. Could this trip be nearly over?

Saturday, May 19, 1934

Grants, New Mexico to Cortez, Colorado
(173 miles)

We arrived in Cortez after another long day. Highway 66 was a good road, but we had to leave it at Gallup and take 666 north to Colorado. About the only people who use 666 are Indians, with horse and buggy. Sometimes the road was so sandy we could hardly even push the truck through it. Grandma, Old Joe and Mary Ruth had to walk a lot of this day, also.

South of the town of Shiprock we left the sandy roads behind and were traveling on a road that was little more than a hand-packed cow path. But everyone was able to ride once again -- with Grandma, Mary Ruth, Old Joe and the bird in front with Papa, Mama, Clarence, Kent and I on top.

We had barely gotten settled in our places when the engine stopped. The truck coasted to a stop, and Papa got out. He cranked and cranked, trying to get the truck to start, but there was no response. Clarence jumped off to help Papa.

Mama decided that, since it was getting late in the afternoon, we might as well use this time to make supper. We had sandwiches -- slices of cured pork

between the last pieces of cornbread. Each of us had a little drink from the water bag. We had no idea where the next water would be, so we had to use it sparingly.

During this time Papa and Clarence had been trying to get the truck to start. They had checked the oil and water and had turned the crank many times. No luck. Suddenly, while Papa was cranking and Clarence was fiddling with the battery, there was a spark. They quickly scraped and cleaned the battery connections, hooked them back up and the engine jerked to life with the next crank.

With all hands working, we packed everything back on the truck and got under way. This delay meant we were late getting into Cortez - 9:30 p.m. - but here, at least, we have friends who will help us if we have trouble.

Sunday, May 20, 1934

Cortez to Ackmen, Colorado
(15 miles)

We didn't have to get up early this morning, and it was nice to sleep in! After we left Parks' house, we went to see Lucille and Lloody Brixey. They have a daughter my age.

We had Sunday dinner and a good visit with the Brixeyes. Then we started toward Ackmen.

It was only a few miles but it was hard traveling. After crossing Ackmen Creek, we had to go around some curves and start right up Ackmen Hill, which was steep, crooked and sandy. There was no chance to get a run at the hill, so we had to get off and push.

We reached Ackmen tired and dirty. Gentie and Lee Hodson seemed as glad to see us as we were to see them. It is comforting to have caring friends in this new country!

Monday, May 21, 1934

Ackmen, Colorado to Summit Point, Utah
(65 miles)

We are here -- Summit Point, Utah -- after having traveled 922 miles in eight days. The town is set in the middle of sagebrush and rocks. The land is not cleared for farming, and no jobs are available. We found this out in a short time after we got here.

The drive from Ackmen was not bad, most of the hills being between Pleasant View and Dove Creek. We stopped at a little town called Cahone and asked about the Risenhoover family. Mama wants to see her friend Manda.

As we left Cahone and drove on toward Utah, the countryside seemed to have fewer trees and more rocks. It was not a difficult drive, because the roads were dry and hand-packed, the weather was pleasant. There doesn't seem to be much water here, either.

There are no houses to rent in Summit Point so Mama spent the afternoon cleaning a shed for us to live in for a while. She swept and scrubbed, giving it a "high-neck cleaning" -- cleaning only what shows. She will make corn-husk mattresses, but for a while we'll sleep on the ground.

"Paul, Paul," Mama said last night, after we were all in bed, "why did you choose this rocky, brush-covered place when there's nice country back there in Colorado?"

"But, sweetie," Papa replied, "I don't think Summit Point is so bad. There are nice people here."

"That's about all it has," Mama stated. "Let's consider going back to Colorado."

"Hmpfff!" Papa was asleep.

Life in Colorado
May 23, 1934 -

Wednesday, May 23, 1934

It looks like we will soon be going back to Colorado, probably around Cahone. Papa has heard of land in that area that is for sale. He has traded his truck to Howard Scott, Aunt Helen's brother, for a two-horse team and farming tools. That trade will have to take place after we move back to Cahone. Howard Scott seems to have an idea to build a little cabin on the truck bed -- a traveling house! Imagine!

May 25, 1934

We left Summit Point late last week and moved to the Cruzan place, about four miles north of Cahone. The small box-like house sits in the middle of a bean field. We can live in it free for keeping the field gates closed. Otherwise ranging cattle wander in and damage the pinto beans.

In this two-room house, only one room can be used for a bedroom -- Papa and Mama sleep there. Kent and Clarence sleep in bedrolls in a dug-out which was probably started as a cellar to store food. Grandma, Mary Ruth and I sleep in a tent between the dug-out and the house.

Nights are cool here, not warm and humid like Oklahoma. We are wearing our winter nightgowns, because when the sun sets, the temperature drops. During the day the sun keeps you warm, but if you step into the shade, it is cool.

May 30, 1934.

We are pretty well settled now. It has taken us a few days to get used to living here.

For instance, we all have to be on the job keeping the field gates closed. Old Man Seancy's cows wander in any time they can find an opening.

Grandma and I walk to the store every few days for the mail. It is about $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles each way.

Grandma is a strong walker, but I can keep up. Sometimes we do not have three cents for a stamp, so Mama sends a penny post card to the family in Oklahoma.

June 1, 1934

Getting Water

The big problem in this part of the country is getting water. The house where we are living is near a canyon. Every drop of water we use must be carried from a spring at the bottom of that canyon.

When we haul water everyone in the family has a pail which is their size. Papa carries big buckets, Mama and Grandma not quite so big. Even Mary Ruth carries water in a little land bucket.

Walking the one-half mile down into the canyon is not bad, but it is no fun climbing back up with pails full of water. Mama won't allow any complaining, but she does let us stop and rest.

On the floor of the canyon the spring well has a long rope with a bucket attached. Papa can drop that bucket in so it sinks the first time. I usually start with a floating bucket and have to jerk the rope until the bucket sinks.

"I used to think it was strange," Mama said one evening, "that I saw so many houses perched beside canyons. Now I know why. People build their homes near the water supply!"

I wonder if we will ever get a home near a water supply?

June 26, 1934

Grandma, Mary Ruth and I no longer sleep in the tent. We sleep inside the house now. Mama and Papa sleep in the tent. We made the change last night.

We all went to bed early last night because it had been a long, tiring day. Papa had traded one of the last sacks of peanuts for a tree full of ripe, red pie chennies.

Grandma loves chennies, and she's an expert cherry-pitter. She can sit for hours, bowl in lap, squeezing the seeds out of chennies. Furthermore, Grandma likes to get things done. As soon as possible!

So all day we pitted and canned the chennies. That meant hauling a lot of water to wash the jars, besides what was used to cook the chennies.

After a pick-me-up supper we were ready to go to bed. I fell asleep immediately.

"Jean Eileen! Jean Eileen!" I heard my name being called.

When I opened my eyes, it was still dark. It was still the middle of the night!

"Jean Eileen, did you hear that noise?" Grandma was shaking my shoulder. "It was a mumbly noise like someone..."

At that moment the air was filled with a scream --

a scream that pierced ear and heart and being. It filled the night air and invaded the tent as if there were no canvas walls.

"Mercy me, it's a mountain lion!" Grandma yelled. She ran for the house with Mary Ruth and me right behind her.

Mama had awakened and was lighting the lamp as we entered the kitchen.

"Did you hear that scream, Zona?" Grandma asked. "I simply cannot sleep in that tent with mountain lions breathing down my neck!"

"Now, Mama, calm down." our Mama said. "I'll fix you a cup of tea. While you catch your breath, we'll decide what to do."

I think Grandma had already decided what to do. Mama and Papa spent the rest of the night in the tent. We slept inside.

This morning at breakfast Clarence said, looking slyly at Grandma, "Yeah, we heard that old mountain lion but we weren't scared. We knew he wanted only Grandma."

If looks could kill, Clarence would have been lying dead at Grandma's feet!

June 29, 1934

Getting Food

Summer and fall have always been the times when we have to get food ready for the winter months. This year it has been harder than usual, Mama says.

"Of course, the water is a problem," she reminds us. (She didn't really have to remind us of that.) "But it also has to do with being new to the area. We don't know what will grow well at this elevation, or how long it will take it to grow."

As we are adjusting, though, we still have enough to eat. Kent and Clarence trap squinnels, and when Mama fries them the meat is tender and juicy. After the pinto beans are harvested, we will pick up those that are left on the ground. Mama says they will taste good in the winter after she's boiled them with a ham bone.

After Papa loaned his gun to a neighbor, it was returned with some fresh venison. Papa has arranged with another neighbor to do carpentry work for beef and milk cows. The beef cows will be butchered in the late fall. By that time the weather will be cold enough that the beef can just hang outside, frozen. Mama will just cut off what she needs to cook.

We have already canned 19 quarts of cherries and 12 quarts of gooseberries. The gooseberries grow wild down by the canyon.

As Mama says, even if we have no money, we will have plenty to eat.

July 15, 1934

*Snapshots, at last! We were sent a little money
as a gift, and I had the roll of film developed.*



*The four of us --
with Clarence's gun*



*Clarence --
with Flossie and his gun*



The four of us with Papa



*The four of us
with Mama.*

*Many Ruth has
her doll.*

*Where is Clarence's
gun?*



*Mary Ruth
with her doll.*

*Grandma and
Old Joe*



July 29, 1934

More About Mountain Lions

Ruth and Ferris Hookham live about a mile up the canyon in a dugout (the beginning of their house). They stopped by our place on their way home today. Mama invited them to stay for supper. After supper, seated around the table, the conversation turned to mountain lions.

"I had a scare a few weeks ago", Ruth said. "One evening Ferris was gone, and I was sitting in the rocking chair mending socks. Once or twice I thought I heard voices in the distance -- a sort of murmuring sound."

"I heard the same sound," Grandma agreed.

"I listened for a while, waiting for someone to knock or call our name." Ruth continued. "Finally I decided that I should check. Just as I opened the door, a mountain cat screamed -- a long, loud blood-curdling scream. I saw it standing no more than 200 yards away, but I was frozen in my tracks. I could not move. When the low murmurings started again, I realized that I could be in danger. I jumped back and slammed the door shut."

"What a frightening experience," Mama said.

"It was terrifying!" Ruth answered. "I don't know how long I stood there, leaning against the closed door, shaking. I can tell you I was mighty glad to see Ferris come home."

"We heard that a catamount had killed one of Ayers' pigs," Papa commented. "Sometimes they get very nervy, 'specially if they are hungry!"

Later Clarence told me that he had heard a mountain lion scream, and it made his hair stand on end. The cat's voice carries, and there's no way to tell for sure where it is.

"Scared the heck out of me, Sis!" Clarence admitted. "Since I didn't have my gun along, I headed straight home."

The strange thing is, when we left Oklahoma, everyone thought we'd be in danger from the Indians. I wonder what they'd think about these mountain lion tales?

August 30, 1934

Mama works very hard, from early morning until dark, and hasn't been sick much since we left Oklahoma. She likes the mountain weather -- cool nights and warm days.

Mama has always liked flowers. Since there is no extra water for flowers, she enjoys the wild ones, especially the cactus. The colors are clean and bright. We have seen cactus plants with rose, yellow, white, lavender and bright red flowers. Some of the blossoms are as large as a tea cup.

We have seen bright blue flowers on a single stem, which are called cowpeas. We have found little yellow and white daisies in the woods and bright red Indian paintbrush near the sagebrush. The yucca is a big plant with spikey leaves surrounding a large stem of waxy-white flowers. The colors of the wildflowers seem more intense here than in Oklahoma.

We like the people here. They are kind, friendly and helpful. Mama is particularly happy when she can visit with Manda. They talk about old times, people they both know, recipes, sewing and school. Manda is a schoolteacher. Mama is a good talker.

Epilogue

April 7, 1984

Granite Falls, Washington

It is a gray and rainy day -- typical of western Washington. I have been house-bound for a few days and was restless, so I decided to sort through some cartons I had stoned in the attic.

Imagine my surprise when I opened a small box and found this diary! Written 50 years ago! I hardly recognized my own handwriting, it was so different! Large and rounded, like the penmanship which our teacher expected of us.

My handwriting is not the only thing that has changed over this span of five decades. After graduating from high school in Cortez, I went on to college in Boulder. During the War I worked in Seattle for the government, testing foods. In 1946 I married Bob Thompson and we raised two sons, Bill and Don, in Colorado, Utah and Washington. Last October I buried my husband and my life is once more changing.

Mama is gone and Papa is old. All the brothers and sisters are still living, including Sue and Judy who were born in Colorado.

As I re-read the diary, the importance of the past

events in the family overwhelmed me. We should be wiser and more understanding for having lived through these times. Surely there are lessons which we can pass on to those who follow us:

- * the importance of strong family commitment and support
- * the use of ingenuity to solve problems
- * the ability to feel comfortable with being different
- * the courage to maintain standards while meeting the challenges of personal and family life
- * the importance of loving each other unconditionally, despite differences
- * the ability to keep and live the faith.

To a large degree we are what we are because of our past. We need to know and understand that, accepting it and using it proudly to benefit our children and their children and their children's children, God willing.

