

My Mother's plans for the education of her children included "going away to school" for each of us as the time seemed ripe. The places of learning to which we were sent varied. As did, of course, the use each made of the opportunity.

Schooling of the home made variety which she gave us herself cost very little in money. We used books handed down in the family; we dressed in such clothes as we would have worn in any case; and as scholars we were no more expensive to feed than we would have been as illiterates. But the expenses attendant upon "going away to school" were appalling and all had to be paid in the rare thing we called "cash money".

First of all, there were clothes to be bought and made and then there was railroad fare to be paid. Then the tuition or fees of the school had to come. Then books were to be bought. All of these things must be had and money for them had to be spent practically all at once.

After that awful burst of spending there were still what we called "running expenses" to be managed for. These included board and keep; term registration and laboratory fees; more clothes and seasonal hats and gloves; and there were shoes-- oh yes indeed, there were shoes. I'm sure my Mother thought that nothing in the world was so gossamer like and evanescent as shoes.

Shoes were things which could not be made at home. They cost ridiculous sums of money. Some member of the family was always on the verge of wearing out a pair. The exclamation, "What, gone already!" was my Father's explosive way of meeting the announcement that such and such ones of his offspring needed new shoes. *P*It was so obviously a protest and a condemnation; it was so embarrassing to the culprit whose vigorous activity had worn to frazzles good cow hide and battered out even copper toes, that in time it came to be funny. But never was it funny to the one who needed shoes. *P*If the matter had been left to my Father, he would have yielded to our eager desire to go barefooted. The younger children did enjoy that privilege for a brief period in summer time. But when girls reached the ages of ten or eleven and boys twelve or thirteen, in our family then went into shoes for life. My Father would have extended the barefoot months and years to ease the strain of *she* buying, but

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Here we had a matter that touched the standard of living which my Mother proposed to maintain for her children at all costs.

We owe her much for that determination, though as children we fretted against it like the young rebels we were. We realized that we paid in hard work and loss of many freedoms for what we secretly called her "notions". And we had no idea that the whole business was for our good, but thought we just had to humor her because she had the authority to compel us.

To have nice Sunday clothes and party clothes always on hand for every member of the family was a part of her standard of living. We liked having these clothes of course. But we loathed keeping them nice until an event called for their use. We wanted to put them on and enjoy wearing them without delay. Once one of my sisters had a new plaid gingham dress which she had anticipated wearing with joy on Easter Sunday for a visit to a neighbor. With the day, came one of those swift bitter cold winds from the north famous as "Texas Northers". In such weather the visit was considered unjudicious which was a great disappointment. But what was worse--wearing the new dress was also considered out of the question. When this was made plain, my sister lifted up her voice in sore lamentation. Besought by an older member of the family to "Hush!" She loudly proclaimed "I won't hush. I want to wear my plaid dress! I never do have no pleasure no how. I won't hush!"

It was a pretty bad time for all of us who could'nt be comfortable with that going on, but nothing could be done about it because my sister was up against my Mother's standard of living and that was rigid and unyielding. It really had to be to hold out against the pressure of hard times and the insistence of a growing family.

Sometimes my Father rebelled against it too. Part of it was having a "company bed room" with furniture, linens and toilet articles suitable to the station in life to which our parents were born and from which my Mother willed that we should not slip. The furniture and furnishings of our guest room were of the best and satisfying to my Mother, even while our own every day things were worn and shabby. But some of the guests my Father housed therein were not accustomed to such elegance and did not disport them selves in keeping.

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One horse drover slept between the beautiful wool blankets instead of between the sheets. My Mother was outraged and held my Father responsible. She reminded him of it whenever he took in another stranger and made him go in when the man was retiring to see that it did'nt happen again.

So once when a gentleman whom my Mother esteemed to have distinction was to be a guest and the room had been prepared beautifully against his coming my Father went quietly and reposed himself on the bed, pillowing his head on the great starched linen pillow shams of the day and resting his dusty shoes on the immaculate white heirloom bed spread which had been spun, woven, and embroidered in an original grape vine design by my Mother's grandmother. It was a complete defiance of the standard of living and when my Mother found him there and demanded with spirit what in the world he "meant by lying down on Mr. Roncervilles bed?" he rose and nonchalantly combed his hair and beard with the "company" comb standing before the great full length mirror so that he could see her in it and said, with equal spirit,

"Damn it, I am as good as Roncerville!"

The story of his rebellion was handed down in the family and his words were quoted until they became symbolic to us. But we never quite dared to go as far as he went.

Maintaining the standard of living frequently called for expenditures which my Father did not consider entirely necessary and for which he supplied the money with reluctance. This reluctance hurt by Mother's pride. It was no part of her plan of life that she should beg anybody for anything. But neither was it a part of her plan to do without those things she considered needful for her children's proper upbringing. Her way out of the predicament was characteristic. She did not give up having what she felt was necessary but she she avoided being hurt by making and saving money to pay for those things which related to the standard of living essential, in her judgement, for the family.

Already she had given thought to producing dairy and poultry and garden and orchard products for use on the home table. It was but a step from that to selling small surpluses, and the coming of the railroad engineers opened the first market to her.

Bridge Building Was Not an Easy Job
But the Crossing was Safely Made

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Naturally as we began to grow up in rapid succession small sales didn't furnish

all the money needed. So my Mother expanded her operations until she had acres planted in strawberries, watermelons, and peaches to ship instead of the small surpluses to sell locally with which she began.

Her idea was to have successions of crops so she added green string beans to her list and had a full spring and early summer schedule.

She tried pears, plums and cantaloups also but these were not steadily salable and did easily spoil so they were not continued except for home use.

Butter and eggs were good sellers then as always and my Mother's care in the preparation of the butter was extreme. We children churned, under her supervision, but she "worked the butter" herself trusting no one else to wash the milk completely out of it and salt it just exactly so.

Before the days of butter moulds that was, so on the second day she worked it again to remove all moisture, weighed it into pound lots and then worked those into uniform sized and shaped round pats carefully marked with crossed lines made with the wooden paddle. It was sold packed in clean cloths in tin pails.

Churning with an old fashioned dasher and crock churn wasn't a bad job I used to think. All the work of preparation was done for you; all you had to do was sit there and keep the dasher going up and down with a fair degree of regularity. It was quite possible to hold a book in one hand and read throughout the whole process, though flipping the leaves over was quite a trick. *P* But when rotary churns came in, reading wasn't so easy because every once in so often a little stopper had to be pulled out to let the expanded air escape. If the reader became absorbed in the book sometimes the stopper was neglected. If neglected too long out popped the much larger stopper in the bottom of the churn, *to* one in the opening through which the butter *was drawn off when the butter's* milk had come. When that stopper flew out it usually hit the ceiling and milk followed it in a devastating stream. *P* Usually the churn revolved at least twice before the churner recognized with dismay that disaster had befallen the floor, the walls and even the ceiling as the churn revolved and the milk shot out with what seemed the force of a fire hose. After the churn was stopped the cork had still to be

found and after that was the rather stiff business of explaining how such a thing had happened. (7)
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As I was next to the youngest child in the family I really never caught a glimpse of the whole of my Mother's scheme of things until after all those ahead of me had gone from my Mother's teaching to try their luck in various schools.

Up to that time the whole business had seemed contrarily designed to find chores for the specific purpose of interrupting play. Play and reading being to me the chief ends of life, ~~interruption~~ interruption for work were just too bad. But when school called away the sister next older than myself who was my most intimate playmate, in fact the only playmate I ever had, it left me very lonely because the next child was a boy five years younger than myself. ~~And~~ I was only eight at the time ^{so} I suspect that I began to tag ^{after} my Mother pretty closely then, and, being always under foot, I, in time, came to understand what she was up to. I too became absorbed in it and we really played it as a sort of a game.

The years when we took care of all obligations and were able to afford nice clothes for the absentee we won. The years we were not so successful and had to borrow money to finish out the spring term we were loser. And oh, what losers we were the year string beans went down in price until a consignment shipped to Houston cost us 80 cents for express instead of bringing in the needed and expected cash!

The next year we planted cotton in the orchard but cotton was cheap too. We increased our dairy and poultry operations because we could always sell milk and butter and eggs at the saw mill which had been established across the rail road to the south of us about a mile. But the trouble about that was that we were paid in "checks"-- a pasteboard symbol for money used by the mill owners to pay their employes. These checks were good only at the company commissary and therefore no good to us except for food and clothes.

Fortunately the piece goods the commissary handled were of a good quality so my Mother, who sewed beautifully always, could make up these materials into clothes for us.

And the food was a good quality too. But what my Mother needed and wanted was cash to pay for schooling. And that in the nineties was certainly hard for farming folks to come by.

That was when worry really came and abode with us. To this day I feel a little desperate when I think of those days. And when people speak flippantly of the "gay nineties" I look to see if it is somebody who actually lived through that grim time or just someone who has seen pictures of the crinoline sleeves, sports costumes, bathing suits and the men's mustachios of that decade.

My Mother's health gave a little under the strain. I have only three kinds of mental pictures of her during that time: the first is working hard in the out of doors or with the butter; the second is sitting in a low wicker chair with her back to the open fire place sewing and hearing my brother or me recite our lessons; and the third is propped up in bed reading or sewing. ^{The only way we could tell whether she} Never do I remember seeing her idle. And seldom did she go anywhere except to Houston about twice a year to shop and see her sisters. While there they always took her to see a play or two, love of the drama being a passion they shared in common.

That, with her constant reading, was the extent of her recreation during those hard years.

No, I don't mean that. Her flowers and shrubs were the joy of her life and they were beautiful. Bridal wreath, syringa, flowering almond, pyrus Japonica, wistaria, and honeysuckle planted around the great old weather beaten veteran of a house seemed to us just a part of it. A wealth of ~~Narcissus~~ narcissus bulbs started the season of blooms and fragrance for us in late January. From then on until killing frosts the following autumn we were never without blossoms. Even a hot dry Texas August was defied by the crepe myrtle which was a great favorite with earlier settlers in Texas. Pomegranites were too and we had several for beauty and use. They didn't mind the heat either. Roses were my Mother's particular delight and her one personal indulgence was to buy each spring one of the dollar collections of twelve small rose bushes which seed catalogs used always to offer. In this way she tried ^{out} ~~but~~ ~~my~~

Varieties. From those which responded well and met her approval she rooted many cuttings,

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by a habit. she was ill. when she was ill. I should. my mother was really. I never looked that great when I felt. because of the terror I felt when

so that her roses were notable.

Lilacs would never grow well in our yard, but she liked them well enough to tolerate a very wispy sad little bush for the sake of the two or three tiny sprays of bloom it gave her to small in the spring.

Of course, never having seen better lilacs than that, I thought they were all just that sorrowful so I was taken by surprise the first healthy bush I ever saw in bloom. Like a proper country girl I stopped and gaped and exclaimed aloud.

Two things she had in the yard I now think were sort of horticultural jokes to her. One was a small apple tree which never bloomed but one bloom in its whole life and the other was a gooseberry bush which fruited sparsely, no effort ever being made to use the fruit.

My Mother seldom if ever worked in the yard until dusk of day came and the heavier work was all over. Often I've seen her come from the garden with her hoe and work around just one shrub by light that would not have sufficed if she had not known and loved every sprig of that plant. Daylight she held belonged to the commercial crops. The yard was her personal joy.

Love of flowers was born with her. She used to tell us that in Alabama the garden was planted in rectangular hand spaded beds and each bed was bordered with flowers. There were walks between the beds and she made us see little Sallie Abercrombie toddling down those walks smelling the blossoms and learning to count them before she could talk plain. "One, two, pe, po, pi, pix" she would say. We loved that little girl.

From that little girl carefully tended by slaves to the vigorous capable pioneer woman who was my Mother, overcoming the difficulties of a post-war era and maintaining good standards of living in the face of extreme poverty was a long way. a way which That she came that way never seemed to her remarkable. It really was the only way she saw to come, she being herself, Sallie Comey Abercrombie.

I've written many words here telling about her. And so that you could see her in her setting I've told a few things about her family. But I know it is only a poor, dim, warped picture that I've made after all my striving. So I want to tell you where

led over a social chasm which had to be bridged.