

SAY WHEN

Grandma milked three Holsteins and a Jersey cow twice a day – near dawn and about dark. She guided them into the barn stalls, fed them, washed their bags, and squeezed out the warm foamy milk into her gallon sized buckets. Completing the chore required two or three trips from the barn to her kitchen.

She ‘strained’ the milk through a cotton cloth then started a fire in her wood-burning cook stove. After cooking breakfast, washing dishes, making-up her bed, and a few other ‘little’ things, her daily work began.

During summer holidays, my cousin, Dale Stuckey, and I had the job of taking the milk down the hill to the ‘spring’. We placed fresh buckets in a wooden box situated to allow cold water to flow through holes in the ends; and we brought the previous buckets of milk back to the kitchen.

Grandma served milk at every meal in huge, heavy, stemmed mugs. Grandkids had a hard time lifting them and a harder time keeping them balanced.

Granddad’s brother, my Great Uncle Charlie, lived a few months with one brother and then another brother. Born crippled in one arm and both legs, limited in his speech and thinking, some folks called him ‘crazy’ but they always spoke in hushed tones.

On one occasion, Dale and I vacationed at the farm the same time as Uncle Charlie visited. We took our place on the long bench next to the wall. Granddad sat at the end of the table and Grandma sat across from our bench and next to Granddad. Uncle Charlie’s chair was at the far end of the table.

We ate our supper, enjoying our dessert of milk with cornbread crumbles in the glass. Grandma refilled our glasses, turned to Uncle Charlie and asked, “Charlie, you want more milk?”

He answered, “Well, Laura, I reckon just a bit more would be all right. But just a little.” He kept his head lowered.

“Okay. Just tell me when.” She began to slowly pour milk into his mug.

Dale and I watched because it was clearly over half full when she began pouring. But she kept a steady small stream going into his glass. “Just say when, Charlie.”

We were locked into the whole picture. Even Granddad stopped eating and watched.

Once again, Grandma said, “Say when, Charlie.”

He replied, “Okay, I will, Laura.”

The milk level was at the very top and seemed to be hanging over the brim. I nudged Dale and whispered, “That milk is taller than the glass and he ain’t said a word, yet.”

“Say when, Charlie?”

Uncle Charlie leaned down and eyeballed his full glass of milk. He waved his good hand in the air and said, “I reckon that’ll be about enough, Laura.” He didn’t look up.

Dale and I squirmed around some and laughed really loud. That by itself was not allowed at the table – much less giving the impression that we were making-fun of Uncle Charlie.

We finished supper and Uncle Charlie went out the back door and out of sight behind the barn. Granddad sat us close to him in the front room, giving us a straight talk about manners and right and wrong.

For years I questioned within myself as to what was funny and what was not. I have special memories of love for Uncle Charlie and know we never intended to disrespect him. Apparently, I never forgot that supper. I want someone to fill my glass and ask me, “Say when?” Precious Memories, How They Linger.