

James W. Estes – Before WW-II

I was born September twenty six in nineteen twenty six. At this time my parents were share-croppers and lived in a little four room tenant house in Marylee, Alabama. At the time of my birth, they had four children; seven year old girl, a six year old son, a four year old girl, and a one year old girl. We made two more moves and one more girl was born. We then bought a farm in Lovell and that was when I started to school at Curry.

I lived here in this house for the next twenty years where eight more children were born giving us a total of fourteen children- one little baby boy died at two weeks old in 1940 leaving the other thirteen to live here. All thirteen graduated from Curry High School, which was probably a record back in those days! Six of us lived and survived a terrible depression during our early years. We grew cotton, corn, ribbon cane, and had a huge garden and canned all we could can. Our little Benjamin died two weeks after he was born on January fourth. I remember we had two feet of snow on the ground. He died at eight o'clock at night in my aunt's arms. We all cried and prayed he was gone to heaven. We were so poor that mamma wrapped him up good in two baby blankets and laid him on her bed until the next morning.

My uncle came in his wagon with a little wooden coffin he had made for the baby. He was placed into wagon after a prayer and a song and carried to Blooming Grove Cemetery. My uncle and seven other men dug a small grave with a pick and shovel after the snow was hacked off. They buried him in a space marked off for our family plot. These were some hard and lean years of this time of my life. We all worked hard in the fields, sometimes morning until night. I dreamed for the day I could get away from the farm. We always had food on the table and clean clothes to wear. I never had electricity at our house until I came back from the war. Two years later we got power.

After several hard years working on the farm, I entered high school as a sixteen year old weighing one hundred sixty five because I had been retained a year in third grade. I was telling what we grew on the farm, we

always had one acre of sugar cane which we made syrup from which everyone ate butter and syrup for breakfast. We would have sixty gallon barrels plus one hundred buckets of syrup. We would strip it, cut the heads off and haul it to Uncle Harvey's sorghum mill. He would grind the stalks, getting the juice out and fill up a long pan until it turned into syrup. He got every fourth gallon that he cooked.

We would always have three big hogs to kill after the first cold weather. Remember we had no electricity, so we rolled the meat in salt and stored it in a big box with it covered with salt. We never had any meat to spoil. Our Christmases were always small, but we would get one small gift from Santa. Dad usually got a crate of oranges and one of apples. He would also get a box of peppermint candy and one pound of brazil nuts which no one would eat.

I made first string in football as a guard in the ninth grade. There were only fifteen guys on the team. My brother George played first string left end, who really looked out for me. We won seven games that year. The next year I played left end. We won six games. We changed coaches the eleventh grade and I was first string QB and did all the punting. We won eight games that year. My senior year I played QB and half back. We only lost one game that year to Walker County High School. We went to the games on a pick-up truck.

I was captain of the football team. I also played basketball three years and was co-captain my senior year. We also won the County Championship and placed fourth in the state in Birmingham with all schools in the state. I played the main character in our senior play and sang in the chorus which was second in the county. I probably learned more about life from age nine to fifteen than I did in the whole time growing up as a country boy.

One thing stands out how my uncle taught me how to hunt bees, honeybees! We would leave his house early in the morning with two biscuits and two rabbit legs for our lunch wrapped in newspaper. We went down close to the river and would walk up a hollow until we could find a spring. This is where the honeybees would water. We would sit by the

water until a bee would come get water. Uncle could spot one coming in to land. He had eagle eyes for an old man. He said watch the bee close to see which way he leaves and you could go find the trees where his honey was. When we found the trees he said never to mark it because someone else could find it. He said go south from the tree ten steps and find a small bush. We would find halfway of the bush, then take our knife and cut it in half and lean it toward the tree. No one would find it but us. We went on bee hunting. You never cut or rob bees for their honey in the summer, always in the winter.

That winter four or five of us would go to rob the bee trees we found. We would take a crosscut saw, an ax, three wedges, and a five-gallon lard can to put the honey in. We would saw the tree down, find the hole where the bees were going in, and saw half through the tree just below the hole and three feet below the hole. We would take our ax and wedges and chip just half the tree. There would be five gallons of honey in their cones. He would catch the Queen bee and put her in a box we brought to take the bees home. All the bees would fly in the box with the Queen. We would pull the combs of honey loose from the tree, put it in the can and head for another bee tree. We could cut two in a day. We would have plenty of honey for the winter. When we got home, we would either strain the honey or cut it up in four inch combs and seal in a quart jar. I also learned how to trap for wild game and could sell their hides. We caught foxes, minks, opossum and rabbits. I learned how to skin animals and gut them for a meal.

My dad was a Baptist and mom was raised as a Methodist. We all went to church every Sunday and on Friday nights during the summer we kids went to BYPO at church. We went to the Revivals at both churches and the preacher would always spend one night with us. I remember one revival night at Lovejoy church when I was thirteen years old. The preacher screamed and hollered that anyone who was not a Christian was going to hell. This close friend of mine was sitting next to me when this man came and asked us to be saved. We both went up to the alter with seven other teenagers and they prayed for us to be saved. We gave our hearts to God that night and lived a good life. I know I have sinned many times since

then, but I have asked for forgiveness. I try every day to be a good husband and father. I have had many close calls in life, but my life was always spared. I thank God for this. I have been in car wrecks, war and open heart surgery. I have survived these all for some reason that I will know someday.