

them to wither and die. Dad heard that these bugs were on the move and had devastated crops just west of us. He was told that they would not crawl across tankage, a smelly sludge made up of mostly dried blood and refuse from slaughter houses. As Dad handed us cotton gloves he designated us kids to be lifesavers of the crops. He told us to put handfuls of this tankage along the fence rows, hoping the chinch bugs would not cross the vile stuff. After we had worked several hours in the heat, Dad drove to town and brought back an ice cold bottle of pop for each of us. Thankfully, the tankage treatment seemed to work.

During the drought Dad and Grandpa came in from the fields disheartened, yet with hopeful outlooks for the year. They were thankful for our healthy chickens and the eggs they laid; for the pails of frothy milk from our cows; and for last year's grain, even though that supply had dwindled. Our cistern's water supply got lower and lower until it was bone dry, but the hope that rain was sure to come kept them optimistic and in good spirits. When the rain finally came, we raced outdoors to welcome it with hearty cheers, and were happy to discover the grasshoppers had left.

TURKEY TALES

Throughout November, school days in the Redding Consolidated School focused on Thanksgiving: pilgrims, Indians, and thankfulness for the beauty and richness of our country.

We heard stories of the Indian Squanto's friendship and helpfulness to the Pilgrims. We celebrated a feast of popcorn while wearing paper pilgrim bonnets and feathered headdresses. We were given mimeographed outlines of turkeys to color, then we hung them up as classroom decorations.

Once we visited a turkey farm and giggled at their gobbling. However, our usual Thanksgiving dinner featured a plump, roasted hen.

In the early 1930s, Dad and Grandpa decided to raise a few turkeys. We kids were jumping with excitement when the first carton of twenty-five noisy, newly hatched turkey poults was delivered.



Grandpa Surrounded by Turkeys

The baby poults could starve or dehydrate while standing in the midst of plenty, so Grandma became the mother turkey. She took over the chore of tipping each tiny, downy head to the saucer of water for a drink, then to the turkey mash waiting in a tray. She seemed to enjoy this and gave each one a welcome and a blessing.

Those little balls of fluff fascinated us. How we loved to cuddle them! When darkness fell, the peeping ceased as they nestled together for warmth under the brooder hood. They looked like a blanket of soft fuzz.

The poults often ate their droppings, which gummed up their gizzards. We wondered if they would smarten up as they grew older. To keep their gizzards clean, we fed them crushed oyster shells.

The poults grew rapidly, and soon began to explore the fenced-in enclosure. They nibbled the green grass; they chased and savored small insects.

When summer arrived we put them onto pastureland for greater freedom to grow. They had graduated from eating mash to a purchased turkey feed of cracked corn, grains, and weed seed that we poured into troughs. We also kept containers filled with fresh water available.

A few years later, the area farmers became aware of a new weed growing in their pastures that neither the turkeys nor the cows would eat. Wondering what it was, they took some to the local Agriculture Department. They were told it was marijuana that had grown from seeds contained in the turkey feed. This news made the headlines in the local paper!

The farmers began to include this weed with the cockleburs and thistles they constantly tried to eradicate from their land. We hadn't considered turkeys to be the smartest creature on earth but now wondered if perhaps they did have enough "smarts" to deliberately reject those seeds?

One afternoon, Dad asked us to move the turkeys from one pasture to the adjacent one. We opened the gate and got behind the flock to herd them in. That mistake only confused the flock into a squawking, milling mass. My sisters and I still remember that frustrating day!

As we decided to close the gate and get help, we realized those turkeys were following us through the gate like a game of Follow-the-Leader. Silly birds. Since wild turkeys had this curiosity, it was easy for the Pilgrims to capture them. This helped the settlers to survive their first harsh winters.

Raising hundreds of turkeys, Dad and Grandpa had to solve several problems when they were put out on the range. Lanterns were kept burning at night to discourage foxes, but the coyotes weren't so easily discouraged. So, Grandpa outfitted the shell of his 1929 Buick as a sleeping rig out on the range. Turkeys are notoriously noisy when disturbed, so any interloper raised an alarm. John and our cousin John Chalmers, made a great team as daytime guardians of the flocks.



Turkey Shelter

Another problem was the weather. One summer afternoon, a cold, heavy thunderstorm came and frightened the turkeys. They all raced to their shelter and piled in a great heap. Many suffocated. The men tried to shoo them apart, but they were left with mounds of dying turkeys.

At that time, there was no insurance, so instead of throwing away the turkeys, we had the bright idea to dress them and at least preserve them for future meals. A quick call brought the rest of the family together. We even called Uncle Fred and his family, who lived eighty miles away, to help butcher and dress those unfortunate birds.

We formed an assembly line. By lantern light, the men severed the heads. The boys brought them to the house to plunge into boiling water, loosening the feathers for us girls to pluck. Mom singed off the fine hairs by holding each turkey carcass over flames.

The entrails were removed and giblets put into the cavity. Then Grandma used her strong fingers to grasp and remove the tendons. We never did like to bite into the tendons of a cooked turkey leg. Twine was anchored to the feet and hooked over a nail under the porch roof and the turkeys were left to drain.

As we worked, the clock marked midnight, then one a.m., and on into the night. Uncle Fred's family arrived and we tired kids were sent to bed. By morning the turkeys were ready for freezing in the Grant City Locker Plant, where we had rented several drawers.

Even though we gave dressed turkeys to relatives and friends, it was about two years before the last of those turkeys was roasted.

This event became an oft-repeated story at Adair family gatherings. The camaraderie experienced in that tragedy was warm and unifying, giving us all a real sense of oneness.

One day our cousin Orin was flying on his way to Sioux Falls in a B17. He created quite a ruckus when he circled the farm in salute. The turkeys scattered in a panic. They ran into fences, sometimes breaking their necks. Little did the turkeys know that later they might be dinners for those airmen in England.

Soon after World War II broke out, red meat was rationed. The demand for turkeys led us to raise thousands as a contribution to the war effort. That way, servicemen all over the world would have turkey for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. Turkey raising became a big business for area farmers. We were glad to play a patriotic part, bringing a bit of cheer to the servicemen. Most of our turkeys went to the Christmas market. They had to be ready about three weeks before the holidays. Our brother John remembers loading those turkeys into crates as a young boy; in his words, “a flopping chore.” With their wing span they seemed bigger than he was, and they squawked loudly in protest at being stuffed into the wire crates.

A sense of wonder wells up within me as I remember that from the Pilgrims to the present-day, the turkey has symbolized Thanksgiving. It’s a day to honor those who founded and those who fought to preserve the values of our country.

Cheers and waves followed the trucks as they took those turkeys to the next stage of becoming dinners. Our part in the war effort was complete. We thought of all the servicemen that would remember their loved ones while enjoying the turkey and trimmings of the holiday meal, and we wished them well.

OUR SPRING

Let’s mosey over to the spring,
To gather sprigs of watercress
On this warm sunny morn.

Wade into the cool spring water,
Bare feet splash in squishy mud.
Feel it ooze between the toes.

Water bugs do skim the surface,
Tadpoles swiftly scurry by
As they dart for safe dark shelter.

Bullfrog waiting for an insect
Sprawls upon a nearby log,
Patient, hungry, bug-eyed frog.

Green and lacy watercress
Bids us pluck a fresh bouquet.
Treat for Mother’s sandwiches.