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## Riding With Grandpa

By

Vicky J. Rose



My grandfather was a good-natured man with big ears and a large nose. While words and my grandmother were strangers, my grandfather loved conversation. For all his sterling qualities, he had one fault the whole community knew about. He was a terrible driver. He never really made the transition from horse and buggy to driving an automobile.

My uncle had a favorite story about his father he loved to repeat. One day while sitting on the front porch, he saw Grandpa coming around the corner in his old Model T. As he drove by the house and right before he crashed into the barn that served as a garage, my uncle could see Grandpa pulling up on the steering wheel and heard him hollering, "Whoa, you son of a gun, whoa!"

By the time I came along, the Model T was gone and replaced with an old black GMC truck manufactured in some indistinct time during the 30's. I remember hearing my parents' whispered worries. "Should we let her ride with him?"

Fortunately, we lived in an isolated area with country roads that rarely saw travelers, so I was allowed to ride with Grandpa. During a period when my mother was suffering from a breakdown, my sister and I were farmed out to different relatives. I was sent to live temporarily with my grandparents, and these jaunts increased in frequency.

At that time in rural Central Texas, even the poorest of men owned or leased land on which to "run" a few head of cattle. Grandpa would attempt to leave his house in town every afternoon to check on his cattle, and I was often invited along.

This was a delightful experience for me, but one that was fraught with uncertainty. Would the truck start? I thought it was a wonderful truck because the hood opened from the sides instead of from the front, much more interesting than everyone else’s vehicle. The outside color had faded to a smoky black, and inside, there was a funny knob that Grandpa called a choke. With me standing on the seat by his side, he would pull that knob, and I would anxiously hold my breath. Grandpa’s truck broke down regularly, and oddly enough, his mechanically-minded sons were never in too much of a hurry to help him get it running again. That shudders went down their spines every time he pulled out of the driveway didn’t occur to me.

On this day, however, the truck started, coughing and spitting a haze of gray dust out the rear. The cab rocked, pistons hit, and the heady smell of gasoline and burning oil filled the air. I smiled and patted Grandpa’s shoulder; we were off!



Me at a later age on Grandpa’s truck

The steering wheel was in constant motion when my grandfather drove. Not only was the steering mechanism loose, Grandpa, who kept both hands on the wheel, had a habit of moving the steering wheel back and forth, so we careened from one side of the road to the other. I looked out the window to get a good view of one ditch, and a few seconds later looked out the other window to see the ditch on the other side of the road sliding by.

“Why are the roads so winding, Grandpa?” I asked loudly above the sound of wind noise and an engine knocking on three cylinders.

He smiled and explained they were originally old cattle trails, and cattle meander around, rarely going in a straight line. I mentally pictured Grandpa dressed as a dashing cowboy instead of an old man in tobacco-covered khakis and a sweat-stained hat.

“Did you carry a pistol, Grandpa?” I asked eagerly.

“Oh yes,” Grandpa nodded. “Had to, especially during the Depression. A lot of desperate people were stealing. A lot of meanness was going on. Of course, most of the bad ones were from your grandmother’s side of the family.”

I smiled. The only arguments I ever heard my grandparents have were when they accused the other one of having “sorry” relatives. We hit another bump in the road, and I tightened my hold on Grandpa’s shoulder. Dust rose from the seat. If the truck ever had shocks, they were long gone. That made riding all that much more fun.

“Can we drive over that bump faster when we come back, Grandpa?” I asked.

Grandpa, who rarely drove over 25 mph, smiled at me again. We arrived at the barbed-wire gate of his leased pasture, and Grandpa turned, hitting the brake and only a few seconds later remembering to push in the clutch. The truck died, but he slowly turned it toward the gate.

I was too little to get out and open the gate, fortunately for me, because all my life I hated those barbed-wire gates. My legs were always getting tangled in the wires, and I never seemed to have enough strength in my arms when closing them to push the gate post close enough to the fence post to pull the wire latch over it.

Grandpa didn’t have any trouble with it, and we were soon through the gate. Before he even had it shut, I could see cattle running toward the truck, udders swinging, hoping to be fed.

I wasn’t allowed out of the truck. Cattle were deemed way too dangerous for little girls. Women labored from sunup until sundown, but few of them worked with cattle in that era. I didn’t mind. I used my time to admire the inside of the truck. There wasn’t a radio; I’m not sure if it even had a heater, but there were delightful and intriguing knobs poking out of the dash. I got behind the steering wheel and pretended I was driving, moving it from side to side, just like Grandpa.

He was soon finished with the cattle, and we headed for home. As I bounced around, I did not think about the hushed tones around me or why I was suddenly sent to live with my grandparents. Instead, I pondered my parents' apprehension about Grandpa's driving. I simply couldn't understand it. Why, I had been to a carnival once, and riding in Grandpa's truck was ten times more fun than any old carnival ride. I put my arm around his neck and hugged him. We hit the big bump, and my whole body seemed to lift up.

"Thanks Grandpa."

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