

Poor White Trash  
By Jerry L. Parker

"Poor white trash!"

That's what some people called my family back in the late 1950s when I was only 7 or 8 years old living in the small town of Dexter, Missouri.

At that time, I was too young to know - or much care - about what these words actually meant, but I assumed from the tone of their voices and the look of disdain on their faces that it was something horribly bad - perhaps like when I said, "All girls have cooties!" - an opinion which would soon change dramatically.

I was also too young to understand just how poor my family actually was. In fact, I thought we were doing just great!

After all, my mamma often made me the best biscuits & gravy in the whole wide world for breakfast. She sometimes even gave me a piece of bacon to go with it (but she saved the excess bacon grease in a little metal canister she kept out of my reach on the top of the cook stove). Our dessert was sometimes watermelon, cantaloupe, strawberries, or fresh blackberry pie made from produce grown in our own small garden.

I didn't know that my mother made these wonderful dishes mostly because there was absolutely nothing else in the house that she had to feed her husband and five young children.

I was a fairly happy child - the youngest of three other boys and one girl. My next older sibling, Larry, was four years older than I. My sister, Paulette, was three years older than Larry - then there was Kenneth, a year older than Paulette, and finally Jimmy, who was a year older than Kenneth.

So, yes, I was "The Baby" of the family.

I didn't know I was "Poor White Trash" or think there was anything different about my family as compared to anyone else's. I was too young to understand.

Sadly, as I grew older, I learned through the cruel taunts of more wealthy children. Sometimes my persecutors wouldn't need to say anything but simply extol the superiority of their new toys as compared to my old hand-me-downs.

Still, I wasn't convinced that my family was poor or needy, not even when I was transported by a farmer in an old rusty pickup truck with my mother and a few other poor families to the flat, dusty Missouri boothill to either chop or pick cotton.

Of course, working in that hot, dry field soon gave me the excuse that I was too hot and tired to work - so my mother would dismiss me to go run and play with the other clever children who had also tricked their mommies into allowing them to leave work to play tag or hide-and-seek. Naturally, our mothers never suspected that we were deceiving them.

Our mothers, on the other hand, also had a secret - they knew that they took us out into the fields with them, not because our meager efforts helped to fill the family coffers, but because they shouldn't afford babysitters to keep us out of trouble while they worked the cotton fields.

I was old enough to feel a bit sorry for those poor kids from around Kennet, Missouri, who were dressed in badly-worn, but well-mended, clothing. Most were skinny kids who lived in tarpaper shacks with outhouses and hand-pumped water.

Still, these children's mommies made them pulled-pork sandwiches, black-eyed peas, collard greens, and pumpkin bread, so I concluded that they were doing just fine too.

But, in comparison to those other kids working in the dusty cotton fields, I thought my family was doing just great - even when I was tortured by the taunts and teasing of my "friends" in grade school who would call me a "hillbilly" or "pig farmer" - comments I found confusing because we lived in an area where there were few hills and I wasn't a farmer - I just occasionally worked for one.

Still, these were some of my first lessons in class warfare and social injustice.

I was too young to understand that my mother was forced to work in those blazing hot cotton fields on weekends to make a few extra dollars. My mother could pick up to 500 pounds of cotton a day, which was quite an accomplishment - a chore which few others (including men) could boast.

My family didn't have a color TV or air conditioning and we had to periodically stoke our coal heating stove, but we did have a black & white TV that picked up three different channels. We had city water, indoor toilets, and a gas cook stove. (Admittedly, most of our appliances were very old - some salvaged from the Dexter City Dump where my brothers and I would forage on weekends for things which had been thrown away by the wealthy but could be repaired by my father's skilled hands.

My father was a quiet, even-tempered, hard-working auto mechanic. So, as a young child, I didn't understand why he was sometimes fired from his job. I didn't know that he was fired through no fault of his own.

Instead, he was fired on the many occasions when he became physical incapable of doing his job. He became physically incapable because he had a sheep bone (yes, an actual "sheep" bone) from the ankle of his right leg up to his knee. This sheep bone was used to replace his shin bone after it was shattered by a backfiring car. (Back in the early 1930s, when my father was only 19, many vehicles were still started by hand cranks which would suddenly counter-rotate with tremendous destructive force when the engine backfired. Broken bones were a common result, which soon led to the invention of electric starters.)

Sadly, the surgical experiment on my father's leg was only a partial success.

With the sheep bone in his lower leg, my father was able to walk, work, and even run for a very short distance, but his leg never completely healed - his body always tried to reject that foreign tissue which had so rudely invaded its domain.

My father's leg was collateral damage in a constant state of war between his body and some long-dead sheep's bone. His leg was scared, scabbed, and the slightest scratch would turn that scratch into a large, gapping sore. The wound then penetrate all the way to the bone before his skin would start to heal outwardly. During that long healing process, my father couldn't stand, much less endure the agony of working on his feet all day.

My sister, Paulette, was often delegated to the task of replacing the stinky, putrid leg bandages - a task which she understandably did with some resentment ... a task which she happily passed on to the "Baby of the Family" as soon as she possibly could.

And, because of this constant battle with his reoccurring impairment, my father was never able to take me swimming, didn't play baseball with me, didn't teach me to throw a baseball or football. The most physical game he ever offered to play with me was a rousing game of croquet (which was about as exciting to me as watching the grass grow on the playing field).

My mother and father didn't want to frighten their children, so they never discussed the dire financial straits that our family was in during those many times of my father's unemployments. Instead, my parents would sacrifice things they needed or wanted in hope that their children would not be burdened with the fear of what might happen to us. I wasn't aware of their sacrifice, so I never knew how grateful I should have been until I was much older.

My parents would sometimes joke that our family would be alright as soon as "Your rich uncle dies in the Poor House," but I didn't know we had a rich uncle and didn't understand why my parents seemed so pleased over the possibility of a close relative's impending demise.

I also never knew that during those times of my father's unemployment that he was usually suffering excruciating pain as he forced himself to repair other peoples' cars and truck in our front yard to earn a few dollars for us. I was just embarrassed when my neighborhood playmates said that our house looked like a junkyard.

My mother worked fulltime at the International Shoe Factory as a line worker for a few cents above minimum wage. In the evening and on weekends, she earned extra money by washing, ironing, or repairing other people's laundry. She tended our garden, laundered our clothes, made our meals, cleaned our house, and fed the pets that we children had vowed to care for but never followed through on those promises.

Of course, I only was resentful that my mother could find time to do all these other trivial tasks but never seemed to be able to find the time to take me to my Boy Scout meetings, so I had to walk the entire 9 blocks both to and from my meetings.

During these times of my father's unemployment, my family lived far below the poverty level but my father wouldn't go on welfare or accept charity; so, my older siblings did what they could to help. I earned money by having a paper route so I could buy candy, comic books, and other necessities.

My more wealthy "friends" made fun of my family - and I wanted to be part of the "in crowd," so I became ashamed of my family - even though each member seemed to be of higher moral character than either my friends or I.

I became ashamed of my parents who were working hard to provide me with a lifestyle which allowed me the illusion that I was better than they were.

I became ashamed of my sister, Paulette, because she worked as a babysitter from some of the parents of peer group - boys who would tell me loudly and in great deal about how "hot" they thought my sister was and what they would like to do to her if they had the chance - knowing that they would never have the chance.

Instead of defending my sister as I should have done, I resorted to talking about their sisters or insulting their families instead.

I just wanted to be "one of the boys."

I was ashamed of my brother Larry because my parents sometimes ordered me to accompany him as he mowed the yards of my snooty "friends" and trimmed their hedges. Naturally, Larry interpreted my parent's words "accompany him" as "follow his orders without question and help him without "just compensation" for my labor. In turn, my working in their yards justified my friends, words when they denigrated me by call us "The hired help" - which, of course, we actually were.

I was ashamed of my brother, Jimmy, because he was forced to join the Army after a minor altercation with the local law after which the judge gave Jim a choice - either he could join the Army for three years or he would be sentenced to serve six months on the County Work Farm where he would have to cut the weeds from the graves of the county's cemeteries and from along the county's roads.

I was as ashamed of my brother, Kenneth, because, about a year after Jimmy left for the Army, Kenneth joined the Marines and left me behind in a home where I felt unnoticed and unwanted.

Kenneth was my hero. But, he joined the Marines to be one of America's heroes instead. I wanted him at home to love and protect me. But, he went away - selfishly hoping to protect the World instead.

I was embarrassed by my father's working on cars in our small front yard where all my friends could see him. I was embarrassed by the permanent grease stains on his clothing and hands - hands that fixed on dirty engines in order to feed his family . . . taking few brakes to visit with his own friends.

I was embarrassed by my mother's homemade dresses made from printed flour sack material. Embarrassed by her strong, calloused hands - too much like a man's hands. Hands painfully debilitated by arthritis.

Time passed. I grew older. But was I any wiser?

At age 12, a singular event changed my life. My beloved brother, Kenneth, was killed in Vietnam in 1965. He was one of the first Marines from Missouri to be killed in that awful war. Now his memory lives only in my heart and as just another name on Vietnam memorials.

I wept openly at Kenneth's funeral - with its full Marine Honor Guard and 21 Gun Salute. Not worried about whether my uppity friends would call me "baby" or "wimp," I was suddenly filled with pride to have been his brother. He looked so peaceful and regal in his Marine Dress Blues and medals.

I knew he had died for what he believed was right. He had grown into an honorable man while I was nothing more than a whiny, selfish child.

Still, I started looking at things with my eyes more opened. I began to see my family in a completely different way.

I realized that my sister, Paulette, worked each day to provide things she wanted or needed but which our parents couldn't afford to provide. She has worked since she was a teenager and is still working today - at age 74.

After retiring from his job, my father died in 1989, peacefully of "old age" in his sleep. The most tragic thing about my father's death was that his cold, lifeless body was discovered by my sweet little, 9 year old niece, Jamie, when she went to wake her grandfather for breakfast.

My mother died of Alzheimer's about 15 years later. The only thing I can remember my mother asking from life was to never be placed in an "Old Folks Home." She asked to die at home, surrounded by family and friends. Instead, she died alone - no longer in her right mind - not knowing who I was - in an "Assisted Living Facility" (i.e., insert "Old Folks Home") in Sullivan, Missouri.

While in the Army, my brother, Jimmy, became a paratrooper with the famous 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. He was a hand-to-hand fighting instructor, an explosive expert, and trained sniper. He later became the owner of a successful construction company before he eventually died of a heart attack while taking a nap after work one bright summer's day in 1996. The most tragic thing about Jimmy's death was that my sweet 16 year old niece, Jamie, discovered his cold, lifeless body when she went in to wake him for the dinner she had cooked for him.

Jamie had found the bodies of two of the men she loved most in life. So, fate has not been kind to my lovely, warm-hearted, little Jamie. Now Jamie is a grown woman who can still find enough love in her heart to care for even the likes of someone like me.

Larry followed our father's footsteps to become a professional auto mechanic. Although he is now deceased, he had his own family of four whom he also managed to embarrass by working on cars in their own front yard. He died about ten years ago of a brain aneurism.

So, I am now proud to have been allowed by God to have been a member of my wonderful family - of which I was not worthy to have been a part.

I never gave my family any reasons to be proud of me. I committed a terrible crime at the age of 17 and have now been in Missouri prisons for the past 51 years. At 68 years old, I have the dubious "honor" of having been incarcerated longer than any other prisoner in the State of Missouri.

So, I now regret what I did not realize while my parents and brothers were still alive - a truth that I am now willing to admit - and now feel compelled to reveal to you.

All those years ago when I saw people looking toward me and saying, "Poor White Trash," I was wrong to assume that they were talking about my family.

I now know they were only talking about me.

THE END