

Growing Up in Lester
With
Dean Jones

Before it was called Lester, the area six miles east of Vernon was called Arnold Chapel because several Arnolds lived there. Arnold Chapel had a Northern Methodist Church, a one-room school and Eagan's Store.

Eagan's Store featured a gathering area around the stove where old men could talk and spit. Dean enjoyed hearing them tell about having the best dog and getting the biggest coon. Vinegar and rice came in barrels. The clerk was so exacting in weighing the rice, she was sometimes accused of splitting rice grains. Dean's mother bought fabric at the store to make overalls and shirts for the boys and dresses for his sister. Each boy had two pair of overalls and at least two shirts. With stair-step boys, there were sometimes hand-me-downs. The used overalls might have been more comfortable. Dean still remembers how hot new overalls were during August and September.

The Arnold Chapel School had 6 classes with 7th and 8th grades offered in alternate years. There was no electricity or running water. They pumped water out of the well and brought it into the school in a water bucket. Each student had a metal cup hanging on the wall for drinking. Dinner buckets were kept behind the stove. Dean would bring biscuits and sausage or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. On the half-mile walk to school in winter, his dinner bucket would drag in the snow. When he took the short cut through a livestock field, he also had to concentrate on hiding from the bull. The school featured a raised platform in the front with the teacher's desk. From that vantage point, she would lecture and ask questions. The students were arranged in two rows of seats with an aisle down the middle and outer aisles on either side. The younger children sat in the front and the older ones sat in the back. When it was time for instruction to a particular grade, the students moved to the recitation seats. Of course, all of the students could hear all of the lessons, and some knew the whole curriculum by the time they were in 4th grade.

Before marriage, Dean's mother taught at Shanghai School. To qualify to teach, she took a teacher's test at age 17 and passed. After marriage, she was a full time homemaker raising Helen, Harold, Dean, Don, Cecil, Dwight, Bill, Richard, and John. She had red hair, and her husband had dark hair. Every other child in the family inherited their mother's red hair. Dean's parents farmed and raised the family in a small house comprised of kitchen, pantry, parlor, bedroom, and living room. The living room and parlor doubled as additional sleeping quarters. In the beginning, the only heat came from a wood stove in one room and a cook stove in the kitchen. Dean slept in a double bed with three brothers. They snuggled in a feather bed to keep warm. Sometimes, Dean's mother wrapped heated irons to put at their feet for additional heat. This was helpful when snow blew onto the bed through walls without insulation.

The family never had a food shortage. They raised hogs, milk cows, and chickens. They had a big garden and truck patch for potatoes. To preserve the potatoes, they dug a hole and lined it with straw. Then they put the potatoes on the straw and added another layer of straw for insulation. Finally, a layer of dirt went over the top. To keep milk and butter cool, they hung them in the well. A smoke house was used to cure meat. The formula Dean's dad used for pork usage was one hog per family member plus one more for company. Chickens were harvested as needed. When a hen got too old to lay eggs, she was turned into chicken and dumplings. Geese were raised for feathers for feather beds and pillows. An additional bonus for the feather bed was a place for Dean to hide when thunder scared him. Goose eggs didn't taste good, but the ducks they raised had tasty eggs.

With a large family and a small house, there wasn't much space for entertaining. However, when thresher men came, some would eat on the porch. For extended family meals, the men would eat at the first table. Then the children would eat, and finally the women would eat after serving all the others. Dean especially liked food at his grandmother's house. She often made an assortment of sweets and kept them on the table covered with a tablecloth. Dean was known to eat quickly to make sure he ate his fair share. One day he took a bite of her chocolate pie and waited to let others catch up, knowing there was something seriously wrong with the pie. When others complained, his grandmother tasted the pie, and realized she had reached for the liniment in the dimly lighted pantry instead of the vanilla.

Transportation and communication have changed drastically. The farm tractor had steel rimmed wheels without tires. They had a surrey pulled by two horses for family trips. Everyone fit if some sat on laps. When they drove through the creek, a boy might hold a tree limb and then release it at just the right moment to hit a brother. When Dean's dad bought a Model T car, he started it by cranking. Even though the bus took Dean to Kinmundy High School, the roads were muddy at times requiring a two-mile walk to meet the bus. About once a year a dirigible would fly over the house, and they would all run out to watch it. Even an airplane flying over the house would clear the house as all the children would run out into the yard to watch. The family had a wall telephone with 4-6 families on the line. The Jones family answered to one long and one short. The phone rang in the other homes, and some were known to eavesdrop. The customers on the Jones family line went through the switchboard in Vernon where the operator connected them to other locations.

Dean was one of the older children, and experienced more austere times than the younger ones. He cannot remember having any toys. They made their own entertainment. A favorite activity was pushing the metal band that went around a wooden wheel down the dirt road with a lath. They rode stick horses and played cowboys and Indians. In the summer they enjoyed swimming in the creek. Since they skinny-dipped, they sometimes found their clothes missing when they came

out of the creek and would have to run home naked. Running barefoot over cockleburs added to the discomfort.

They didn't go to a doctor unless they were seriously ill. Liniment was a staple for aches. Sore feet were soaked in kerosene. Babies were born at home. The neighbor ladies helped with childbirth and hoped that the doctor arrived in time to deliver the baby.

Discipline to keep the group of boys in line involved cutting a switch from the tree in the yard. Dean likes to say so many switches were cut that the tree died. Dean was the shortest boy. When he asked his dad why he was so short, his father replied, "When the food is passed, you are so busy talking, you don't get as much food as the others." Dean still has a lot of stories to tell and a wonderful sense of humor. He knew children who had large homes and more material possessions, but he says he wouldn't have traded places with any of them. He has memories of a wonderful childhood in Lester and still has an extremely positive attitude in spite of challenging circumstances.