

## SKIMMING THE DROSS

*So vast, so limitless in capacity is man's imagination to disperse and burn away the rubble-dross of fact and probability, leaving only truth and dream.*

– William Faulkner

Every year around Thanksgiving when the leaves are falling and the air is crisp on my face, I am transported back to my parents' farm in south Louisiana. My father produced bounty of some sort on every inch of his seven-acre farm. Dad could not stand to have bare land used for nothing, so driving up the gravel driveway meant passing rows and rows of vegetables and fruits of all sorts. Mom drafted into service anyone who stayed for any length of time into picking, snapping, shelling, or canning. Mom knew well the art of preserving all that they had harvested. No one ever went hungry at my parent's home.

At the far back right corner of the property—as far from the house as possible—my dad built a pigpen where he raised two hogs every year. I never liked to visit the terrible-smelling place, but our children did. Of course, they had to name the pigs though we frowned on their breaking a cardinal rule: never name something you plan to eat.

When Mom baked her famous fluffy biscuits and cooked bacon or sausage as she often did, the children always asked apprehensively, “Is this Elvira?” Knowing they were afraid of the answer they might receive, Mom always avoided the question one way or another while Dad laughed and made jokes, leaving the children to believe it must not be.

For some reason, in the last decades of my father's life, he had a driving force to live as entirely off the land as possible. A man troubled by many things, working on the farm or in his garden seemed to bring great peace to him. At any time of the day he could be seen dressed in his old overalls with a carpenter's pencil in the pocket. He always covered his thick black wavy

hair with one of the many old baseball caps lined up on the pegs beside the door. When the cool weather settled on the farm, he put on his faded and torn blue jean jacket that had seen many winters in its day. An idle man he was not—always planting, always tilling, always working. He could be found either riding on his old tractor or laboring with his woodworking equipment, smelling of sawdust.

My father had researched how to go about making cane syrup from the juice of the cane he had harvested. He built a large metal vat to specifications he acquired. The vat rested over a wood-fired brick oven he made the same length as the vat. Dad stacked wood cut for the day of syrup making a few feet high on the edge of the concrete slab. He rigged a pulley system so he could hoist the vat from one end when the temperature of the syrup was just right.

Each year at Thanksgiving, my siblings and I, along with our families, would gather at our parents' farm. My family looked forward to this holiday and leaving behind the city life for a brief respite and to enjoy the bounty of the land together with those we loved.

The chilly but not too cold weather set the stage for a perfect Thanksgiving on the farm. Dad always had a roaring fire going in the fireplace. Mom commented, "He doesn't know how to make a small fire!" We would often be so hot in the house we had to go outside to cool off!

The adults pitched in to prepare the Thanksgiving meal while the children did what children do on farms—get into all kinds of mischief. Dad always baked a browned well-seasoned turkey to picture-worthy perfection. He also made the best cornbread dressing that has never been duplicated. Mom prepared the side dishes of fresh vegetables from their garden. The homemade yeast rolls she prepared filled the house with the aroma that drew everyone inside asking when dinner would be ready. Of course, what Thanksgiving would be complete without the roll of jellied cranberry that still looked like the shape of the can from which it came?

Usually, Mom forgot that it was still in the refrigerator until halfway through the meal. None of us missed it—only her. We gathered at the table to enjoy the bounty of food, making sure to give our Lord and Savior the thanks He so deserved for His many blessings to us all. Everyone relished in our day of relaxation and family togetherness on Thanksgiving.

The Friday following Thanksgiving Day, however, was “all hands on deck.” Dad rose before the sun, ready to begin the day of syrup making. While we were still in bed dreaming, Dad busied himself feeding the sugar cane stalks into the old mill to extract the juice. The juice ran underground through pipes and poured out into the vat he had rigged. Dad connected the mill to his tractor, which he had set up to circle the mill. He sat in a chair all morning, feeding the cane into the mill, stalk by stalk.

Once he extracted the juice from the cut cane, he started the wood fire in the oven below the vat. Once the temperature reached a certain degree my father called for us to come do our part. My father assigned the job of skimming off the impurities that bubbled up to the surface to the adults and children. We performed this task with handmade skimmers Dad had fashioned from pieces of wood for handles and mesh screens. All day long we took our turns skimming the thick, bubbling foam from the top and dumping it in large barrels nearby. Because of the sweet mixture, bees swarmed around the barrels all day, which Dad warned, “had better not deter us from doing our job.” When we tired of standing or our arms got sore, we called for a reinforcement to take our place. At least four of us worked during the entire process. Everyone’s hands went into making the syrup on that day. The process from start to finish took many hours.

After removing all the dross and impurities and the color and thickness were right, Dad placed his hygrometer in the syrup and pronounced it done. Then he used the pulley system to hoist up the six-foot-long vat on one end so that we could open the spigot on the opposite end

and fill the cans with syrup. When the syrup emptied from the vat, and all the cans had been filled, we pounded on the lids and placed my parents' personalized labels onto the front of each can. On a beautiful day, my parents enjoyed setting up a little stand on the side of the main road to sell their cans of homemade cane syrup. They made some extra income while at the same time making new friends along the way.

As for the rest of us, on Saturday morning, we all enjoyed the cane syrup poured over hot pancakes with lots of butter. Cane syrup is thicker and stronger tasting than the customary maple syrup, so most people must acquire a taste for it. Even if you don't care for it on pancakes, cane syrup is excellent for cooking many different foods.

I view our lives in much the same way I do the syrup-making process. God gets everything prepared for us. He has everything in place we will need for success in this life. He rises early, plans it all out, and calculates it to the tiniest detail. Then it's time to light the fire and draw out all the impurities. This process is ongoing throughout our lifetime, with every storm and every valley, drawing out the impurities. The process never stops, but as the years pass, the dross becomes less and less. The goal is to be something God can use in His kingdom. We are the salt of the earth that gives flavor to this world as Dad's syrup added the flavor to Mom's pancakes.

*Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel*  
(Proverbs 25:4 ESV).