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Fire Eater! Editor

Prune Picker

19 February 2004

(Originally published on Dixieinternet.com.)

> **"...11 million Southerners pulled up stakes and settled in industrial Northeast, Midwest and Western boom states like California and Washington between 1910 and 1970."** *(J. Earle Bowden, The New South, Know Southern History)*

I started to a'thinking (always dangerous) lately about my Southern family in Southern California, especially since so much vituperation had been directed at me recently for my parents' decision to give birth to me there. (Apparently, the logic goes, if one is not born in the geographical South, one is not "Southern". Right.) I started to think of how I grew up, what food I ate, what stories I heard, what Uncles and Aunts I had, and sisters, cousins, friends, schoolmates. And values, traditions, music, art, writing.

I grew up in a "prune-picker" family, an old Virgina-Tennessee-Mississippi-Alabama-Arkansas-Choctaw Southern family that fled to the west (now Left) coast in the 1940s, looking for work. Now, back in the 1940s and 1950s, extending up to the 1960s, Southern California was a remarkably beautiful place, with little roadside stands where folks sold watermelons and corn to other folks who were returning down Jamboree Road from the beach. Orange groves as far as the eye could see, and my friend Dayne and I played in every one of them, hurling oranges at each other and jumping our bicycles over the concrete culverts that ran past them. Dayne was a prune-picker also, his family having come from Texas to California for the same reasons as my family: work.

My grandpa, Mel Aston, Sr., started a furniture store out there and tried his best. He had little black-and-white postcards made up that read: "Greetings from Pappy Aston!" My daddy, Mel Aston, Jr., came home from World War II and tried his hand at a number of jobs, eventually ending up teaching school. My little Choctaw Grandma, Eva King, kept the house over on Batavia Street in Orange. During those early years, I would sleep over at "Grandma's and Grandpa's house", and would wake in the morning to Grandma's delightful Southern cooking. She'd keep a mason jar of bacon grease in the icebox (which is what she called it, not a "refrigerator") for her iron spider (skillet), and when Grandpa got up, he'd walk out, sniff the coffee, and pour his cup of it into the saucer beneath. I never really figured out why he did that. Maybe to let it cool off. But he'd always drink his coffee from a saucer. I remember Grandma scolding him for it, as if he were too much a redneck for it. But Grandpa paid no matter and kept on drinking his coffee from his saucer, while the smell of fresh Southern cornbread filled the air. Grandma made her cornbread the old Southern way: little or no sugar and always in the iron spider smeared with the bacon fat from that mason jar. To this day, I still make my own cornbread as Grandma made it (though I leave out the bacon grease for butter). Yankee cornbread still seems to me like a sweet cake, not a real food.

I still live with the sound of my Aunt Dorothy Mae's musical Southern accent in my ears; and Aunt Mary's, and Uncle Jim's too. Such a contrast to the homogenised yankee nasality around us. And I was never Mac, but lil' Mac to my relatives. Even unto the present.

Aunt Dorothy Mae, who lives in Arizona now, tells me that folks ask her, "Are you from the South?" and she answers, "How could y'all tell? I'm wearing shoes."

Now on weekends, I'd sit beside Grandpa while he watched Okie football. (I had been graced by the Lord to have been born the year that Oklahoma won the first of its back-to-back national championships under Bud Wilkinson.) Did I say watch? Grandpa never watched the Sooners, he participated, waving his cigarette in the air, spilling ash about, and hollering at the old black-and-white TV in his robe, for Grandpa had but two states of sartorial display: a business suit or a robe, and at home the robe was king. Even today, I follow Grandpa's lead: once the door of the house slams behind me, I reach for my robe. I'm writing in my robe now, come to think of it. And I too have kept up the tradition of Sooner football. One of the earliest memories my daughter, Saraniah, has is of me hollering at the TV and jumping up and hitting my head on the ceiling lamp during an OU-Nebraska game. Dang Cornhuskers, anyway.

Nat Rudolph quotes a University of North Carolina study that identified the main traits of Southerners:

1. Courteous
2. Religious
3. Conservative
4. Loyal to family

I grew up with three sisters, and all of us were taught courtesy as a fundamental part of human existence. I was, as the boy, taught never to hit girls, and I never have (though I've had a few females launch punches at me). While Daddy was an apostate, everyone else in the family was deeply religious. Grandpa used to call himself "a loosely constructed Methodist", which I never knew what the heck meant. Grandpa was, like my Daddy, very conservative. As Brother Dave Gardner said of his wife, "She's so conservative, why, you beat a snare drum and she's ready to go to war!" Grandpa wasn't quite like that, but he believed in old-time religion and conservative values. His own daddy, William Henry Aston, fluent in Latin and Greek, was the first Pentecostal preacher in Pittsburgh County in the Indian Territory (southeast Oklahoma), and both Grandpa and Grandma had many stories of tent-revival meetings. Theirs was the God of Abraham, not the God of the philosophers, as Blaise Pascal said.

Loyal to family? Here's a true story. My Great-Uncle Jim had robbed a bank in Texas after returning from World War I, and had done his time, released from prison after his sister, Almyra, went to the Governor of Texas. Aunt Almyra and the Governor prayed on their knees together, and Uncle Jim was released from prison with the proviso that he never return to the Lone Star State. So he made his way out to "Californy", to Sacramento, where he made a fortune buying wrecked automobiles off of bewildered Yankees. Uncle Jim would pull a wad of bills from his overalls, take one dollar out and say, "That's for the government," stuff the rest in his pocket, "and this is for me." Now somehow Uncle Jim "got in trouble with a woman" down Texas way. He told his brother, Uncle Charley, "I cant go back to Texas or they'll put me away for life." Uncle Charley went and found the woman in question, gave her $100,000, and told her to go to South America and never come back. One-hundred grand in those days was a lot of money. But family is family.

It may be fashionable nowadays to bash us prune-pickers, like Merle Haggard, for one, who come from that great migration of Southern families South to West (though the migration patterns of Southerners in general tended that direction all the way from Jamestown on). Well, bash away. One of the overlooked fruits of this great Southern migration was its overwhelming influence on American culture. As Bowden said of us Southern prune-pickers on our migrations, "And with them went their unique Southern culture, including love of competitive sports, jazz, gospel, old Scots-Irish musical laments and motorcar racing. Their Pentecostal

and fundamentalist religion heavily influenced the conservative political movement." Somehow, we prune-pickers picked not only the grapes of wrath, but the fruit of Dixie, and carried her culture with us where ever we traveled.

I believe it was Terry Warren's article on Dixie Internet that said Dixie is in the heart. Well, he was right. And as long as that heart beats, as it shall forever, there will be a Dixie; not only in Savannah, Georgia, or Durant, Oklahoma, but in Santa Ana, California. For Dixie is more than a place. Dixie is a culture, above all, a set of shared values and traditions and kinship. It is not a "country" (yet), but what Nat Rudolph calls a "people-group", "a group of people with a distinct culture, common language, blood ties, and history. For example, we speak of the ‘Basque nation’, which though they cannot be found on a map, are a definite people-group."

Today I celebrate with pride both my deep Southern roots and my prune-picker family out west. No, I was not born in a hospital down South, but I am the South. I spread the South, like butter on a biscuit, wherever I went, just as my family did. And when the Angel comes a'calling, I shall be buried down in the Indian Territory, beside my Confederate Choctaw fathers and mothers and aunts and uncles and cousins and all of them sleeping beneath a Southern sun, picking prunes in a Dixie heaven.

And a Dixie heaven will surely smell of Grandma's fresh-cooked Southern cornbread.