

THIS IS MY LIFE

My name is Helen Joyce Baker. I was born on October 3, 1903 in Henry County, Virginia, a daughter of the late Robert Lee Joyce and Lucy Ann Kelly Joyce. To this couple, twelve children were born, six boys and six girls. Their names were Luther, Helen, Everett, Grace, Mamie, Lillie, Thomas, Harvey, Otis, Edward, Elsie and Virginia.

Being the oldest girl, I had to start doing household chores at an early age because Mama had to take care of the little ones. As we grew, the older brothers and sisters helped our father in the field growing our food. All of our food, except sugar, coffee, salt, soda and pepper, was grown at home in the garden. We dried, canned and preserved lots of fruit of all kinds. Corn and wheat were grown and taken to the mill for grinding into meal and flour for our bread. At harvest time, there was a fifty-gallon barrel of molasses, a fifty-gallon barrel of sauerkraut, and about a hundred bushels of sweet potatoes. We raised hogs, chickens, turkeys and cows for food. As you can see, we had plenty to eat. Tobacco was our money crop.

My first cooking was on an open fire with big pots hanging from pot hangers. The bread was baked in large skillets on hot coals. We washed our clothes on a scrub board and dried them in the sun. Our water was carried in buckets from a nearby spring. Our only refrigeration was a box in the spring where the milk, butter and anything that needed to be kept cool were stored. Kerosene lamps provided our light and the fireplace provided our heat. Back then, no one had indoor plumbing. We took our baths in a large tin washtub and wore a path to the little outhouse behind the house.

We had to walk one mile to school. The road was unpaved and became very muddy when it rained. We also walked to church. Sometimes, Mama didn't get to go, but she always made sure everybody was scrubbed and our Sunday best was washed, ironed and ready to go.

Much of our father's farming was about two miles from home. I would gather food from the garden, cook and pack a big lunch. One of the younger brothers and I would walk two miles with the sun beaming down on us to carry lunch for the ones in the field. We'd walk the two miles back, go to the garden, gather more food and prepare the evening meal. Then, Mama and I would go milk the cows, feed the hogs, and bring in wood for the next day. Mama would sit up real late sewing our clothes and knitting sweaters, socks, gloves and caps. We didn't get new shoes or clothes every week. If our shoe soles got worn out, our father would take advantage of the rainy days to mend them. If our clothes were torn, they got patched.

If one of us got real sick, we were carried to the doctor, but everyday sickness was treated at home. We were kept warm and treated with a little Vicks rub and a flannel cloth on our chest or a little Porter's Pain King or aspirin. This usually did the trick.