TALKING WITH THE AUTHOR

Q: Why the title, OF GOD, RATTLESNAKES, AND OKRA?

A: Growing up as a preacher’s son, one hears a great deal about God. Rattlesnakes were our most feared predator, and harvesting okra was the most dreaded of all farm chores.

Q: What motivated you to collect your boyhood stories?

A: My family are storytellers. A highlight of family reunions includes retelling our favorite stories. It’s a good way to pass along traditions and values.

Q: What made your boyhood so special?

A: Recovering from the Great Depression and WWII, America was optimistic again, working again. We sensed a bright future. Folks were thankful to God for bringing them through dark days. It was a great time for heroes---Joe Louis, Babe Ruth Jackie Robinson, Ted Williams, Roy Rogers, The Lone Ranger, and Batman. A boy could buy an all-day sucker and worship his idols.

Q: How did you remember things that happened so long ago?

A. In bits and pieces. One story leads to another. The main thing was getting started. I kept notes, slipping out of bed at night to jot down something suddenly remembered—then working on it next day.

Q. Was writing about your childhood an emotional experience?

A. Definitely. Memory is a heart-warming companion. It’s like turning on a lamp in a dark room—one flick of the switch and Grandma is sitting over her old clay urn, churning milk into butter. Or a long-lost sibling is romping again with you in the woods. A lost loved one returns if only for a moment but it rekindles those old fires.

Q: What life-lessons can we learn from these stories?

A: That family, friends and people are more valuable than glitter. That knowing God and loving people is the secret to a meaningful life.

Q. What is the main story line in the book?

A. For me it was the preacher. Here’s a pint-sized uneducated dirt farmer with one mule overcoming incredible odds. A man of God, a family man who showed us that character counts; that honesty, loyalty and hard work triumph over fool’s gold.

Q. What did the preacher get right and wrong as a parent?

A. His love was transparent. He loved out loud, hugging us and telling us he loved us. He didn’t always take the time to teach us how to fix things—or take a vacation with us.

Q: You grew up in a far different world. Is there anything that hasn’t changed?

A: People’s hopes and dreams. Faith is still America’s bedrock though it’s hard to hold onto with society moving in the opposite direction.

Q. What saddens you in looking back?

A. Growing up on land that belonged to the American Indians for thousands of years—and understanding how their lives were uprooted and destroyed. About the only legacy they left were the dark-skinned cheekbones, piercing eyes, and straight black hair of our grandparents and great aunts and uncles. That and a few broken arrowheads lying on the ground.

Q. Do you have any other regrets?

A. Oh, bushels of them. Like shooting Momma’s song birds with my sling shot, and tormenting my sisters, and tossing my cousins panties down the outhouse privy. Too many to count.

Q: Did you question racism as a boy?

A: Unfortunately, no. It was so ingrained in society most didn’t give it a second thought. Sadly, the South had no monopoly on it. Negro league baseball shamed the whole country until the 1940s. In 1947 Jackie Robinson was the first black allowed to play in the major leagues. Many people living today participated in the Boston, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles race riots.

Q: What is the funniest old wives tale you can recall?

A: Momma said my double cowlicks meant I almost split into two in her womb and became twins. “I never would’ve survived two of you!”

Q. Did your mother allow herself any hobbies?

A. She loved her flower garden, and sewing on her foot-peddled Singer sewing machine.

Q: Your father?

A: Hunting, fishing and trapping kept the wolf from our door but also gave him a welcome break from farming. Preaching was the icing on his cake.

Q. Who will these stories appeal to?

A. Animal lovers, people-watchers, the faith community, legacy and history buffs.

Q: If the preacher were living today, what would alarm him?

A: Glorification of violence, marriages in trouble, casual sex, missing fathers, family disintegration, churches mimicking a godless culture, selfish politicians—to name a few.

Q: Did the preacher have pet peeves?

A: He had his soapbox favorites: The bad guy who walked over people all year then served communion on Sunday. “People running down to the courthouse to get a justice-of-the-peace to marry them—that’s just heathen. Don’t they want God to bless their vows?”

Q. Did you leave any colorful characters out?

A. Oh my goodness, yes. The year I was born, Theodore G. Bilbo, a red-faced demigod and United States Senator from Mississippi, tried to get 12 million blacks shipped back to Africa. The South was full of Huey P. Longs and Pitchfork Ben Tillmans. We barely scratched the surface.

Q: What is a steel magnolia?

A: A southern belle. She’s honeysuckle sweet outside but hard as sunbaked kindling inside. It often falls to these iron-willed matriarchs to take care of family business while we good ole boys hunt, fish, and scratch our bellies.

Q: It sounds like your father’s place was more zoo than farm?

A: Sometimes it looked, sounded, and smelled that way. If it waddled, gobbled, cackled or crowed he loved it. If it neighed or bellowed or barked or mewed he adopted it. Sadly, goats don’t enjoy a good reputation in the bible so Daddy’s heart never warmed up to them.

Q: Who prompted you to gather and retell these stories?

A: My grandchildren. When they were small and spent the night with us, we’d go to bed, turn out the lights, say our prayers and tell stories—ghost stories of course, but also, “Tell us about when you were little”.

Q: What was their reaction?

A: Big eyes and ears. My boyhood was so different, like I’d descended from space. They wanted to know about the people hanging in their family tree—heroes, heroines, and hootenannies.

Q: What do you hope the legacy of these stories will be?

A: To honor God and encourage others to tell their own stories. Every life is precious and becomes even more so when shared.