

# Life on a Sandflat Farm

A Unique Life in a Unique Place

**TOM ABERNATHY**



# **Life on a Sandflat Farm**

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ISBN – 978-1-62141-252-6

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Printed in the United States of America

Booklocker.com, Inc.  
2012

## Chapter 1

Last night I went on a long journey many miles away to a place that existed many years ago. There I saw and learned things that I had not been able to recall previously. I stood in the bounds of an old farm house and experienced the activities that took place there. Amazed, I looked at me: five years old, sun freckled, tousled red hair, bare feet, and striped overalls, sitting at the table Dad had made. A wooden bench along one wall and on the other, a wood and chrome ice box that seldom got used for its intended purpose.

Into the kitchen, I saw the old cast iron wood stove that had supplied so many wonderful home cooked meals; I could almost smell the aroma of baking bread. At its side was the old wood box and yes, it was painted lime green. How many times had I brought wood in to fill it at evening's end? Next to it sat Mom's pie safe where she kept her pots and pans. I could see the patterns punched into the metal front.

Along the other wall was the hand built cabinet with the two little corner shelves above it (Yes, they were painted lime green, also). It was these shelves that taught me a valuable lesson in authority. One day Dad caught me on the cabinet reaching for something on one of the shelves and told me to get down. I now plead temporary insanity because I said, "No!" His big, loving hand never let me touch the floor between the kitchen and the back porch. One lesson was all I needed.

On the back porch sat a wooden bench and a couple of straight back chairs with rope bottoms. How many evenings were spent here until long after dark with Mom on the bench, Grandma in a chair, Dad on the steps, and me in the yard? On the other end of the porch was a shelf with a water bucket, wash basin, and Mom's white hand towel with the red roses around the edge.

In the front room I could see the maroon and blue linoleum that covered the floor and once more I traced the twining patterns. There was Mom's wall paper, beige with little rows of pink flowers and blue lines. She did love her flowers.

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By the front door were two little shelves that held two small metal framed pictures of sailing ships (one of which I still have) and her little pink cup and saucer. Over the window hung Dad's rifle on a couple of nails. Mom's iron bed in the corner was covered with her chenille spread with the little tassels around the edges. On the center wall was the old olive chest of drawers and on it sat the pewter base, coal oil lamp with the tall glass chimney. I remember standing here doing my school homework in later years.

The other corner room was where Grandma and I slept. My bed was in one corner and hers in the other; between them hung the big framed picture of Grand Dad Abernathy. I could see the huge handlebar mustache just like it was real. A trunk and rocking chair were the only other furniture except for the old wall clock hanging in the corner. All this I had seen many times and I'm sure it was tucked away in the deep recesses of my mind, but most amazing was the revealing of things I had not seen before. I saw how Dad had cut and squared the logs for the foundation of the house. I saw how he had built the walls without any two by fours and how he made steps from huge tree blocks. I was just born when this was done yet I saw it like it was happening before me.

I walked the sandy yard and saw Mom's poppies blooming by the back fence. The old front gate with the rusty hinges led out to the garden lane where the blackberries were ripe. I wanted to stop and pick some but could not.

It was all there and so clear to see. I felt that I really was there again and all was normal. Some dreams are sad, some frightening, some confusing, but this dream was a warm, happy dream and I awoke feeling good and with a sense of purpose. I'm not exactly sure what that purpose is but it has awakened a process of remembering what life was like back then. With pen and paper, I will try to capture the magic of life on the sandflat farm.

Throughout the pages of this book you see the reference to a sandflat hopper. I suppose now would be a good time to explain how that term came into being and how I was endowed with the title. In that time of history all the kids that resided on the flat sandy fields of Doodleville were poor and shoes were an uncommon accessory. As soon as the first warm weather of spring came, the shoes were shed for the joys of barefoot comfort. Shoes were a cold weather bit of apparel and for Sunday church services only. Even then they were usually carried along to be put on just before we arrived. There we sat

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in suffering repast until church was over and the infernal discomfort could be removed. Usually by the end of summer our feet had toughened to the point of rawhide but early spring they were a bit tender. The expanse of sugar sand fields grew little vegetation except nettles, grass burs, and a few sparse, grassy plants. With that hot summer sun shining down, that sand could become quite hot to those feet. Therefore, on crossing one of the fields, trying to step on what shade or cover there was, required a lot of hopping around. I'm sure to see of crossing a sandy field was quite comical and that earned us the title of Sandflat Hoppers. If possible our journey usually ended somewhere along the spring fed creek where hot feet could be cooled in the sublime comfort of the cool water. Once, the question was asked why torture our feet just to cross the field. Usually somewhere along that creek a watermelon lay cooling and was a just reward for the pain of the sand. Somehow the crossing of that field made that watermelon a lot sweeter. Besides, we had to keep the reputation of Sandflat Hopper.

## Chapter 2

I have so many memories that revolve around that old lane that wound through the woods to our farm. It was one of the favorite places on the farm for me. With the garden fence along one side and the wooded hillside on the other, it was the eastern access to the farm and the portal of many adventures for a sandflat hopper.

It was along this lane that the best black berries grew and late in the season when all other berries were gone, they were just changing color. They were small and tart but they were abundant and made the best blackberry jam ever tasted. Many a day ended with my fingers purple from picking berries and my thoughts raced ahead to the cold winter mornings of hot biscuits and great jam. There was always the big berry cobbler that was made after the canning was done and even without fancy whipped cream topping it was delicious.

It was also along this path that the biggest, sweetest wild grapes hung from the trees. I was a regular shopper for these treats but Mom knew how to get her share for juice and jam. We usually had to beat the birds for the best because they liked them too.

The roadside along the lane also held a special plant made for a country kid. It was a red flower that grew on a tall stalk with leaves that looked like green hairs. The flowers were pretty and many bouquets were brought home for mom but it was the stalk that I treasured. When dried to a brown, hard, hairless condition they made perfect arrows. With a supply of these, a hickory limb, and a piece of string, I have hunted many imaginary foes through the forest and fields of the farm.

Many hours were spent as a lad playing along this old lane. It was also down this trace that I walked to catch the bus for my first day of school. Just a scared kid comforted by a father's calloused hand on a new journey into life. It was my route to the challenging world but also my path back to the comforts of home and family. It was with great joy that I would emerge from the woodland's embrace to see the plowed fields and old frame house. My bare feet would race through the old front gate and across the sandy yard to my refuge of home.

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It was also this lane that we took our final journey away from the farm but that's another story of another time.

Now and then I get back to this piece of country and I'll walk the shady lane again. Old memories flood my mind like a rolling tide that cannot be quelled and voices of the past call my name. Here in these shadows lie my past, my roots, and the memorable times of childhood on the farm. A thousand golden moments that started a sandflat hopper on his journey of life.

Every morning on the farm was a new experience in beauty. One of my favorites was an early morning walk up the old lane that ran along the bottom of the hill. Wild morning glory vines covered the fence with a profusion of pink blooms. Kissed by the early summer sun and still wet with morning dew, it was the perfect beginning to another day in a hopper's world of wonder. It was also along this lane that the sweetest blackberries grew of course and may have been the real object of this early morning hike. I have been accused of being overly acceptable to the enticements of the wild treats that grew around our Doodleville farm.

In many trips through the woods and bottomlands that surrounded the farm, I followed the long legged stride of my father and enjoyed a young hopper's dream. Dad would always tell the story of losing me on one trek and how he had to retrace his path to find me. It seemed that I had found a persimmon tree and topped to pick a snack. He always said he had to keep a look out for any edible sites in our travels or he would be leaving me behind again.

I believe that at some period of time in my tenor as the king of Doodleville, I knew where all the biggest and best dewberries grew, where the sweetest blackberry bushes could be found, and where every plum thicket grew. I had every grapevine spotted; every persimmon tree located, and knew where the biggest and best hickory nuts could be found. There was also the food producing favorites that warranted a family pilgrimage each year to acquire a supply for the pantry. This included the old pear tree in the back of the farm and the huge black walnut tree in the middle of the north field. I can almost taste mom's black walnut cake even now.

Along with all the wild edibles, I learned at an early age the importance of keeping Mom happy and flowers served this purpose rather well. Therefore, I kept a mental list of locations where the brightest wild flowers grew and kept a close watch on the seasons to be there when they were at their brightest.



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Many a bouquet to Mom resulted in some tea cakes or a stack of sugar cookies. Early spring heralded in the pink sandflat posies, summer brought the joyous Indian paintbrush, and the fall foxtails all served to help me live a joyful life as a sandflat hopper. Then there were morning glories along the lane. If I close my eyes real tight and concentrate real hard, I know I can smell the dew kissed aroma of the Doodleville Morning Glories.

I remember the old fields freshly plowed in the springtime sun. I would walk the newly turned furrows behind Dad and the mules, kicking clods and catching earthworms. There was a soothing relief in the cool earth for a young hopper with growing pains.

Much of my entertainment was involved with the plants and animals found around the farm and woodland. Along with the fruits and berries that were, oh, so good, there was also an array of odd and unusual things to be found.

In certain areas of the sandy flats there grew a despised little vine whose grotesque seed pods were called a devil's claw. They were of no known value but were a very unique item in my repertoire of play things. With their fat bodies and curved, twisted arms, they made great make believe cars and space ships. Often in my travels I would find a patch of lover's lace and spend a lot of time trying to find the roots (It doesn't have any because it is a parasitic plant). It is a very pretty golden color and looks like a big pile of silly string.

Sometimes a plant actually provided a usable toy for my enjoyment. In the moist earth along the creeks grew onion grass. I suppose it was named for its smell (which is just like an onion) but the flat blade of the green top made a very unique whistle when used just right.

Speaking of whistles there were certain people that could take a hickory limb and make a terrific flute. One of the best sound makers was made from a rooster feather quill. I'm sure one from a chicken would work but Grandpa always said use a rooster quill.

Bull nettles were a plant quite plentiful on the sand flats and many is the time I got close to one. It would burn and make the skin itch and sometimes cause a rash. I was lucky because Grandma dipped snuff and a few drops of snuff juice on the spot usually stopped the pain.

Of course you looked a little spotted sometimes but at least it didn't hurt anymore. I remember the occasion when I was napping on a sack full of peas and rolled off into a big nettle. I believe I was more brown than white and Grandma used a whole dip on me. Bull nettles

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had little seed pods on top that you could eat if you were brave enough to pick them and skilled enough to peel off the stinging cover. It really wasn't worth the trouble and pain.

Now and then in our excursions, Dad and I would run across a horse apple tree. Known as Osage orange in other parts of the country, to us it was just horse apples. I don't really know why because horses didn't like them at all. I know because I tried. We would always bring a few home and put them under the house to keep the bugs away. I guess they worked because I don't remember seeing any bugs at our house except the ones I collected in my tobacco tin and when Mom found out they quickly left the premises.

## Chapter 3

On the farm, there was quite an array of pets and critters that passed through my days. Every farm boy had a dog and I recall two that were special to me. These are really a story of their own, along with Suzie the hog, Dan and Kit, the team of horses, and the three legged cat named Ratter. Add to this the wild iguana, Crooked Toe the buck deer, and a run in with a black racer snake, there was usually an adventure just waiting around every tree.

Other creatures came and went as items of farm life too. A few turtles, some birds, and horned toads were usually present. Once a baby flying squirrel was found, adopted until grown, and returned to wood hollow as was a little barn owl found in our tool shed. The longest lasting unusual resident was the doodlebugs and from that I acquired my title of Doodlebug King.

Every kid needs an area where he is known above all others and mine was the doodlebugs. The sandy fields of the farm was home to many interesting and unusual creatures, but this one little bug, about the size of a pea, would be my source of recognition.

Somehow the ant lion had acquired the local name of doodlebug and the abundance of them led to the area being called Doodleville. Right there in the middle of Doodleville sat our farm so it was only natural that I became the resident expert on these doodlebugs and their behavior. I suppose the long summer days gave me plenty of time to become close friends with the creatures that dug the little cone shaped holes in the sand.

It was when I found the red and black specimen that I became the local celebrity. No one had ever heard of anything but the gray ones but what made me the undisputed king was discovery of the giants. In a sector of the sandflat west of the house I noticed the curious trails wandering through the sugar sand and followed them around many times. Then one spring morning, there it was. A giant doodlebug over an inch long with a mean looking set of pinchers. There seemed to be a colony of them in this area and no one had ever seen one this large. Dad built me a sandbox in the corner of the yard to keep them in and every visitor we had was sure to stop and

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see the wonder of doodlebug town. When we left the country they were still there patiently furrowing their patterns in the sand. Have they survived all these years or has progress erased them as it has so many other things. I like to think that somewhere on some sandy flat, they still furrow along and a young lad looks on in wonderment. Maybe it's time for a new Doodlebug King.