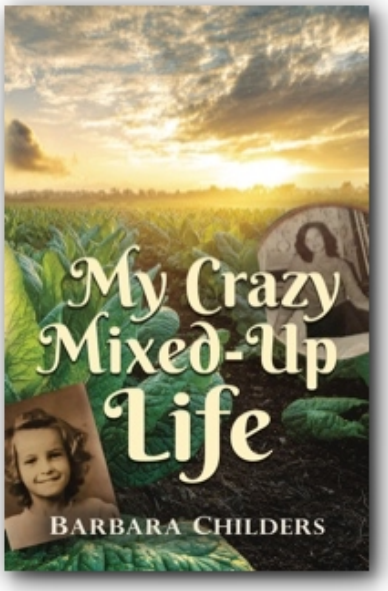
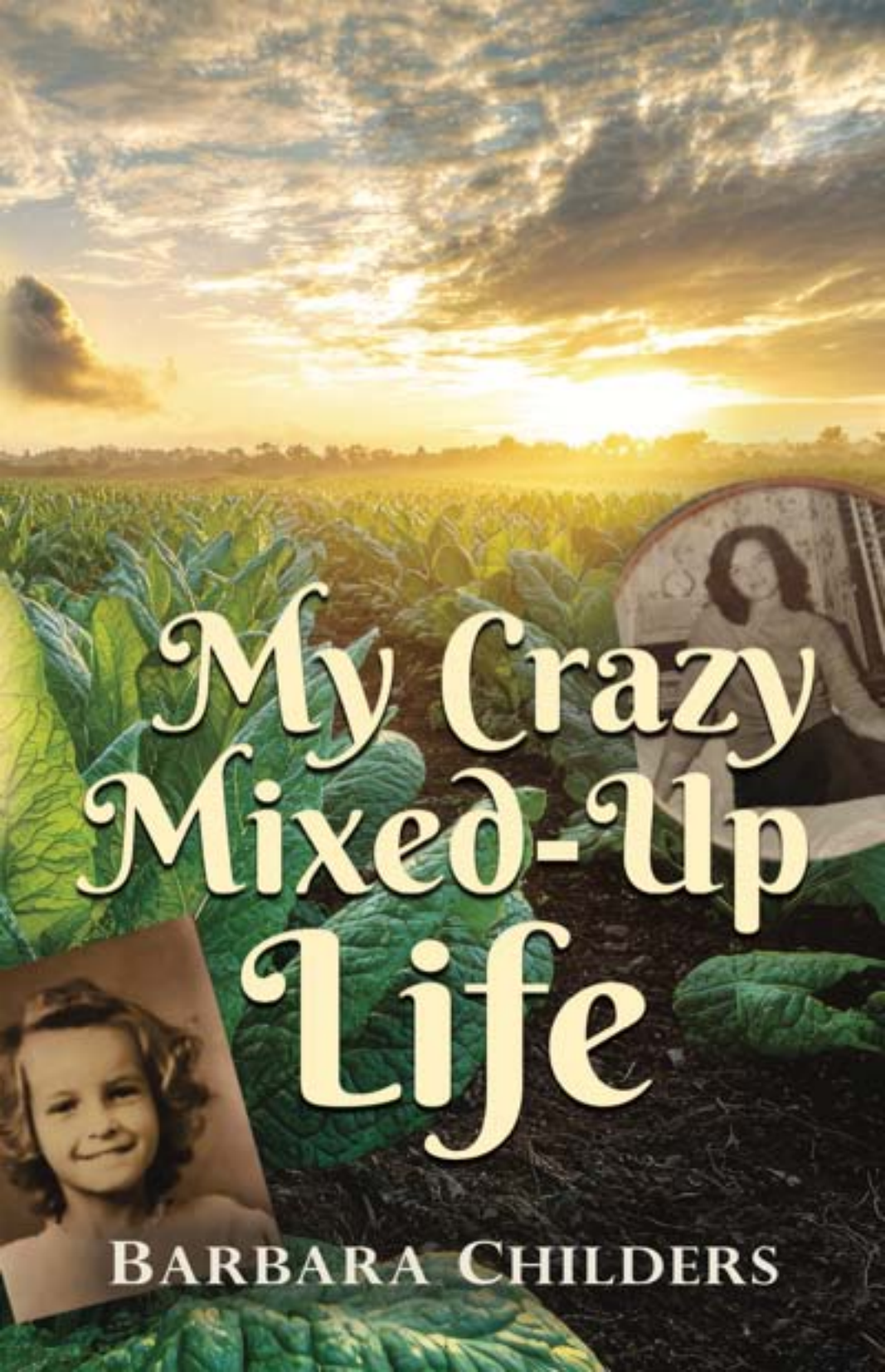


Raised in the 1930s on a humble farm, Bobbi never imagined how far life would take her. Through struggle and perseverance, she discovers strength, healing, and a new beginning.

My Crazy Mixed-Up Life

by Barbara Childers


My Crazy Mixed-Up Life
Barbara Childers

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-959624-72-1
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-959624-73-8
Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-136-5

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Childers, Barbara
My Crazy Mixed-Up Life by Barbara Childers
Library of Congress Control Number: 2025919498

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2025

First Edition

Table of Contents

Chapter 1:
Childhood Memories

I was the second oldest of nine children raised on a farm in South Georgia. We had to work at a very young age in crops like tobacco, cotton, and vegetables. One of my earliest memories was when I was seven years old handing tobacco leaves to a black woman who we called a stringer. We handed tobacco to the stringers, and they would use cord to tie the leaves to the sticks. Early in the morning when the tobacco was wet, the juice would flip in my eyes and sting me as I was trying to hand it to the stringers.

There were no hourly time frames for the labor. You worked from daylight till you got finished—sometimes till after dark. We usually did homework when we got home from school if we had time. Sometimes we got in trouble for not getting it done, but the teachers understood back then what children had to do.

There was no indoor plumbing. We had an outhouse and we had lamps that were powered by kerosene. That is, until my preteen years when we got electricity.

We had to get water drawn from a well by hand that was forty feet deep and by pulling a bucket up by rope. It was a big container of water, and you had to conserve it very carefully. Everyone washed their hands in the same pan, and there had to be extra water drawn for cooking. Baths were made one bucket at a time and put in galvanized tubs for the sun to heat since the little children had to bathe together.

We grew our own food, which was plentiful—mainly vegetables. Meat was usually available only on weekends. We had some chickens we kept for laying purposes for eggs. Some

we would kill on weekends for our company. We also had hogs we butchered for Christmas and holidays in the wintertime. My parents kept sausage and different things from those sows at a cold storage plant in town. We would go and get it as we needed it because we had no freezer—only an ice box. It had a long shelf at the top with tubing for drainage and a hole cut in the floor so it could go underneath the house. At most, we had ice for weekends because we couldn't afford it during the week, so whatever we cooked had to be eaten right then because it wouldn't keep.

It was customary to feed all the tobacco hands, no matter how many there were at the person's house. I remember one day when my mom had started lunch. She was about seven months pregnant at the time. I was home with her the day before the gathering tobacco day. She had gone to the field and picked corn, okra, and butter beans for the next day's meal. She brought it back home and I sat and helped her. She shelled all the peas and prepped the vegetables to cook. We had a big iron stove, so she had to heat it ahead of time. She then went out and butchered chickens and fried them. She went out to the well to draw water for the cooking, and while we were gone, my dad's hound dog put up his paws on that hot stove and devoured most of that food that she just cooked!

She then went back to the field to gather vegetables, bring it all back to the house, kill more chickens, and did the same thing again. She did make sure the door was closed this time. She cooked all that food and left the wood stove going on low till the next day to keep the food warm for the meal. She was expected to work and then come back to the house to serve lunch. She then had to leave all the lunch dishes and pots, go back to the barn, work till the tobacco was done, and then come back home and prepare supper for us that night after cleaning.

So work was a way of life. I don't know how she did all that because birthing nine children, most of them at home, and doing all that work was something I can't even imagine. I watched her cry when she had to do all that prepping and cooking all over again, but it didn't help. It had to be done. She might have been pregnant with Phyllis, my sister, at the time, and she had two more children after that. As I recall, she gave Dad two choices: get rid of the dog or lock him up. Dad thought what the canine did was funny. She had a saying about that pet: he remained so thin that you could read a newspaper through him.

A few years later, when I was ten or eleven, we moved to another farm. My dad was an avid hunter and fisherman, which he had to be to feed all of us. He had been tracking this huge hog by the river and my two brothers, Harold and Earl, had gone with him because he was teaching them about hunting. He knew that creature was very big by the tracks. The way Harold tells it, this one Sunday they didn't think they would find the hog that day, so Dad didn't take a gun with him. All he had was his pocketknife. They tracked it into the river and saw him there.

They had dogs with them, so my dad made them go in the river; he got my brothers to climb up a small pine tree. Dad jumped on that hog and stabbed him with a knife like you would ride a horse. Harold said he was scared to death because that small sapling tree kept bending with the wind and he was so afraid they would fall on that swine before my dad could kill him. In Westerns they would take a couple of branches of the tree to make the sled for hauling things. So, Dad butchered out that hog on the banks of the river. They cut down small trees to build a makeshift sled, called a skip, and hauled the animal back to the house. This hog weighed about 300 pounds. Then, Dad had to go buy ice because he had a big glass tub on the back of the house, but it was way too much meat, so he gave some to the neighbors.

Mom cooked it up as best she could. There was ham and pork chops, so we ate quite well with that.

On that place where we lived there was an abundance of rattlesnakes. For some reason, they loved the property. Both my brothers were avid shooters with sling shots, and they would get right up on them and kill them with the shooter.

Clothes for school days had to be prepared the day before with so many kids. You had to have the outfits you were going to wear the night before, especially as with so many girls. There was no such thing as figuring out what to wear. We had to walk quite a way to catch the bus and they didn't wait for you. We would miss school if we missed the transportation. Since we didn't have a car so, we got punished badly if we missed that bus.

Another time I recall my parents, aunt, and uncle working in the field and my sister and I had to go into our out house after school. There was a snake in there and my parents and aunt and uncle all thought I was hurt. My Dad obstructed the door; he had his hoe with him, and my sister told me to jump over him, but I said no. I already had my underwear down, too.

Holidays were very slim, especially at Christmas time. We always had hogs to butcher and Dad waited till then because you had to do it in cold weather to keep meat from spoiling. All my mom’s brothers lived around us, and we all worked together to do what had to be done. My mom's only sister, Marie, married a carpenter, Arnie. They lived in town, so she never knew about farming except as a child because they were comfortably well off. They would come out to the farm and they would eat Sunday dinner with us.

My dad’s family didn’t visit that often simply because they lived in Florida and didn’t have cars back then.

We would go out into the woods and cut our own tree, and all the decorations were homemade. There were no lights. We would color little things and make tiny ribbons or whatever we had to hang on the fir. Mom usually would go into town and sign up with Salvation Army and get a few toys for us and hide them from us—then they'd tell us Santa brought them.

When Aunt Marie visited, I would always want to go home with her. I would cry, but still was not allowed to go with her. My parents let me in the summer, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. They had indoor plumbing and better things that we didn't have. They would turn on the water and get in the shower, plus they had TV, and we didn't. Aunt Marie lived in Valdosta, and we lived near Hahira where there were a lot of farms. I usually got to stay with her for a week in the summer. I wanted to stay longer, but Dad said no—one week was enough.

Mom was a great cook, and she made homemade dressing for Christmas dinner. We'd have chicken and stuffing, ham from the hogs, and homemade fruit cake. We usually had a milk cow, and we would have milk and butter and the chickens provided eggs. We didn't have the luxury to kill them unless we had company or a holiday because the animals would have to provide eggs for us. My parents would take some of the eggs and they had what they called a setting hen and when she would go off, she'd have eight or ten eggs. As we tried to get them, she would peck us, so Dad and Mom left them alone. In the wintertime we had to really watch the chicks so they wouldn't freeze to death, and we would wrap stuff around them to keep them warm because in South Georgia there were a lot of times it would get very cold.

We went to the same school until we moved to Florida. When I was in the fourth or fifth grade, I won a spelling bee and then I went on to win the district spelling bee and then I had to travel with one of the teachers for the state contest.

I told Ms. Folsom, my teacher at the time, that I couldn't go, and she looked at me because I was telling her this in confidence. She said, “You don't have anything to wear, do you?”

I told her no and she said to meet her at the teacher's lounge, and she made it where the kids didn't know. She bought me a dress, shoes, and nice socks. I don't know how she remembered my sizes, but she got a whole new outfit for me to wear. I didn't win but I had gone a long way and they had me stand up in front of the class the next day and tell them about the spelling bee. I was crying because I didn't win.

She said, “Listen, don't ever be that bad on yourself. The important thing to remember is you tried. And if you tried and you didn't win that's okay; at least you tried.”

She was a very inspirational teacher, and I wish we had more these days.

I was about ten back in the 1940s and they had the draft, mainly to the Army, because the war was going on. Mom had four brothers: two in the Navy and two in the Army at the same time. I remember when she would get letters from them, seeing one envelope that read “somewhere in France” because they weren't allowed to divulge where they were stationed. They would come home on leave, wearing uniforms and God was good because they all came home uninjured. They came back and worked on the farm again like they did before they ever left.

My Uncle Turner was hurt though. He met his future wife, my Aunt Mabel, at an Army hospital as she was a nurse. They started dating and married and she moved to Valdosta where they settled and had two daughters. She worked at the Air Force base in town and all of us were very close. The cousins were all like brothers and sisters because we grew up together. Many of

them, the ones still living, remain close to this day. We call and stay in touch just like we did as kids.

Grandma and Granddaddy lived near us, and she always came when a baby was to be born and helped mom give birth to the babies because they were all delivered at home. I was born at a hospital but after that, all the rest of them were birthed at home. Grandma lived close and I stayed with them a lot. She taught me lots of things—like how to cook greens and make biscuits. She was a wealth of information to my sister Laverne and I and she showed us how to make banana pudding and all that delicious stuff!

My granddaddy was very standoffish, but grandma was real jolly and she was a hugger. She loved to give affection to us kids and all. Mom was standoffish a little too and had trouble showing love. I thought it was odd though when I used to stay with them that grandma would make biscuits and put them in the old wood stove oven and my dad would stand there with a bleached out floured cheesecloth waiting for them to be cooked while she would go milk the cows. I felt that was a reversal from what I expected.

Grandma and Granddaddy were all about manners and when we stayed with them, I remember my cousins and I talked about this a lot.

Grandma would say, “Wipe your feet and wash your hands.”

If you wanted to go into the kitchen and help her, you had to do this. When we ate at the table with them, it was very quiet. They taught you to chew with your mouth closed. When you were finished, you were expected to wash dishes.

Grandma was a stickler for hot water and bleach when doing the dishes. When it came time to do laundry, sometimes she would

help Mom and they would do it together. My brothers had to cut wood and light a fire under a big washpot, and Grandma put clothes in it, along with lye soap (that she and my grandmother had made) and boiled them. She had a battling stick that she used to move the clothes around, much like an agitator would do in a washing machine today. Once the apparel was done in the washpot, she would use the paddle to transfer them to a washtub filled with clean water. She then used a washboard inside the tub to scrub the clothes with bleach and lye soap.

Then she used the battling stick to transfer the clothing to a second washtub and a third basin of clean water so that they were cooled off and thoroughly rinsed. After the last tub, she would wring out all the clothes by hand and hang them on a clothesline to have them dry in the sun, so it had to be good weather when they did the wash.

It was hard work, and I saw quite a few times that the clothes were so heavy with jeans and work clothes that they would break the clothesline and fall in that mud if it had been raining. Mom would have to wash them all over again.

One memory that comes back to me was picking cotton. I must have been about seven. In many ways, this era of my childhood reminded me of a movie called *Places in the Heart*. That film was very true about how things were back then. My dad made me a cotton sack out of flour sacks with a cross-body strap, much like handbags today. Adults usually averaged picking 150 pounds of cotton a day whereas a child like me would do well to pick even fifty. My mom would slip some of hers into my bag to help me out. I remember it was so hot—95 to 100 degrees and the long rows of cotton stretched endlessly. I could see shade trees at the end of the rows. There you could hope to rest and get a cool drink of well water.

I thought I would never get to the end of that row that I was in. There were burrs that held the cotton and they had sharp quills that stood straight up. They would stick in your fingers when you went to pick it and make them bleed. No sense complaining because the same thing happened to my siblings and my parents as it went along with the cotton farming. We were all expected to work from a very early age with no exceptions. At the end of the day after sunset, we would go home. My mom would try to figure out the quickest thing she had on hand to cook for all of us for supper.

Many times, it was a baker pan full of biscuits and gravy she made from tomatoes that she had canned. A lot of times we were more tired than hungry, but we would eat that and fall into bed only to start the same again the next day. This went on for weeks until the long fields of cotton were harvested. It would usually come in the fall in September and October. The manufacturer of the cotton had a cotton gin, and they would take the burlap sheets of cotton and empty it on to the trucks where they would take it to the gins. It separated the fleece seed from the product itself and then it was sold to a manufacturer.

If it got too close to the end of the season, a lot of times the buyers for the cotton would move on to the next area and my dad could not sell it. So, he would go into Valdosta and hire black people to finish up because if he didn't, the gins would move from one end to the other and you wouldn't get your product harvested. I remember when they would get a truck half full, us kids would jump in the middle of it playing and pretending it was snow.

There were also times in harvesting the cotton we would get tent caterpillars that we called fire worms, and they would cover the plants and eat the leaves. If we saw them my dad would take over and take care of them where us kids didn't get into them

because they really stung. They would get into cotton and my dad would mix up poison or he would just cut the branch of them off and the kids didn't have to deal with it. When we worked a lot of us didn't have hats to wear, and that's why it was so hot. My mom usually had a hat, and she would take turns letting us wear it since there was nothing to protect you from the scorching sun.

We worked on cotton for a couple of months until it was all harvested, and we still had to go to school for that part of the time. We would come in from school at two or three in the afternoon and go straight to the field. We had to put on our farm clothes, which were just old jeans with holes in them because we weren't allowed to work in our school attire. The jeans we wore to class were washed and pressed and nice looking and you didn't wear anything with holes in them to see the students.

Going into the fall season, we got some respite from farm work because after things were harvested, we could concentrate on school until the winter came. My dad usually planted fall tomatoes for the market, and we would have to pick tomatoes. We picked those green because they had to have time to ripen, but they were very delicious because they were raised naturally. You could just pick one off the vine, which my dad loved to do, and just eat it out in the field.

In the fall, Dad would also plant rows of greens of all kinds like mustards, collards, green onions, and things like that. We ate a lot of greens and the dry beans that we bought at the store. Of course, you could not can the greens. We had no freezer, and if we had one, we could've done those for the winter months. Back then, no farmers had freezers. That came later. After we got our fridge, we got what we called an upright freezer, meaning it looked like a refrigerator. My mother would cook greens and freeze them, and she froze a lot of things for the winter months

because it helped with feeding when there were so many of us to feed.

In the spring we had a watermelon patch, and we sold them and had plenty to eat. They were very delicious in the spring. Of course, we had to have my dad and brothers lift them because they were heavy to load onto trucks to take to the market. As a young child, I really harbored resentment toward my parents because there were so many children. I thought maybe they never practiced birth control after I learned about it. I often wondered why they had so many kids and I felt resentment a lot; however, I realized later contraception was not nearly as reliable as it was in later years. There were nine of us there and lots of fights—as you can imagine. Lots of conflicts, and the same was true of my parents. They never seemed to get along and were always arguing as we grew up.

I didn't understand why, but later I did because it was just too much for them with so many children and never enough money to clothe and feed us all. My mom made our clothes on an old Singer sewing machine that you had to pedal, and it was not electric. So that helped a lot. I remember we went barefoot all summer, but in the fall, we had to have shoes for school. So, my dad would take cardboard, and he measured our feet and then he took the figures to Lazareth Store. He asked what size of shoes to get because we couldn't go to the place barefoot. It carried a very cheap line of foot apparel that didn't last very long, and I still remember my feet freezing in the winter as all of us did. But that was the best he could do. That's why to this day I wear probably expensive shoes; however, they have good arch support and are made well. I swore when I grew up, I would never wear cheap ones again.

We had no toys from the stores except at Christmas from the Salvation Army. We had to make our own or be creative. I

remember we took the moss from the trees and fashioned them into makeshift furniture like a sofa and a chair. We thought they were cute until my grandma told us they had chiggers—bugs that would bite you. We had not known that before. My brothers took empty syrup buckets and washed them out and filled them with dirt; then, they took haywire and ran it through the holes that were on one end. They took a nail and made a hole in the other end, then ran that wire around so they could pull it like a wagon. In doing so, it made a clack-clack sound like a car. But we did what we could to have childhood things to play with. My mom had hair clippers that were handheld, and she cut my dad and all my brothers' hair. She also did the same with my sisters' and my hair with scissors and performed a fairly good job since we couldn't afford the barber and beauty shop.

Back in the day during segregation, black people would work on the farms.

My grandma said that when Uncle Ralph, my mom's oldest brother, was a baby, she was home alone while my grandpa was working at a grocery store he owned. She relayed that back then the doors had a stick that went into a little holder and there were no locks. The stick would slide over and lock the door.

She heard a knock one night. My Grandad Sim usually knocked at the door when he would come in from work. Grandma said she had Uncle Ralph on her hip. She went to the entrance, and she had her hand on the stick to open it when something told her to ask who it was.

She said, "Is that you, Sim?"

And this deep voice said, "Yeah," and she realized it was not my grandpa.

She picked up a stick and banged it on the floor and said, “Get off that porch. I’ve got a gun here.”

It was a young black guy, she thought.

He said, “You ain’t got no gun. And I know Mr. Hooker is still at the store.”

And she said, “You don’t know if I have a gun, so you better get off the porch. I’m going to count to four.”

And he ran off because he was afraid she might have a gun.

My mom was always busy trying to make jams and jellies in the spring and summer. She would pick blackberries and boil them, adding sugar. I don’t know how she did that, but she made jars and jars of jellies. She had us pick tomatoes and I remember seeing big Number 3 wash tubs full of red ones. She peeled them by hand, and then she put them all in a wash pot and had to cut wood to boil them. I remember she had a long spoon she would use to skim off a white foam that the tomatoes had, and she said if you didn’t get that off, they would sour and spoil. After they had boiled enough and she had all the foam cleared off, she took them by buckets to the kitchen. She had a big pot on the wood stove that had sterilized the canning jars. She then spooned a cup at a time of those tomatoes in those jars and sealed them. So that went on a lot in the spring.

The peaches were in a short time in June, and we had to pick them. Mom would have them in big tubs. She peeled them and did the same process as she did with the tomatoes except they didn’t go in boiling water. She put them in a big pot and added sugar with Sure Gel and made peach jams and jellies. (I used to can peaches as an adult—still do. I put them in zip lock bags for cobblers.) The Sure Gel kept the color in them but if you were going to make cobblers you didn’t need it to go in there.

My mom also canned green beans the same way as tomatoes, as well as all the vegetables we didn't sell. She canned them for the winter. My dad had rows of potatoes, both Irish and sweet, and we didn't sell those but used those for our needs. The way he kept them was he would just put them on the ground and covered them with dirt, making a patch over them so they wouldn't freeze in winter. When we wanted potatoes, we would go out there and dig them out of that mound where they were safe and use them for cooking.

Some farmers raised sugar cane, though we never did. The way that worked there was a mule that had ropes or chains around him, and he would go round and round in a circle on a track. In the center of the circle was a processor they put the sugar cane in, and it would come out on the other side as juice. The farmers would take that and make syrup out of it. It was sold to the neighboring farmers, and my dad would go and buy it. Then, we'd have it on hot biscuits in the winter.

I remember riding home on the school bus and the driver knew which farms were processing the sugar cane and they had cane juice. The bus driver would always stop where they were processing the cane, and the farmers would have paper cups there and would give us the beverage to drink. It was sweet and we would get our cup of cane juice and get back on the bus and come home. I doubt there are any farms today that grow sugar cane at all, and I don't remember seeing any after I grew up.

One of my sisters and I think the teacher said at least one of my brothers needed glasses, but we couldn't afford them. He never got them, so he just did the best he could. I remember we always had a bucket with kerosene in it on the back porch. It always stayed there and if anybody got a cut of any kind, they didn't go to the doctor. They used kerosene as a disinfectant. I remember stepping on a piece of glass. I must not have been more than six

and it was just shooting blood out. My grandma rinsed it off with water and she opened it up and poured it full of kerosene, which immediately stopped the pain and helped it heal.

My mother and grandma dipped snuff as far as I can remember, and they just had a little bit in their jaw. If any of us kids got stung by bees, they would take it out of their mouth and put it on the bee sting and it stopped the stinging immediately.

My parents had a very stormy marriage with lots of screaming and cursing and I don't remember any affection between them at all. I know it was very hard for them raising nine children in such poverty; many times, we went to bed hungry. There was never enough to eat, even though we raised our food. It depended on the season and winters were especially rough as we were cold and hungry. Dad didn't drink during part of the year since we had times we had to work, but the rest of the year was different because my dad and my mom's brothers would drink and fight each other. These were my mom's brothers who all lived near us with their families. They would all get crazy drunk at harvest time.

I remember one time my dad and my Uncle Ralph were coming home from town in a wagon. We didn't have cars then. We could hear them from miles away cursing and yelling and when they got home, they were bloody and still fighting. I saw my dad hit my Uncle Ralph by his eye and we were all scared to death. We would all have to run and hide till they passed out. I don't think they remembered anything when they sobered up. To this day, I can't see a hammer without thinking about that fight. This was one of many things I saw as a child that I will always remember. Small children should not have to see that.

Many years later my parents got a divorce, which was a huge shock. Tony, my second husband, worked for Lear Seigler then, so we were living in Virginia. There were no cell phones then, so

I heard about it in letters from my siblings. They said my dad met another woman and it was a nasty divorce. I didn't speak to him for about two years because I blamed him. Tony talked me into meeting with my father when we were back in Florida, and I'm so glad I did. He talked to me at quite some length and said my mom was a good woman, and he had great respect for her. He also said every time they had sex, she made him feel dirty. He said it was the way she was raised, and he didn't blame her at all. Neither of my parents discussed sex with us siblings at all.

My dad's second wife made him feel loved and he stopped drinking. We all came to accept Ann, his wife, and so did my mom. She became friends with her. Mom said she didn't blame herself or my dad for the marriage not ending well—that it was both their fault. It was also a difficult time for me because I had to tell my kids their grandparents were divorcing. They were just old enough to know.

Part of my story was published under "Our Heritage, A Choice Choir of Angels" and it lists my name in *Atlantic Beach*. In that piece, I talked about being about eight years old—one of nine children in a very poor family.

Here is that piece:

"I grew up on a South Georgia farm. Like our neighbors we raised our own food, and our parents showed us lots of love while teaching us about hard work and honesty.

One Christmas memory stands out above all others from back when I was about eight years old. We had cut a small tree to decorate with handmade ornaments and pinecones which we were all we had. In our hearts we hoped Santa would bring us presents although we knew there was little hope for that. But there was no doubt we would feast because my dad would butcher a hog early on Christmas Eve. The delicious aroma of

ham, greens, chicken, and stuffing filled the house. Mom baked pies and cakes, and we had fresh fruits and nuts.

But the thing that made this Christmas so special came next. Suddenly out of the blue two cars pulled into the driveway full of aunts, uncles, and cousins from Dad's side of the family. They had driven up from Florida to surprise us. What a time we had!

They were all musicians, and they made such a happy group as they sang and played their guitars for us. We kids sat around in wide eyed enchantment until we fell asleep. My mom made makeshift beds for everyone on the floor, and nobody minded because we were all together.

Santa did visit us after all, bringing us one toy each. On Christmas Day we would happily share them with our cousins. But as much as we had hoped and hoped for gifts the love and closeness made us happier in a way no presents could. I remember waking up all cozy and warm from the fire on Christmas morning and crawling out from under the covers and up in my dad's lap as he sipped his coffee. Together we watched the sunrise so beautiful that we could all feel God right there with us."

A funny story that happened in our family years ago was at my youngest brother Ronnie's wedding in the 1970s. Some family members had decorated his car with the traditional tin cans and a "Just Married" sign while the wedding was in progress. As the newlyweds were preparing to escape, Ronnie noticed the gas gauge was below empty. He had forgotten to get gas, so my cousin Rodney generously offered to swap cars with them and get gasoline in their car while they proceeded to go on their honeymoon. Since my mom lived near Rodney, he volunteered to drop her off at her house.

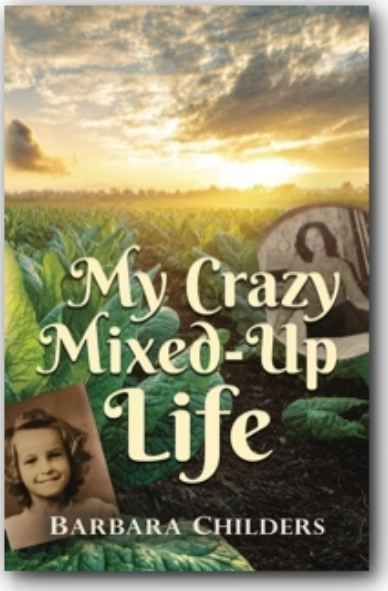
When he stopped for gas, an attendant came out. Back then the employees pumped it, and you didn't have to do it.

So, the guy said to Rodney, "Oh, newlyweds."

Rodney grinned and said, "Yes."

The attendant said, "Oh, let me congratulate the bride."

Imagine the look on his face as the window rolled down and he saw Mom, 85, and Rodney, 23 years old. They laughed about that as they drove away. This story has been a favorite in our family for years.



Raised in the 1930s on a humble farm, Bobbi never imagined how far life would take her. Through struggle and perseverance, she discovers strength, healing, and a new beginning.

My Crazy Mixed-Up Life

by Barbara Childers