

Keepin' It Together

A FAMILY'S ADVENTURES
IN SURVIVAL



VIRGINIA FRANTZ



Keepin' It Together, set in the Oklahoma Panhandle during the Depression / Dust Bowl days of the 1930's, tells the story of Ada Joyce and her family, who by sheer will to survive and succeed, overcome monumental tasks and difficulties to show a true picture of life during those trying times. Author Virginia Frantz lived those times, and was recently interviewed for Ken Burns' documentary, "Dust Bowl", on PBS.

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Chapter Four: April 1937

“Here, turkey, turkey, turkey,” I called, sliding down from the windswept, barren pasture into the draw. Small willow trees were growing knee high and so thick that I mashed some with every step. This morning at breakfast, as Mama shook some chocolate pancakes on my plate, she brought up the subject of the missing turkey.

“Ada Joyce, as soon we get the washing started, I wish you’d go see if you can find where that turkey hen has hid her nest. I’d go help hunt, but for the first time all week the wind’s not blowing. I just have to get the washing done. You girls are out of clean clothes to wear to school.

I had helped Mama build a fire under the black kettle in the yard and carried water from the well house to it fill it up. As soon as the water was hot and the slivers of lye soap melted, I filled the Maytag with the soapy water. She was cranking on the gasoline motor when I set out for the pasture. Soon I heard the pop, pop, pop, of the motor and knew that Mama’s trusty machine was doing its work.

“Here, turkey. Here, turkey.” I called again, brushing the short weeds aside. Last night the coyotes howled close by, and that was one reason Mama was so anxious to find the turkey and her nest. We had gathered the eggs from nests of the turkeys who had made nests close by. Mama would put a hen’s egg in each nest she found so the turkey hen would still be under the impression that her nest was well hidden. Mama kept those eggs in the cellar, keeping them fresh until she could get enough turkey eggs gathered to put under her broody Rhode Island Red chicken hens. She had three of her chicken hens setting on turkey eggs now. But this old biddy I was looking for today was being sneaky and trying to hatch her own babies.

Each turkey Mama saved meant a lot to her. They were her own special project to help with family finances. Each fall, right before Thanksgiving, she and Daddy would catch the turkeys, put them in cages, and take them to town to sell. She used the money to buy Ruthie or me a winter coat, any needed groceries we were out of, plus she

bought presents for us, which she always managed to hide from us until Christmas.

A little jack rabbit jumped up right at my feet, scaring me as much as if it was a bear, but it did bring my thoughts back to what I was supposed to be doing. I let my pounding heart slow a little then continued on.

“Here, turkey, turkey, turkey.” I sneezed as I parted the pungent-smelling fronds of a blue sage bush. A big rock jutted out from the bank of the draw, but the turkey’s nest was not under there, either. A few steps farther on, a little cottonwood tree was trying to get a start. I pushed aside the little twiggy branches and...”Gotcha!” Ruthie hollered, laughing like she had pulled the greatest joke possible. Old Shep was right behind her, looking as if he was laughing at her joke.

“Betty Ruth!” I hollered. “You scared me! How come you to slip up on me like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Ruthie thought the whole situation was funny. But I didn’t.

“Why’d you come down in the pasture by yourself? Did Mama say you could?”

“Didn’t ask her,” Ruthie said, real sassy like. “Sides, I wasn’t by myself, ‘sides Old Shep came with me.”

“We sure don’t need old Shep.” I told her. “If we do happen to find the Mama hen, he’ll scare her. But anyway, I heard Mama tell you to wash the dishes. Do you have them done?”

“Nope,” she answered, “No hot water.”

“Couldn’t you fill the tea kettle and put it on the burner?”

“No, the water bucket is empty.”

“Ruthie, I never heard such a sorry excuse. All you gotta do is turn on the faucet over the water bucket on the washstand. It might take 10 or 15 minutes to fill it, but it’s not like you have to go carry the water into the house. You do know how to turn on a faucet don’t you? Ruthie, sometimes I think you just play dumb. No one could be as dumb as you *act!*”

Ruthie giggled like I had given her a big compliment, or else said something funny. She can usually get anything she wants with that cute little laugh, and I guess she can with me, too, because I said, “Come on then, Stay close. I’ve got a hard enough job trying to find a stupid

turkey, without having to keep a little sister tagging along or keep from getting lost.”

“Shep’s a good hunter. He’d find me,” Ruthie said, as if that settled the matter.

Ruthie fell in behind me as I walked on down the draw, looking under the sagebrush and dodging the sharp spears of the soapweeds as I looked behind them. Shep walked back and forth around us, only his back showing above the little willows.

“Keep right behind me, Ruthie,” I told her, trying to part the little willow trees so they wouldn’t scratch her legs when she came through. “Here, turkey, turkey, turkey” I called.

“Here, turkey, turkey, turkey,” Ruthie echoed.

I stopped and put my hand behind me to stop Ruthie too. “Be real quiet,” I told Ruthie. “There’s something ahead,” I whispered.

“Is it the turkey?” Ruthie whispered back.

I stood real still, trying to see what was moving the bushes ahead. “Ruthie! It’s a skunk! Stay back.” We started backing up quietly when the mama skunk waddled into a clear spot, followed by a string of wobbling baby skunks.

Curious Shep circled toward them. “Shep. Come back! Come here!” I might as well have been talking to the moon. Shep ignored me like I wasn’t even there and jumped at the mama skunk, barking.

“Come back, Shep,” I hollered, but it was too late, the damage was done. That old mama skunk just turned around, raised her tail, and sprayed Shep full blast right in the kisser. The air was thick with a fog of the horrible smell. Shep howled and cried in pain. He ran in circles, wiping his head in the willows, rubbing first one side than another. He rolled over and over trying to clean himself of the awful stench. His eyes were watering like someone had turned on a faucet.

“Come on, Ruthie, let’s get out of here.” I grabbed her hand and went flying for the house, half carrying and half dragging Ruthie. Shep was right beside us.

“Stay. Shep, stay! Cover your nose, Ruthie,” I said, as I swooped up my dress tail to cover my nose with my other hand. I couldn’t say that helped any. The stench was part of the very air we were breathing.

“Oh, that’s awful,” Ruthie said bursting into tears.

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“Yes.” I answered, hanging on tighter when she stumbled and would have fallen if I hadn’t kept a strong hold, “Keep running as fast as you can.” Shep stayed right with us, trying to wipe the vile stuff on our skirts.

“Stay! Shep. Stay!” I hollered again. “Come on Ruthie, hang on. Quit bawling. It won’t help” Shep acted like he had never heard the word “Stay” before. He stuck with us like glue -- crying and moaning and acting plum miserable, acting like we could do something to get the misery away from him.

We were almost to the barn when Mama heard the commotion and saw us. She dropped the basket of wet clothes she was carrying to the clothesline and ran towards us yelling, “Girls, are you all right?” When she knew we weren’t hurt but just scared and stinky, she hollered again. “Don’t come to the house. I don’t want that stink in there. Get in the calf shed and throw your clothes out the window. They’ll have to air out before I can even wash them. I’ll bring some water to wash you off.” We dodged into the calf shed, locking Old Shep outside, who was still crying and trying to get the stinky stuff out of his eyes. “Come on, Ruthie. I’ll help you get your clothes off. Hold your breath when I pull them off, then the smell won’t seem so bad.” Then I stripped my clothes off, and we threw them out through the opening that used to be some windows. Almost as soon as we were bare, here Mama came, bringing the little red wagon with two cream cans full of the soapy wash water, several quarts of her home-canned tomato juice, a gallon of vinegar, and two bars of lye soap, plus some rags to wash with, and our clean clothes. She let us wash ourselves first, and then she took over. Ruthie and I hadn’t had a bath from Mama in a long time but that did not stop her today. She was going to do the job right. She first bathed us in the tomato juice.

“That’s supposed to help kill the smell.” She said. Next, she slathered Ruthie with the lye soap and smeared it all over her. Ruthie started bawling again. “That stuff burns!” she said.

“Quit being such a baby!” I told her. Then Mama gave me the same treatment. I didn’t have a spot on me that wasn’t smeared with soap. “Ouch, Mama, stop. That stuff burns!” I told her. She didn’t pay me any mind, just scrubbed, from the top of our heads to the bottom of our

feet. She scrubbed. Didn't matter one bit how much Ruthie or me howled, Mama kept scrubbing. She didn't quit until our skins were the color of her canned pickled beets. By that time Ruthie was really blubbering, and I was hollering. "Mama, can't you stop now. My skin feels like I got in the nettle patch."

Mama ignored me and then added. "I'm going to get some water from the horse tank to rinse you off"

Ruthie and I both yelled when she doused us with the cold stuff. But only then did she seem satisfied with the results.

"Now, I've got to get that nasty dog cleaned up," she muttered, "You kids get dried off good. You could take a cold from all this bathing outside. Then another thought seemed to occur to her, the reason for our adventure. She turned to me and asked, "Did you find the turkey?" With that I felt the fright from the skunks, worry about Old Shep, the responsibility of getting Betty Ruth safely home, and the frustration that I could not find the turkey's nest, nor the turkey. I broke into a howling, bawling fit.

Mama looked at me bewildered. She was used to Ruthie bawling, but not me, I never bawl, not until today.

"What is the matter?" She asked.

I couldn't really tell her. Here I had promised Daddy I would do everything I could to help keep things together while he was gone. And I'd messed up on a simple thing like finding a turkey.

All at once, Mama seemed to understand. She hugged me and said, "Don't cry, I'll try to help you hunt the next time. We're going to find that old biddy, however long it takes!"



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