

10-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Utley, Dan K. (2008) "Steve Allen Never Picked Cotton in Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 46: Iss. 2, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol46/iss2/6>

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## STEVE ALLEN NEVER PICKED COTTON IN TEXAS

*By Dan K. Utley*

**Editor's Note:** The following was Dan Utley's presidential address at the 2007 fall meeting of the ETHA. As you will read, Dan was unable to actually deliver the address and it was read by his friend and ETHA member Cynthia Beeman.

**Author's Note:** A funny thing happened on the way to Nacogdoches. As my wife, Debby, and I prepared to leave Pflugerville for the East Texas Historical Association Fall meeting, I began experiencing sustained abdominal pain. By that evening it was evident I would have to make a detour to a local hospital for relief. Avoiding unnecessary details, I will only say that while Tony Bennett may well have left his heart in San Francisco, I chose to leave my gall bladder in Round Rock. Thankfully, my dear friend and respected colleague Cynthia J. Beeman capably delivered my presidential paper at the conference. Meanwhile, back in Round Rock, a remarkable surgical team led by Dr. Jack L. Walzel, by coincidence the descendant of a Texas family who picked cotton, worked diligently and successfully to provide me with another chance. They are, quite simply, the best of their professions, and I am thankful to have been in their capable care.

Unfortunately, I had no choice in how the final days of my ETHA presidency played out, but fortunately there were many who moved quickly to cover my assigned tasks and ensure the conference went on as planned. Foremost among those who stepped into the breach was Vice President Dr. Beverly Rowe, who unselfishly and without hesitation provided a steady transition in an unprecedented situation. That is what good leaders do. My thanks also to the members of the ETHA board for their understanding and support. And, as always, I remain indebted to my friends Dr. Archie McDonald and Mrs. Portia Gordon – the ultimate ETHA team – for their support, concern, hard work, patience, and humor.

As I recovered from surgery, Archie called to check on me and to report on the success of the conference. He also requested I provide a copy of my talk for publication in the *ETHA Journal*, although at the time I must admit I wasn't quite sure which of us might still be groggy from general anesthesia. Nevertheless, he prevailed, and so I hereby offer my paper – written by me back when I still had gall.

Festus and Mabel. Sounds like a lost episode of Gunsmoke or maybe a California folk music duo from the 1960s. Festus and Mabel. Perhaps a Martin Scorsese film of life along the Brooklyn waterfront or a Willa Cather novel about a young girl coming of age in Festus, Missouri. Festus and Mabel, though – more precisely Festus John, Jr. and Blanche Mabel Prater Utley – were my parents. Both grew up on cotton farms in Bell County, Texas, and they lived their early lives only about a dozen miles apart along the blackland prairie in the central part of the state. Festus John Utley, Sr., who came to Texas as a young man from North Carolina seeking unspoiled farmland and economic opportunity, died a young man, the result of complications from a farming accident on his land. My father, only a year old when his father died,

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grew up picking cotton, but his mother eventually turned the homeplace over to sharecroppers and moved into the big city of Belton. As a result, my father was soon able to put his cotton picking past behind him.

My mother, however, was another story, and it is her influence that sets the personal context for this paper. To her, cotton picking was something akin to a Marine Corps boot camp. It was the touchstone of her youth, and it influenced her work ethic throughout her life in interesting ways. It was an integral means by which she measured one's character or values, as well as a job's degree of difficulty. To her, those who had picked cotton were automatically part of an undefined but universal fraternal organization, and they had successfully passed the initiation – no password necessary.

Festus and Mabel married in 1937 and eventually made their way the following decade to the East Texas town of Lufkin, where I was born. Although I didn't have an opportunity to pick cotton, I grew up taking on other jobs. I ran a printing press, sacked groceries, worked on a hay baling crew, hauled honey bees, fixed flats in a gas station, poisoned trees in the Tyler County swamps around Hillister, and even worked one day in a window factory – but that's another story. The bottom line is that no matter how hard I worked or how exhausting or dangerous my work was, it never quite measured up in my mother's mind to picking cotton. I was never allowed into the fraternity. I didn't know the password. I never made it to the initiation.

One day when she and I were having a discussion about something I thought was funny, but which she did not – a situation I often find myself facing with other folks to this day – I told her I had seen a television interview with Steve Allen wherein he stated there was humor in everything. To me, this was a brilliant comeback. Steve Allen was, in my mind, something of a Renaissance man of the post-World War II era – a late night television pioneer, musician, comedian, writer, philosopher, conversationalist, and would-be actor – and I quoted him often. In this case, though, the argument failed. Seemingly without concern for logic, Mother simply replied, "Well, if Steve Allen thinks everything is funny, one thing's for sure: he never picked cotton in Texas." Game, set, and match. I had no comeback for that. Steve Allen had no comeback for that. But I remember thinking that if I was ever fortunate enough to be president of a prestigious historical organization, I could at least use the line as a title for my presidential paper. And so here we are.

From that discussion with my mother, most likely somewhere in the 1970s, the story moves forward to 1991. She had passed away two years earlier, and I found myself sitting in Temple at the home of her sister, Ganelle Prater Moore, talking over the kitchen table about, once again, picking cotton. I had only recently joined the staff of the Baylor University Institute for Oral History and was planning to develop a research project dealing with life on Texas cotton farms in the Burton area of Washington County. So, I interviewed both Mother's brother and sister for general background. More on the brother later. When my conversation with Aunt Ganelle turned to the inevitable question of which family member picked the most cotton, she told me the oldest

sister, Bernice, was by far the best. Then I asked what I thought was the legitimate and logical follow-up question: "Was Mother a good cotton picker?" Aunt Ganelle stared at me for an instant and then started to laugh, and the laughter intensified, and as she continued to laugh, tears came to her eyes. As she took off her glasses to wipe them away, she said, "Dan, nobody tried harder to avoid picking cotton than your mother."<sup>1</sup>

The truth was out! My mother, the great gatekeeper of the secret order of the cotton picker, in fact spent most of her early field time trying to sneak away from the Bell County cotton patch that would eventually come to identify her own personal work ethic – and mine. While Mother was understandably evasive about that part of her life, she was apparently right about Steve Allen. Nowhere in his autobiography, *Hi Ho, Steverino!*, does he mention spending time in a Texas cotton patch.<sup>2</sup> But, the Allen theory of humor in all circumstances nonetheless held true. As I would find out as I conducted oral histories on cotton farming there was, indeed, humor in the patch. It was, in fact, pervasive, and it percolated through memories time and time again.

That is not to say work in the cotton patch was fun; it was not. It was stoop labor that required field hands to work virtually non-stop from sunup to sundown – or in the farming vernacular, "from can see to can't." The work was tedious, demanding, grueling, mind-numbing, monotonous and relentless, but it also put food on the table. There were the dangers of an unrelenting sun, of dehydration, poisonous snakes, stinging and biting insects, stinging vegetation, and the poisons used against the boll weevil. And, for those pickers who failed to contribute their fair share to the cause, there was swift punishment from the field supervisor, quite often a mother or grandmother.

But through it all, there was also the inevitable humor that somehow evolved from such seeming adversity. Now, to be sure, cotton patch humor is subtle. It is not like the story I heard about a young couple who left the rat race of Houston and traveled up U.S. 59 to Angelina County for the purpose of developing a cotton farm in the Neches River bottoms. According to the story, they worked hard to till up their half-acre and then dutifully planted 500 sterilized cotton balls they bought at a local drugstore. After a couple of weeks they came to the sad conclusion their crop had failed, and believing they had not adequately irrigated their field, they dug the soil once again and planted another 500 balls of cotton. This time they watered faithfully every evening, but the results were the same. No cotton plants; not one. Sensing they needed professional help, they drafted a long letter detailing their predicament and mailed it off to specialists at a well-known agricultural college. Two weeks later came the following reply: "It's difficult to tell from your letter what the exact nature of the problem could be. We're going to need a soil sample."

No, cotton patch humor is much more subtle – and hopefully funnier – than that apocryphal story. It is borne of the harsh realities and gamblers' trade of agrarian life. I have been collecting farming oral histories for over twenty years now, and wherever I have collected them, from the lower Trinity to the middle Colorado and from the rocky soils of the Panhandle to the blackland

prairies of Washington County, there are the unmistakable and universal rhythms of humor. Without exception, those brought up in the cotton culture have never forgotten the intensity of the labor, the uncertainties of markets and weather, or the common struggles of communities and families, and most have kept all that in a healthy perspective over the years. But they have also preserved the humor that comes from daily events. As Steve Allen so accurately observed, "Nothing is better than the unintended humor of reality."<sup>3</sup>

A good example of a cotton patch humorist was Grover Williams, an African-American farmer who lives outside Burton in Washington County. Williams grew up in the bottomlands of Yegua Creek, a stream known for unpredictable and widespread floods in the days before the impounding of Lake Somerville. The community of his youth was Flat Prairie, a place considered a land of lost cause soil and secondary to the preferred blacklands of the surrounding uplands. Farmers in Flat Prairie were considered by others to be the poorest of the poor, and one German-American farmer I interviewed noted, "When Mr. Jackrabbit went down to Flat Prairie, he packed a sandwich."<sup>4</sup>

Grover Williams is a remarkable man. He grew up in the segregated South but learned to accommodate all kinds of situations. He understood the system and how the system worked, and he made it work for him; it was his chosen method of survival. When he graduated from school he joined the U.S. Air Force and served in England, then returned to Texas to make a good living in the Houston industry before retiring to a farm in Washington County. He has a strong sense of place, both historical and personal.

Williams grew up without his mother, who died when he was a child, the result of a fall from a cotton wagon, and so he came to regard his grandmother as his mom. As a young man he was known as "Bristler," because of his tendency to "bristle up" on occasion like a cur dog. As a young cotton picker, he learned to observe keenly the cultural landscape surrounding him. Take, for example, what I recall his story of the educated cousin. The Williams family picked cotton over a wide part of western Washington County, and from the meager funds they collected they systematically set aside money for education, which they saw as a means out of the cotton patch for future generations. But they lacked the money to send all the children to college, so they in effect "invested" in Grover Williams' cousin, Ruth Carter, a good student considered likely to succeed. When she graduated from high school, the family sent her off to Tillotson College in Austin. When she returned in the summer she worked in the fields alongside the other family members, although she had fewer responsibilities.

Since Carter represented the family's investment, she received special treatment to protect her from the harsh Texas sun. She wore a long sleeve dress that reached to the ground, gloves that went to her elbows, and a long barrel bonnet that left only a tiny part of her face visible – even when she was looking directly at you. Her remaining exposed flesh was smeared with an oil-based cream that was both black and white, giving her a zebra-like appearance. Thinking back on her unique countenance, Grover Williams recalled, "I didn't

know, during that time, nothing else to compare her with ... I thought that's the way college girls looked."<sup>5</sup>

And speaking of bonnets, Williams learned at an early age to read the meaning of their subtle directional nuances like an aviator reads a windsock. His grandmother was the field boss, and she was strict. Unlike others in that capacity, she never allowed her charges to get on their knees to pick cotton. The Williams family always picked standing up. When Williams would protest, crying out "Mama, my back's hurting," the reply was most often, "Boy, you don't have a back, you just got a gristle." He knew better than to say his gristle was hurting. So, instead, he learned to lock in on the bonnet and follow its direction, even in his peripheral vision. His grandmother was most often ahead of him, so when her bonnet would turn away he would drop to his knees and pick as long as he could. But when the bonnet would swing back in his direction he knew to snap to his feet or face the standard cotton patch punishment, which was designed to be swift, sure, stealthy, and startling – the agricultural equivalent of "shock and awe."

A good field boss knew how to take advantage of the agrarian landscape when meting out punishment to lazy hands, using whatever was available – cotton stalks, dirt clods, green cotton bolls, a hoe handle – to make a point. Williams' brother, Alonzo (nicknamed "Snook"), was frequently the target, as he never took his work too seriously. He preferred, for example, to chop off the tops of weeds rather than carefully prying them out of the soil. So, only a few weeks after the family blitzed a field, chopping cotton as they called it, healthy linear stands of non-cotton vegetation provided unmistakable evidence of the rows where Snook had supposedly toiled. And one time, when he drifted away from the field to rest near a pond and contemplate some far-off vision, a well-aimed green cotton boll caught him sharply on the back of the head, startling him and causing him, as Williams recalled, "to walk water."<sup>7</sup>

Grover Williams had great admiration for his father, and that is clearly evident in his oral histories. Remembering his father's efforts to eradicate the boll weevil, he told:

We used a Paris green, I think they call it. It's something like arsenic. See, the old man he must have been immune to all of that – snakebites and arsenic and poison. See, he didn't have the equipment like the affluent farmers had, you know, where they go in there with sprayers and stuff, whatever. He had to get him a stick, just as wide as the row, you know. The only protection he had on, he had on maybe an old handkerchief across his mouth. And he had a little dust bag on each end of that pole. He had to walk, and he'd just shake it over, just walk around and shake it, hoping he'd get enough on there to stop the boll weevil from piercing that boll. It wasn't like a plane coming over with a great big old mist. It was just enough where it didn't do any good.<sup>8</sup>

When Grover Williams and I talked about hog killing time – a special event each fall on farms – he told me about the collecting of hog bladders. As the oldest child, he got to claim the first pig's bladder at slaughter time. This was more significant than it might at first seem. As he described it:

The bladder is about six inches long and it was green. If you blew into it, it would expand, so you'd blow it and beat it and soon it was bigger than a football. Every time you blew into it, it would stretch some more. You'd keep stretching it and stretching it, stretch some more, till it got about the size of a beachball. Then you tied it off and you hung it up and let it dry. When it dried, it would be just like paper. Over the hog killing process of that year you might get three bladders. My other brother might get three, according to how many hogs we'd kill. Everybody had them hanging up – wind blowing just as dry, just like a big piece of thick paper.

And then he elaborated further as to purpose:

That was for Christmas. I got three pops. See, you got it dry, and Christmas time come – didn't have firecrackers like you got now. You'd put the bladder somewhere and get up on something and you'd jump down on it – POW! Down in Flat Prairie, we didn't have firecrackers and Roman candles. You had to make your own stuff.<sup>9</sup>

With that, I asked what I thought was the appropriate follow-up question: "What did you call those?" "Bladders" was his reply.

Another cotton patch humorist in the Burton area was Eddie Wegner, who grew up in a German-American family. Mr. Wegner had a mechanical and systematic sense about his answers – he liked to explain processes in detail – but he always laced them with a little bit of humor. I interviewed him eleven times, and it seemed like each time there was something interesting going on at the kitchen table where we chose to conduct the interviews, primarily because of Eddie's son, Richard. One time when I was interviewing Eddie Wegner, Richard was breaking down and cleaning a .357 pistol at the table, handing it over to me at times to check it out. Another time he was making sausage. And then another time he was sharpening a Bowie knife he made from a truck spring. I never knew what to expect.

Because Eddie Wegner had such a good memory for details, I was able to interview him about a wide range of aspects about cotton farming. Take, for example, weeds. He described the common vegetative varmints, including cockleburrs, grassburrs, goatheads, Mexican burrs, white thistles, bull nettle, horse nettle, stinking gourds and careless weeds. But, even after years away from the cotton patch, he still harbored a special, deep-seated hatred and resentment for Johnson grass, the so-called scourge of the cotton patch. He called it "the plague."<sup>10</sup>

Wegner told about a time that he drove over to the farm of an elderly neighbor: "I drove up and he was pulling Johnson grass, and I said, 'What you doing, Mr. John?' He said, 'I'm trying to take care of this Johnson grass.' I said, 'Don't you know there's hardly any end to that?' He said, 'I well realize that.' I said, 'How long you been fighting it, Mr. John?' He said, 'All my life.'"<sup>10</sup>

Wegner also told of a young man in the Burton community who disliked his older neighbor – just could not stand him for whatever reason. So, each time the young farmer came across some Johnson grass on his land, he'd dig up the rhizome and flick it over the fence into his neighbor's field. Somehow, that gave him great satisfaction. Well, as the years went by, the young man

started courting the old farmer's daughter, who grew up to be a lovely woman. The two fell in love and eventually married. Years later, the old farmer died, the couple inherited his land, and the young farmer spent the rest of his life picking Johnson grass out of his field.<sup>11</sup>

Eddie Wegner liked to talk about animals, which he personified – like Mr. Jackrabbit going down into Flat Prairie or Mr. Chickenhawk circling the henhouse. He had an understanding of animals and certainly a respect for them, and it showed in his stories. When he talked about mules, for example, he related how they were hybrids and therefore supposedly sterile. He had personal doubts about that, but he offered as how most people thought the effort to breed mules was, at best, “not a good cause.” He recalled how one year his family lost two of their mules in accidents and they needed help fast to keep the fieldwork on schedule. So, Wegner's father borrowed one from his brother-in-law. As he told:

His name was Dick the mule. And Dick was – he was not too long on the working end. To make matters worse, he had been raised in West Texas where my uncle used to own extensive land, and my uncle was not known to be the most kind to animals. He worked them pretty hard. And believe it or not, old Dick, when we got him here, he knew exactly what a bedder was – a middle buster plow. That's what he'd put in a lot of hard days with. No matter where a bedder was laying or standing on the place in an idle season, when old Dick walked by it, he would look at it and then kick it with one leg. He knew exactly that was a machine of burden for him.<sup>12</sup>

In reminiscences of pre-tractor cotton patch days, stories of stubborn mules are common, and Wegner provided a classic version. He recalled a neighbor who had a mule that just quit working in the middle of the field one morning – wouldn't budge. The farmer tried the usual tricks – beating him with a stick, pulling on the harness, putting sand in his mouth – but nothing worked. So, he found a little dried prairie broomweed at the edge of the field and used it to build a small fire under the mule's belly. The mule would take a few steps forward to avoid the heat but then stop. After a number of small fires and only a few yards to show for the effort, the farmer decided to out-stubborn the stubborn mule. He went to the barn and got a fencepost and a drop auger, and he dug a hole next to the mule, set the fencepost, tied the mule up and left to do other chores. He left the mule standing out there in the middle of the hot field all day. At sundown, he unhitched the mule, hooked him back to the plow and made him work a few rounds in the field just to show him who was boss. According to Wegner, the balking mule was converted that day.<sup>13</sup>

I ended our discussion of mules by asking Wegner how his family disposed of large animals like mules and horses that died on the farm. He said if the death were attributed to a disease, they either burned or buried the carcasses. But if the animals simply died of natural causes, like old age, his family would drag them off to a secluded spot and “the Jones boys would take care of them.” That's how he referred to buzzards – the Jones boys.<sup>14</sup>

The Wegners expected every member of the family to work in the field, even women with infant children. Some mothers improvised field care for

their children, letting them ride on their cotton sacks, but when the Texas sun was high and hot they often resorted to other means. Young girls would take turns babysitting under a nearby shade tree, but the Wegners also utilized a “baby box” – a homemade wooden crate on slides, driven to the field by mules, that had a hinged side that could be propped open to provide shade. One of Wegner’s earliest memories was of this “baby box” and the perceived abandonment by his mother. As he recalled, “I would holler, Mama. Mama, Mama, until I couldn’t see her chop over the hill anymore. So when she came back, I was elated, of course.”<sup>15</sup>

When he became a parent, Wegner took his children to the field as well, even before they could work or walk. Instead of the baby box, though, he kicked the technology up a notch and used a baby buggy with a canopy for shade. One day as he picked cotton near the house, he heard his baby, Robert, gleefully giggling and gurgling and cooing, and he looked up just in time to see a family goat, with the buggy handle firmly in its teeth, gently pushing the buggy down the road.<sup>16</sup>

Wegner also talked about the elites of cotton pickers, those celebrated hands who could out-pick anyone, gathering hundreds of pounds of clean cotton a day. One in particular he remembered was an elderly man named Archie Laws, much in demand by local farmers for his remarkable skills and endurance in the field, and because of his somewhat unique ability to pick two rows of cotton at one time without losing concentration. He would stare straight down the row as he moved along, picking on both sides using peripheral vision and bringing two handfuls of cotton together at the mouth of the pick sack with a clapping motion. When Wegner asked him about the secret of his success, Laws said, “Well, the best I can explain it to you, one hand must not know what the other hand is doing.”<sup>17</sup>

That story contrasts markedly with the personal assessment of Charlie Linccum, who lived in the Lake Somerville area when I interviewed him. A self-professed poor picker, better suited to hand-digging wells and cisterns than working in the patch, Linccum recalled that even on the best day in the best field he had trouble picking a hundred pounds of cotton. His sister, Bertha, would frequently admonish him to work harder, even meting out justice by whipping him with an uprooted cotton plant, bolls and all, right there in the field. As an adult hand, Linccum recalled one particular incident where, as he weighed his cotton sack at the end of the day, the farmer to whom he had hired out observed, “You must have just come down here to eat.”<sup>18</sup>

One last comment about Eddie Wegner: he is unfortunately no longer with us, but I have great memories of his love for life. He always seemed genuinely happy to see me when we would visit, and he always greeted me with a great smile. He thoroughly enjoyed sharing cotton patch stories with me. When I last saw him several years ago, long after our sessions ended, he said, “You know, it’s good you interviewed me when you did. I seem to be getting freckle-minded these days.” An interesting description of what would later be clinically diagnosed as Alzheimer’s disease.<sup>19</sup>

Now, stepping outside the boundaries of East Texas, let me tell you about an interviewee from Turkey in Hall County, not far from Amarillo. That was the boyhood home of Curtis Tunnell, the first State Archeologist of Texas, later executive director of the Texas Historical Commission and my public history mentor in matters related to historic preservation, oral history, and traveling Texas. I conducted over fifty interviews with Tunnell, and his memories of life on a West Texas farm were remarkably clear and poignant. He had an ability – a gift, really – to recall the past with incredibly beautiful prose. In both spoken memory and verse, that to me evoked an artist's view, as in this written description of his childhood landscape:

Turkey was a beautiful place for a boy to grow up in the years before World War II. My earliest memories are of looking toward the west and seeing the sculptured purple silhouette of the Caprock. This rugged escarpment of the plains beckoned steadily, from the twin Quitaque Peaks on the south to Eagles Point on the north. This vista always made my mind take flight ... I never knew anything drab or monotonous.<sup>20</sup>

Tunnell was, by the local societal standards, a city boy. He grew up in the town of Turkey, but his parents worked on area farms as what he called "hoe hands." He said he preferred that term to "hoers," which he felt did not sound as distinguished. Tunnell's father and grandfather worked in the Turkey gins and compress, and other members of the family helped raise extra money by hiring out for picking and chopping. The Tunnell children worked across the area far and wide, often utilizing the small train known locally as the doodlebug to reach nearby farms, including those of their extended family. One such farm was near the Edgin spur, the site of a dispersed community called Grey Mule, now only a ghost on the High Plains. Today, you can reach the site of the settlement by means of a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department hiking and equestrian trail that utilizes the old rail bed, the route of the doodlebug. Here is Tunnell's description of one particular time when they had to catch the train at Grey Mule:

You had to flag the train. In those days, if anybody along the track wanted to go somewhere, they'd just go out and flag the doodlebug, and the doodlebug would stop. One time we went out, and cousin Nora Dale was with us. So, the doodlebug had come down off the plains and was coming real fast down the track. Oh, we all began to holler that it looked like the train wasn't going to stop, even though we were there beside the track. So, Nora Dale had on a red half-slip. She stepped out of that red half-slip, and she waved that red half-slip. The train came to a screeching halt.<sup>21</sup>

Tunnell's description of Turkey as a typical High Plains cotton town in the 1940s is rich. As he recalled:

One thing that is interesting about a cotton town is that during the ginning season they were burning burs at all five of the gins. We lived a block north-east of one gin, and there was always a southwest wind. The smell of those burning burs permeated the whole countryside. ... It has a very distinctive smell. I smelled it from my earliest days when I was right there a block from those cotton gins. I can't describe what it smells like, but it's like dry weeds

or something. It's not an unpleasant smell to me. When Mama would hang the clothes out to dry, the smoke would be coming, and they'd get smoked in that. I always thought that fresh sheets and fresh clothes, fresh shirts were supposed to smell like cotton smoke.<sup>22</sup>

Let me conclude with another of these cotton patch characters, my mother's brother, Thomas Francis Prater, Jr. – known as T.F. to the family. This brings us back to the blackland prairie of Bell County, where the paper began. T.F. Prater had a remarkable, lifelong ability of surrounding himself with other interesting characters, and he had a good memory for their stories. He remembered little details that made people sound funny, like "one of the McKee boys," a neighbor who played his clarinet at night in the cotton patch. On more than one occasion, it seems, the McKee boy's moonlight serenade coaxed coyotes right in upon him.<sup>23</sup> And then there was another neighbor who made peach brandy in a remote section of the Prater land. The fermented pulp he left behind on the ground attracted animals, including the Prater hogs, that were eventually blitzed, running all over the farm, squealing and carrying on.<sup>24</sup>

Prater had a good sense of family history as well, and he recalled how my grandmother, Florence Nott Prater, a devout Southern Baptist, nevertheless kept a small bottle of whiskey handy for "medicinal purposes." When she administered some to her sick children, she was careful to pour a little in a saucer and light it to burn off the alcohol, evidently making it okay for Baptist consumption. My grandfather, on the other hand, was not as theologically dogmatic as his wife, although he was apparently health conscious, so he generally took his medicine alone in the barn, without a saucer or a match, more in the manner of the Episcopalians.<sup>25</sup>

According to Prater, his father, a somewhat serious man who had a strong set of personal rules – not to be confused with stubbornness – insisted on biscuits to accompany his breakfast every morning. It was tradition, and my grandfather rarely messed with tradition. My grandmother faithfully complied, rising early each day to make scratch biscuits, but some days, in some unexplainable moment of independent creativity, she changed the routine and made toast. That defiance angered my grandfather so much that, according to his son, "He didn't go and even sit down to eat." He went to the field because he'd rather do that than eat a piece of light bread.<sup>26</sup>

In his oral memoirs, Prater spoke of how farmers often had long-held allegiances to particular product lines – ties that could become trans-generational. His father was, for example, a Farmall tractor man, although there was a brief, unexplained, and ultimately disappointing dalliance with the Fordson line. But according to my uncle, "Old man Cross" (a neighbor) was a McCormick Deering man – International Harvester. His tractor was McCormick Deering, his implements were all McCormick Deering, his thrasher was McCormick Deering, and, he added, "I heard a fellow say one time, Mr. Cross's mules is (sic) McCormick Deering."<sup>27</sup>

I have to add just one more story about my grandfather and my uncle. It has only a tangential, political connection with the cotton patch, but it speaks

also to his strongly-held traditions. Granddaddy Prater was on his deathbed in the Santa Fe Hospital in Temple during the early 1970s. He had laid there quiet and almost motionless for days, and we knew the end was near. But as news of Richard Nixon and some related Watergate matter came on the television in his room, he suddenly mumbled something. My uncle went to his side, leaned down and said, "What's that Daddy?" A moment of silence and then Granddaddy said, "They ought to knock him in the head." The old farmer was until the very end a New Deal Democrat.<sup>28</sup>

So, was there, in fact, humor in the cotton patch? Was my cotton picking mother right, or does Steve Allen's axiom of comedy prevail? Like most questions in history, I guess, it comes down to matters of context, perspective and interpretation. But, in a sense, it also comes down to the continually changing cultural landscape. How do we make sense of such a distinct historical era, with humor or otherwise, when so many of the landmarks, personal and otherwise, are gone? Cotton no longer grows around Burton, for example. It has, in effect, gone west and south to larger farm operations, and cattle now roam the former fields of the Williams and Wegner families. Many early Panhandle gins and compresses, as well as the small family farms where the Tunnells toiled, have given way to large agri-business concerns, and the settlement of Grey Mule is only a memory along a trail. The Prater farm in Bell County is long gone as well, although if you know where to look you can detect the refurbished farmhouse in the Marland Woods Subdivision of Temple, down the road from the massive Scott and White Hospital campus. And if you are a golfer, you can drive your cart to the exact site of the Utley farmhouse near Salado and tee off on the par four 18th hole at Mill Creek Golf Course, not far from where my grandfather died working his hardscrabble land for the sake of cotton and family and prosperity.

In the vernacular of the cotton patch, farmers often spoke of "scrappin' cotton," the end of the season process of going back over the field after the primary picking to harvest the few threads – the so-called "goose tails" – that remained in most bolls. It was a limited harvest to be sure, but it could produce additional funds, and in such a society all funds were helpful and genuinely appreciated. In a sense, historians today are likewise challenged to scrap the cotton. The crop was such an integral part of our culture for so long there will always be those who study its sweeping impact, from economics, labor and the environment to agriculture, class struggle and sociology. But to me, it always comes back to a set of fingers reaching down deep into a cotton boll, carefully maneuvering around the razor-sharp burrs, securing the center and twisting it slightly but deliberately – and maybe without the right hand knowing what the left hand is doing – carefully picking out the thin white threads for whatever reason. There was an inherent promise in the process. It was the human side of the cotton equation, and with that humanity as the primary focus we can still discover and analyze all of its historical facets – maybe even, if we listen closely, the humor.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Personal recollection of the author.

<sup>2</sup>Steve Allen. *Hi-Ho, Steverino! My Adventures in the Wonderful Wacky World of TV*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 1992.

<sup>3</sup>Quote publicly attributed to Steve Allen; exact source unknown.

<sup>4</sup>Eddie Wegner. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, January 22, 1992. Comment about Flat Prairie made off tape.

<sup>5</sup>Grover Williams. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, November 25, 1991.

<sup>6</sup>Williams. November 25, 1991.

<sup>7</sup>Grover Williams. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, May 22, 1992.

<sup>8</sup>Williams. November 25, 1991.

<sup>9</sup>Grover Williams. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, May 8, 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Eddie Wegner. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, March 18, 1992.

<sup>11</sup>Wegner, March 18, 1992; story told off tape; personal recollection of author.

<sup>12</sup>Eddie Wegner. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, February 20, 1992.

<sup>13</sup>Eddie Wegner. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, freelance historian, September 9, 1994. Tapes deposited with the Baylor University Institute for Oral History.

<sup>14</sup>Wegner, February 20, 1992.

<sup>15</sup>Wegner, March 18, 1992.

<sup>16</sup>Wegner, February 20, 1992.

<sup>17</sup>Eddie Wegner. Burton, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, freelance historian, September 16, 1994. Tapes deposited with the Baylor University Institute for Oral History.

<sup>18</sup>Charlie Lincecum. Lee County, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, August 28, 1992.

<sup>19</sup>Personal recollection of the author.

<sup>20</sup>Personal writings of Curtis D. Tunnell, October 1999. Papers in the possession of Dan K. Utley.

<sup>21</sup>Curtis D. Tunnell. Austin, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, freelance historian. Tapes in possession of the Texas Historical Commission; verbatim transcripts in possession of the Texas Historical Commission; excerpted transcripts in possession of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

<sup>22</sup>Curtis D. Tunnell. Austin, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, freelance historian. Tapes deposited with the Texas Historical Commission.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas Francis Prater, Jr. Livingston, Texas, oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, June 15, 1993.

<sup>24</sup>Prater. June 15, 1993.

<sup>25</sup>Prater. June 15, 1993.

<sup>26</sup>Prater. June 15, 1993.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Francis Prater, Jr., oral history interview with Dan K. Utley, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, June 16, 1993.

<sup>28</sup>Prater, June 16, 1993; personal recollection of the author.