

# Stomach Agony In Caldwell Country

By Mary Lynn Morrill

**When well water is a forbidden drink in the country, watermelon juice might be a solution. But understand that this next best thing about killed me.**

**The summer I was eleven years old the family thought it would be a good experience for me, a city girl, to have a visit in the country with my Grandma Ellie Caldwell, and 21 year old twin aunt and uncle. The twins were the youngest of Grandma's thirteen children, lived with Grandma and had jobs in town. I was one of Grandma's 38 grandchildren. My daddy, born in 1903, was the oldest of the six boys and seven girls. Baby Warren died of flu about 1918. Grandpa, John McCamey Caldwell, married Grandma, Mary Ella Shannon, when he was forty two in 1902. She was nineteen. He died of a heart attack coming back from the barn when I was three – in 1942. Grandma still lived in the same house on the Matthews-Weddington Road, about twelve miles from our house on East Boulevard. The two story wooden house never was painted and got dressed up with white asbestos shingles not too long after my unforgettable visit there. My immediate family in the city had a telephone, toilet, bathtub, an electric refrigerator and stove, home delivered pasteurized milk and clean running water that came out the faucet. Grandma's house had none of these luxuries.**

## **SUNDAY**

**My mother, father, and brothers drove me to my grandmother's house on a Sunday afternoon and said they'd be back for me the following Sunday. I was very excited about trying a new way of life – to live for a while like my daddy had lived at my age. He had so many interesting tales and memories of childhood. Before I left on the forthcoming adventure my mother told me that I was not to drink water from Grandma's well. She had been told by another relative that the well water had not passed the water test when the health department last came around. She said people can get bad diseases from water if it is contaminated, so I'd better not drink that well water or I could get very sick. She also told me to be careful about drinking any milk that came straight from a cow and was not properly processed and inspected. She said to drink soft drinks, milk in a bottle from the store or canned or bottled juices. This all sounded easy enough.**

Supper the first night at the round oak table covered with red and white checked oil cloth consisted of buttermilk, hard cold biscuits and leftover fried chicken legs, a fried chicken heart, and wings. I was told the best parts of the chicken had been eaten for Sunday dinner. I ate a little of the food, and Grandma said to take my plate to the kitchen. The wood stove in the kitchen had been there many years. My daddy said when his Mama got pregnant with the twins when he was 24 that everyone said she cried a lot as she cooked over this wood stove where water was heating in a kettle. Don had drawn the water from the well near the hen house. I thought about Grandma's crying as I scraped my plate remains into the slop bucket by the back door for the pigs. Dropping my plate, bent, tarnished fork and glass with a faded blue checked design into a metal pan of kettle heated hot water on the old kitchen table, I watched Aunt Dot run a soapy woven faded red dish rag over the supper dishes. She dropped the washed dishes into a pan of clear hot water and gave me a dish towel with a hole in it to dry what she washed. Grandma, a little over 60, put a wad of tobacco in her gum and wiped off the dining room table with a dingy rag. I thought she was very old and was amazed that she could do any work at all. She wore flowered dresses and black tie-up shoes. I could see varicose veins in her legs. Uncle Don asked if all the food was in the slop bucket and upon being assured that it was he took the bucket out to slop the hogs. After supper we sat in the parlor and looked at one another. I asked questions. The old floor was painted a light brown. A wood stove stuck out from the former fireplace. Curtains had been made from flour sacks and hung on a string to hide old books on shelves in the lower part of a flat cupboard made by David Caldwell, my great, great, great grandfather. John McCamey Caldwell was my grandfather, Dr. Thomas Caldwell was his father, Dr. David Caldwell, a twin, was Thomas's father, and the Rev. Dr. David Caldwell of Greensboro was his father. The Civil War obviously, in retrospect, had taken a terrible financial and emotional toll on the whole family. My daddy said that his daddy told him that all that mattered in the end was having land. He borrowed all the money he could to buy land. The books in the antique family cabinet were mostly dated before 1860. Reading those books was obviously going to be my sole entertainment as no one seemed too interested in lengthy conversation with me.

Before supper Grandma had spent a good bit of time brushing my hair after my family's departure and now she said she needed a doze. When working on my hair she commented several times on its thickness and cleanliness and said she didn't find dandruff or bugs. Aunt Dot said she needed to file and polish her finger nails for work the next day. She ironed her clothes with an old flat iron heated on the wood stove, and tied her hair up in rags. Our iron at home in town had a cord and ran off electricity. We had lamps with light bulbs. Grandma's house had one ceiling overhead light bulb in only a few of the rooms. No room had electric outlets. There were two parlors, a dining room, a kitchen, a back porch, a hall and two bedrooms downstairs. Upstairs was a hall

and two bedrooms. There was a door to an attic. I looked in there and saw a dead rat and quickly closed the door never to open it again. The bathroom, an outhouse, was down a path out back. My grandpa's old country store, later destroyed by a tornado, was across the road. Despite the many places to be on this farm, I would be spending much of my time in the outhouse with bugs, bad smells and an array of Sears Roebuck catalogs with many pages missing during the next few days.

Uncle Don said he needed to go read a book in another room. Reading the old medical books that evening I learned how to remove large tumors on the back and how to cut off a leg. I noticed the most beat up book, obviously the one that had been read the most, was the one on sexual etiquette. Soon Grandma said she was going to bed. Aunt Dot said I was to sleep in her bed with her. She said to let her know if I needed to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night as there was a slop jar under the bed. I had never heard of having a toilet pot under the bed. I was definitely not going to drink water. I had drunk almost nothing since my arrival as I had been offered nothing but buttermilk so far. It was hot July, but I covered up with a sheet as I had noticed mosquitoes flying around, and I didn't want to get bitten. Aunt Dot said that since I was a guest she would let me have the side of the bed by the window. The bed was lumpy, not at all like the mattress on my bed at home, but soon I was asleep.

## **MONDAY**

A crowing rooster was the first sound I heard at daybreak. Aunt Dot said his cock-o-doodle-doo's got her up daily. There was no need for an alarm clock. I got out of bed, put on my shorts and a top, and went to the kitchen. Grandma was cooking biscuits, fat back and scrambled eggs. She said Uncle Irvin, her son who lived nearby, was down at the barn milking the cow and would be up soon with milk for me to drink. I was very apprehensive. I never ate eggs due to my strong dislike for them, and I couldn't imagine drinking milk right out of the cow before it had been in the refrigerator to chill. Grandma had a cellar where she kept things cool. Two tin doors opened up into the ground behind the back porch into this cellar. I looked in there during my visit and could see glass jars of tomatoes and green beans. Some of them looked bubbly and some jars had burst. I told Grandma somebody needed to clean it up. She said I was right but that there was so much to do all the time that she never really did a good job like she would like to do on anything.

Uncle Irvin came in the back door with a tin pail of milk. Grandma poured the milk in an old pitcher and then poured milk into a jelly glass for me at my place at the table. I took one sip of the warm milk and could drink no more. I ate the biscuit and the fat back. The egg was loosely scrambled with much runny white in it. I could not put this in my mouth. Dot and Don left for work and said they would see me that evening. Aunt Dot looked lovely and was always so

sweet. Uncle Don was equally kind.

Grandma said I could comb Laddie's hair – that he had the mange and was itching a lot and that it would feel good to him if I worked on his fur. Laddie was a large, collie type dog with a docile face and matted up fur with bald spots. There were enormous brown "moles" – about the size of quarters and fifty cent pieces all over Laddie's body. Grandma said they were ticks. Our city dog got ticks, but they would be very small, and even one tick was a cause for much upset at home. There would be a big production of removing the tick with tweezers, hitting the tick on the sidewalk with a hammer, washing our hands, then putting alcohol on our hands. We knew we didn't want Rocky Mountain spotted fever. I got some sticks and tried to pull the ticks off. Grandma said not to worry about removing the ticks as Laddie had so many. She said that when cold weather came they would gradually drop off. Grandma was so sensible and matter of fact about the worst of things.

Sensing my distaste at this dog job, Grandma said she would give me a basket to go get eggs out of the hen house. The front yard of the house was hard, hard dirt, and there were a good many large trees for shade. Chickens ran around everywhere and especially liked to stay underneath the house. Grandma pointed the way to the hen house and told me to put my hand down in the straw nests to gather eggs but to look first as black snakes would sometimes be in the nests as they liked to put holes in the eggs and suck out the insides. I had my sandals on as my mother told me manure would be in many places in the country and that people could get tetanus that way. Even though I had gotten a tetanus shot, I didn't want to push my luck. I asked Grandma if she had gotten a tetanus shot, and she said she didn't know whether Dr. Black had given her one or not. I asked her what she did when her children cut their feet, especially in the barn. She said ashes from the fireplace healed every wound.

Off to the unpainted chicken house I went with the old basket. I pushed open the door. Some hens were sitting on nests and peered at me. I looked around in the empty nests and spotted some eggs. They were quite dirty – not clean like the eggs I saw my mother crack at home. Some of the eggs had holes in them, and I was sure a black snake must be near. I quickly collected a few of the eggs near the door and got out of there. Grandma said the hens must not be laying much due to the heat. She didn't know that I made a quick entry and an even quicker exit. About that time I started thinking I needed something to drink. I knew I was not to drink the water. I asked Grandma what she had to drink, and she said she had that milk still sitting on the table that we had had for breakfast. She said they couldn't afford coke, juice and such. At that point she told me I might like to go get a watermelon out of the field for supper. She pointed me in the direction to the watermelon patch.

Across the road I went to the watermelon patch. Grandma gave me a knife to cut the watermelon off the vine. Once in the hot field I was thirstier than ever. It occurred to me at that point that with the knife I could cut open the watermelons and that would give moisture to my dry mouth. I found a small one, cut it open, and my thirst was quenched. I had found the way to solve my drinking problem. I knew that I just couldn't drink any more of that milk right out of the cow, buttermilk was not my thing, and the water might kill me. Thank the Lord for these watermelons.

Lunch was not much - some more fat back in a biscuit and a plum from the plum tree in the side yard. Grandma said she could open a jar of those tomatoes from the cellar, but they looked unsanitary when I saw them so I told her "no thank you." A tomato sandwich would have been delicious, but Grandma said store loaf bread cost a lot and that all the tomatoes seemed to have the rot this year. Grandma said I could brush her hair before her nap. I told her "okey." Her hair was mostly gray, thin and down to her waist. She always wore it in a bun, so I was surprised to see all this long, stringy hair. I brushed and brushed, and finally she said it was time for her nap. She said I could read some more of those books in the cabinet since I seemed to enjoy them or sweep the front yard with the broom. I decided to read the books some more, as I didn't want to be in the yard with Laddie, his ticks and mange and with those chickens which had already pecked on my sandaled feet.

It dawned on me that I should go to the bathroom. I was able to put this off as long as I had due to the fact that I was not taking in much liquid - until I got to the watermelons. The outhouse was down near the pig pen. The wood door creaked when I opened it. I looked down in the hole and thought how awful it would be if I fell in. I could see spider webs down in there too. I remembered Miss Muffett and her spider. I sat on the edge, and urinated as rapidly as possible. My stomach had little food in it so I was finished in a hurry. My legs got scratched on briar bushes going back up the path. I took a quick look at the pigs and remembered that all the dish pan water was put in their slop bucket that Don carried to them. They grunted at me, but I didn't hang around.

A neighbor with a car drove up with Aunt Dot and Uncle Don around supper time. Grandma had put a pot of green beans on to cook. For supper we had green beans, more of those biscuits, more fat back and buttermilk. Dessert was the watermelon I brought up from the field. That was also my drink for the evening.

Monday evening was about like Sunday evening. I ended up reading some more in those old medical books. This time I learned how to remove bullets from bodies. I was not feeling all that good but didn't say anything about it to anyone. I couldn't call home because the old wall telephone was out of order. Soon I was back on the lumpy mattress thinking I'd better get to sleep because

that rooster would be crowing soon.

## **TUESDAY**

The crowing took place just like on Monday, and I was out of the bed. Breakfast was the same as yesterday. Dot and Don left for work. Here I was spending another day with Grandma. My stomach hurt a little, but I didn't mention it. Grandma said I might like to go see the cows in the barn. I told her that would be fine and to give me the knife so I could get another watermelon for supper's dessert – that I loved watermelon. On the way to the barn, there was a repeat of yesterday's trip. The liquid was wonderful, and I sucked and sucked on the watermelon. Down at the barn I looked around at the cows and was glad I had not drunk the warm milk. Flies were everywhere. I looked at all that manure and thought some more about tetanus. Back in the watermelon patch I "drank" more juice. Then I returned to the house with a melon for supper. Lunch was the biscuit and fat meat. Grandma said to go get some figs off the fig bush for dessert. She poured me another glass of warm milk which I did not drink. I brushed Grandma's hair, she went down for a nap, and I felt a need for the outhouse. Cramps were beginning in my stomach. I was in pain. I found myself in the outhouse quite a bit on Tuesday afternoon. I read the old medical books for a while, learned how to draw blood for nervousness, and then back to the outhouse. I couldn't get anything to come out. If something would come out maybe my pain would go away. I decided to search the old medical books for stomach pain. Back with the books I found a number of remedies for stomach disorders, but the information served no good purpose, as I had no way to get to the recommended medicines.

Dot and Don arrived home. Supper was like Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. I was sure thinking about home and how nice my mother made everything. Dot said she got some cards in town today and that we could play "Go Fish" before she had to get her things ready for work the next day. I told her my stomach hurt. She laughed and said everybody gets the stomach ache. Soon we were in bed again.

## **WEDNESDAY**

Wednesday morning was a repeat of Monday morning and Tuesday morning with the rooster crowing and all. I had not bathed since I got there. I took a bath at home everyday. This was getting to be an upsetting situation. Dot and Don left for work, and Grandma said I could go get more eggs from the hen house. She worked on my hair some. I told her I needed to go to the outhouse. I went several times that morning. Everything continued to be stuck, my urine was scanty, and my stomach was feeling terrible. The odors in the outhouse brought on waves of nausea. I looked up and stinging critters were buzzing around a good sized nest in the corner of the outhouse. Grandma said all

stomachs hurt and that they always get better in time when I told her my stomach felt bad. I was thinking Sunday was a long way off but that a glass of iced tea might help. I asked Grandma if she ever boiled water to make tea. She said tea cost a lot and that it wasn't good for children. She didn't have any. Besides, where would ice come from for iced tea? Thinking about the iced tea my mother made with lemon and sugar and kept available all summer almost threw me into a state of delirium. I was soon off to the watermelon patch thinking that sweet juice would help alleviate my misery. Soon I was back for the biscuit lunch, brushing Grandma's hair, Grandma's nap, reading the medical books and going to the outhouse. Today I made a quick trip to see the mule and the horse in the barn to the right of the house. Everything always looked so colorless. I opened the door to the corn crib and saw mice scurrying around. Aunt Vernon and Aunt Verla, Grandma's twin daughters, her second and third children, came for a visit today. They sat on the porch in the swing. They had nine children between them but only brought about five. I was in pain and didn't feel much like playing hop scotch in the dirt front yard. Even jump rope was too much for me. I guess these first cousins thought I was unfriendly. It's just hard to be sociable when you have an aching stomach.

Dot and Don came home. For supper I noticed some of those canned tomatoes in a bowl on the table, along with the biscuits. Country ham was on a plate too. Grandma said Vernon brought her some already cooked and wrapped up in waxed paper. The dishes were done in the pan of water on the table, the dish water and leftover food were dumped in the slop bucket for the hogs. Don slopped the hogs, Grandma put snuff in her jaw and said she thought she'd sit a spell. Dot and I played Go Fish, I read the medical books behind the old curtains and told Dot I needed to sit on her slop jar awhile. I told her my stomach was worse and I thought I needed to go home. She said my stomach would be better tomorrow. During the night I sat on the slop jar a lot but got no relief.

#### **THURSDAY**

The rooster crowed. I went to breakfast feeling awful. Dot, Don, Irvin and Grandma had no idea how miserable I was. Dot and Don left for work. I told Grandma I was going to the outhouse. She said she noticed I liked the outhouse a lot more now that I had gotten used to it. From the outhouse I went to the watermelon patch with the knife and drank more juice. My stomach felt worse and worse. I had never felt pain like this in my life. I laid down in the field and cried. Then I started praying. I was sure death was on the way for me the pain was so wretched. I could not stand up straight. Grandma was oblivious to my dire situation. We went through the same routine despite all as on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday with lunch, the nap, the hair, wanting to know if I'd like to work on Laddie's fur, sweep the yard, get eggs, visit the cows, etc. And

here I was thinking tomorrow I might not be alive to do any of these things.

Dot and Don came home. I told Don that he needed to go call my daddy to come get me due to my severe stomach pain. He said he would have to go five miles into Matthews to get to a phone and that he would call my daddy tomorrow when he got to work. I started screaming and crying saying that he had to go now. Dot told him he had to go now. Grandma said she was sorry my stomach was hurting so much. Don went into town and made the call. My daddy arrived within two hours. I was so thankful to see him. Everyone had been very kind to me, but I just couldn't continue living the way I had been living since Sunday.

#### **THURSDAY NIGHT**

Home at last. My daddy carried me into the house as I couldn't walk. My mother was upset that I was in such pain. She called Dr. Adams. He said I needed liquid. I drank a lot of my mother's wonderful tea, got in the bathtub, washed my hair, and started feeling better. I went to the bathroom where there was real toilet paper and was soon in my own bed. Friday I slept very late. There was no rooster to wake me up. I have never had any desire for country living or being in remote places since that time.