

INTRODUCTION



My parents firmly believed in the importance of teaching their children those timeless values that would help them become productive adults. Their lessons were driven home by any means possible. Sometimes it was with words, sometimes with their hands or the closest thing they could reach with their hands.

Mother concentrated on manners. We had little more than an oilcloth table covering during the depression, and the wash bench doubled as seating for our meals, but Mother insisted that we sit up straight at the table, hold our eating utensils correctly, and keep our elbows off the table. Even though she had not completed elementary school, she knew the value of good manners and courtesy. She would correct our speech as much as her sixth-grade education would allow.

Not even Daddy was exempt from her admonishment if he mispronounced words. Of course, Daddy would know exactly how to turn Mother's scolding into lightheartedness. He would often mispronounce a word just to hear her fuss. For example, he would say to one of us, "Come heah," in the broken English that was common in those days. Mother, not having any of that, would say, "Charles, it's 'here' not 'heah.'" Daddy would grin and say, "Okay . . . come hither."

As much as Mother was concerned about politeness and manners, Daddy was concerned about the importance of knowing how to "figure." He taught us all how to count and say our alphabets before we started school. If he sent one of us to the store, he made sure we counted out the exact change coming to us. "That way," he cautioned, "you'll never let anyone cheat you."

My parents taught mostly by example. Daddy believed in giving people

more than they expected. When he harvested vegetables from the garden, people would come to buy from him because they knew he would sell only the most tender green beans and okra or the firmest tomatoes. He'd always give something extra—a seasoning bunch or a handful of freshly picked cayenne peppers. In this area it's called giving a little lagniappe. We could plainly see from his example that his motto was *Give the best of whatever it is you have to give*.

Both Mother and Daddy taught us about work ethic. If something wasn't done to their satisfaction, then it had to be done over until it was right. Mother worked meticulously whether she was sewing or preparing food, and Daddy's garden was picture perfect in even rows and without a trace of weeds. Tools were always cleaned and sharpened before they were put away.

They also gave education a high priority. After the dinner table was cleared, we would all get out our books to "do our lessons." The older ones were expected to help the younger ones. If one of us got into trouble at school, there would be the devil to pay when we got home.

Once, Mr. Talley, the principal at the white school just across the field from our house, was throwing some books on the trash pile to be burned. Daddy had no idea what those books were, but he took the wheelbarrow and went to retrieve them. As it turned out, there were readers and a two-volume set of dictionaries in the pile. We spent the summer going through each one of those books. The dictionary set was placed in the rolltop desk as a reference.

Daddy finished only the third grade, but he never stopped learning. He always had his Bible study book handy for reading after his day's work. He also read the newspaper every day. If he ran across a word he didn't understand, he would call one of the children and ask the meaning of that word. He was never too proud to ask for help when he needed it.

This is how we grew up: learning to give of ourselves, sharing what we had, and understanding that learning is important. It is undeniably a part of who I am today.

Using these tools in the restaurant business has brought me through some rough spots. Looking back, I realize they have served me well.