Elizabeth Fox McMahan

The following narrative is the only one in this collection that did not begin as an oral history interview. I met Elizabeth McMahan Adamitis serendipitously. Mrs. Adamitis’s mother, Elizabeth Fox McMahan, attended Converse College, where I teach. In 2001, Mrs. Adamitis made a gift to Converse in memory of her mother, marking the hundredth anniversary of her mother’s graduation. With the donation, she included a marvelous four-page letter describing her mother’s life on a farm in Sevier County, Tennessee.

Bobbie Daniel, the alumnae information director at Converse, read the letter and recalled that I had done research in Sevier County, Tennessee. She pointed this out to Alumnae Director Melissa Daves Jolley, who passed along a copy of Mrs. Adamitis’s letter to me. I was fascinated with her mother’s story, and I immediately wrote to Mrs. Adamitis to ask if I could come see her the next time I was visiting my parents in east Tennessee. Mrs. Adamitis agreed.

On August 16, 2001, I visited with Mrs. Adamitis. I met her at her apartment, which was located on a secondary road just off the main tourist artery that connects Pigeon Forge and Sevierville. These towns are now booming tourist meccas, rather than the sleepy agricultural villages of Mrs. Adamitis’s childhood. At eighty, Mrs. Adamitis was still lively and spry. She had strawberry blonde hair and wore glasses with large attractive frames. Her vitality and energy were striking. She devoted the entire day to driving me around Sevier County, showing me the sites where her mother had lived and worked. Along the way she provided me with details of her mother’s hard life on the farm. She also gave me copies of family photos and a copy of her own handwritten memoir of her mother. I frantically took notes and taped the conversation, but I quickly discovered that Mrs. Adamitis’s memoir was far more articulate, poignant, and detailed than any transcribed oral history interview could be. With Mrs. Adamitis’s permission, I have included her story here. This version comprises several letters that Mrs. Adamitis sent to Converse’s Alumnae Office and to me, as well as the handwritten memoir. In places, I have reorganized material in order to put similar
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Elizabeth Fox was born October 1, 1879. Her parents were farmers in rural Sevier County. Elizabeth attended Converse College on scholarship, graduating in 1901. Elizabeth Fox’s father was already blind from retinitis pigmentosa and probably glaucoma. During her senior year in college, he died. Fox’s mother was left with five small children to raise. Fox returned to Sevier County and began teaching school to help her mother make ends meet. In 1903, she married Ernest McMahan, son of a wealthy Sevier County landowner. The marriage was not a happy one, and Elizabeth Fox McMahan found herself burdened with a husband who was not interested in the day-to-day operation of the farm and with a large debt. She had three children early in the marriage and two more children in middle age.
Elizabeth McMahan Adamitis, her daughter and fourth child, was born in 1921. After graduating from the University of Tennessee, the younger Elizabeth attended graduate training in occupational therapy at the University of Pennsylvania and went to work for the United States Army. She spent her career working as an occupational therapist in army and Veterans’ Administration hospitals, retiring in 1988. She was married for thirteen years to a man who turned out to be an alcoholic. After her divorce, she devoted herself to her work and to caring for her aging mother. She also had a lively social life, engaging in regular ballroom dancing. She remains active today, working out at the local gym three days a week and attending the meetings of community organizations.

Sevier County was one of the first areas settled in east Tennessee. The county’s geography is marked by rolling hills and fertile river bottoms in its northern third and by steep mountainous terrain on the southeastern side. Sevierville, the county seat, was also the trading center for the county, and it anchored the more fertile farming area. The McMahans lived a couple of miles from Sevierville on rolling farmland along Middle Creek. By the early twentieth century, most Sevier County farmers engaged in general production for home use and also produced some wheat, corn, tobacco, and livestock for the market. In 1920, the average Sevier County farm was eighty acres. Thus, the McMahans were among the largest landowners, farming over one thousand acres at one point.

Here is Elizabeth Adamitis’s account of her mother’s life:

“A Tribute to My Mother”
Written by Elizabeth McMahan Adamitis

My mother’s father, Tilmon Fox, was a farmer in the small community of Middle Creek, near Sevierville, Tennessee. Her ancestors had come to Tennessee before it became a state in 1796. The Fox family came to Sevier County by way of Philadelphia and down through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Her great uncle, Mark Fox, was killed by the Indians. He was the first person buried in Fox Cemetery in the Fox community in Sevier County.

The Fox family had been influenced by Quakers so none of them participated in any of the wars that touched this community until my oldest brother was drafted in World War II and served with the Eightieth Division in Patton’s Third Army.
The Fox family were educated farm people with teachers and ministers [in the family]. My mother’s grandfather was a circuit rider Methodist minister in three local counties.

My paternal grandfather, Thomas DeArnold Wilson McMahan, came out of the mountains in Richardson Cove and married Melinda Trotter, daughter of Dr. William Trotter on Middle Creek. He was an intelligent, aggressive man who started out teaching school and then bought land in Richardson’s [sic] Cove. He owned a store, tannery, and mill. So he continued to acquire land after moving in with Dr. Trotter, his father-in-law.

My mother and father were raised one mile apart near Middle Creek Methodist Church. The Tilmon Fox and Dr. William Trotter families were closely related for years since Tilmon Fox first married Dr. Trotter’s daughter, Elizabeth. When she died, Tilmon Fox married Martha Lawson, a good friend of Elizabeth Trotter.

The first child of this [second] marriage was my mother, Elizabeth Fox, born October 1, 1879. She was highly intelligent and with the help of her great uncle, Dan Lawson, she received a scholarship to Converse College in 1897. Her family had to take her in a buggy part of the way (twenty-five miles to Newport) to catch the train [for Spartanburg]. They spent the night with relatives and continued next day to put her on the train. For her scholarship, Elizabeth chaperoned the girls when they went shopping, to church, to the dentist, etc. She loved Converse and often said it was the happiest time of her life. She wrote a twenty page letter to her family [describing] the funeral of Dr. Converse her first year there.1

During her four years at Converse, her father, Tilmon Fox, died, leaving Martha Fox with five young children to raise. In spite of this, she was able to graduate in 1901. She was the only college graduate in her family or in my father’s. After she graduated from Converse, she tried in every way to get a job. She made applications in many counties and other states without success. She had to settle for a three month, one room school at twenty dollars a month, paid by local citizens. That was at Jayell School in Middle Creek. She paid one dollar a week for room and board near the school and walked home on the weekends. The next year she taught at Middle Creek as principal of a two-room school for thirty dollars a month, made up [contributed] by people in the community. She applied for jobs in many states and couldn’t get a job anywhere. There were few paying jobs for women in 1901. Women could only teach or work in a store at low wages.

She felt she was a burden to her widowed mother and in desperation married my father, Ernest McMahan. My father lived one mile away. He was the son of a wealthy landowner. His little brother died the year before
he was born, and the family spoiled him without any discipline. He only went to fifth grade and put my mother down for going to Converse. My mother had no idea what he was like, only that he came from a prominent family.

They were married December 9, 1903, in a buggy after church at Middle Creek Methodist Church. My mother stepped into a life of physical and mental abuse by my father. They moved into an old dilapidated house with only two good rooms on a 420-acre farm that had once belonged to my grandfather, Thomas DeArnold Wilson McMahan. My parents rented from my grandfather until 1921, when he died. The land was part of a one thousand acre farm that my grandfather owned. Before that, my mother told me it was owned by a widow, Nancy McMahan, who farmed it by herself. This must have been following the Civil War.

My mother told me the bottomland was used as a military mustering ground for the Civil War. It seems logical since the largest skirmish here during the Civil War was on the farm of Dr. Hodson which was only about a mile away. There were estimated 265 casualties. When I was a teenager, people found buttons, etc., there.

Before they were married, my father told my mother he owned a team of mules and a cow and horse and buggy, etc. It turned out he owed for all of them, and she had to pay for all of them out of her hard-earned school teaching money. My mother’s life was extremely hard from day one when she had to move into that shack of a house. My father never worked a day in his life on the farm. He was lazy and rode off every day on a horse and later in a car to spend all day around the stove in stores in town, telling jokes, always jovial, slapping men on their backs. People cannot believe he was a different personality at home because that was all they ever saw. My mother wouldn’t let us say a word of the dysfunctional behavior at home. He would ride off to town every day and leave my mother to raise the children and run the farm, so she was forced to take two hired hands into the house until about 1910 and cook for them and take care of three babies in seven years. My mother tried to get him to work on the farm, but he would beat the horses till my mother couldn’t stand it.

My mother loved flowers and trees and working in the flowers was the therapy that saved her with all those babies and being in debt thousands of dollars all those years. She planted an orchard with apple, pear, and peach trees between the house and barn. My father didn’t care what he did to her flowers and drove the herd of cattle through the yard, and they trampled many. He tied a goat to one of her trees, and it butted the bark off with its horns, letting bugs into the tree killing it.
Before I was born, my father had a sawmill up in Blalock Woods. I can remember an old house where hired men lived and piles of rotting sawdust. Some fields [there] had been cleared and planted in corn. One field was called the “Ten Acres.” Every field had a name so the hired hands knew where to work. My father had a herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle which were pastured at times after the corn was gathered. There was no source of water in the pastures, so a big pond was dug for the cattle. We called that the “Pond Field.”

My parents built a big white Victorian farmhouse with fireplaces in 1910. My mother had a plan for a compact, low ceilinged house, but my father insisted on nine-foot ceilings like his childhood home on Middle Creek, and we froze in those big rooms heated by fireplaces until some time in the 1930s they brought circulating heaters on the market. It was wonderful to have heat in the back of the room. We still had kerosene lamps and outhouses until the TVA came in the ’40s with rural electrification. All the farms in the county were like this. The TVA was a boon to farmers even though it took away some of the best farms in the county. The river bottoms were the richest soil and lots of them are under Douglas Lake. My father cried when they put the big power lines across our fields.

In 1921, when my grandfather Thomas DeArnold Wilson McMahan died, my father bought out all the heirs of the land. We were paying 6 percent compound interest to all my aunts and uncles. I found letters from my aunt demanding money in the midst of the depression when no one had a cent. All my childhood, every cent that was made went to my father’s brothers and sisters, and my mother was feeding and dressing us five children with her chicken and egg money. People in the county thought of us as
wealthy, but I was the only one in my high school class (1938) who couldn’t afford a class ring. My mother paid twenty-five cents a lesson out of her egg money to pay for piano lessons for us three girls. We had lots of land, but very little money.

They now had three hired hands’ houses. These men would come to the back door every morning to know what to do. My mother usually had to tell them what to do because he was never there. The hired men called it petticoat government.

In my earliest memory there were three hired men’s houses. There was an old log cabin over at the forks of the road. It was really primitive with only one little window. Later a lean-to with windows for a kitchen was built on to this. They had a cistern for water from the spring. I guess before that they carried water from the spring.

The barn, granary, corn cribs, and sheds for machinery were north of the house. They built a building at the barn to house the scales to weigh the cattle. They also built a large machine shed to house the tractor and farm machinery. At the edge of the woods was another frame house for hired hands. It had three or four rooms. I guess there was a cistern for water.

In the Depression, farmers only paid their field hands fifty cents a day, $2.50 a week, all over the South. They got cow pasture, a garden, and a percent of the tobacco crop. Most of them raised hogs to kill so they were better off than poor people in town. Every day for years in the depression, men would come walking up our driveway to try to hire on or to beg for food. My mother always gave them food from her stove—bread, sweet potato pie, or whatever she had extra of. My mother looked after the hired hands’ families. She gave the children our outgrown clothes. She gave them food and went to help when they had their babies. She begged every family to buy land with their tobacco money, but only one in all those people did. Papa sold him ten acres of new ground on what’s now Pullen Road. He [the buyer] sold that at a profit and bought a small house, barn, and farm on Denton Road. He sold that and bought one hundred acres on New Era Road which is probably worth a million dollars. His two children have no children. They are both high school graduates and still own the one hundred acres. The boy served three and a half years in the army and went into the D-Day invasion of France. They have been solid tax paying citizens for forty years or more, all because their father was willing to buy his own land and work at back breaking work to make a living and own his own land.

My sister and I were born when the three older siblings were already in high school. This made it very hard on my mother. There she was in middle age with two babies.
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My older brothers had walked across to Harrisburg to elementary school near the covered bridge. When my sister started to school, my father went to Grainger County and bought a pair of trotting ponies and a buggy so they could drive to Middle Creek Elementary School three miles away. My brother Glenn, who drove the ponies, said the ponies could really move fast since they were trained to compete. My father bought a stallion and started to raise ponies. We always had a herd of twelve to fifteen Shetland ponies. There were six to eight mares who had colts every year and were sold when they were about a year old. In the depression, my mother sold one pony for forty dollars and took our family of seven to Florida for a week.

My two brothers started working on the farm when they were ten and twelve. My brother Glenn tells me they had steers to plow. He said he could get the wooden yoke on one but it was too heavy to lift the other one. I guess the hired man helped him. Our first tractor was a Fordson. My brother Glenn started driving the tractor when he was twelve years old. My brother Wilbur operated the farm machinery behind the tractor.

When my brothers were in college in the 1920s, one summer they dug a well by hand with shovels and buckets to bring up the dirt. My younger sister and I played everywhere on the farm. We were about ten or twelve then as I remember. The hole was about five or six feet in diameter, wide enough for a man to go down on a ladder to dig and send the dirt up in a bucket. In my childish memory they must have struck water about twelve feet down. They sealed it off with stone and concrete. I guess my brothers could do anything. My younger sister and I followed our brothers everywhere. That was part of the fun of living on a big farm and having loving brothers who let us tag along.

In 1929 when the banks closed and “the Great Depression” started, no one had any money. My mother sold eggs for six cents a dozen. With her chicken and eggs and butter, she traded with Mr. Ward the peddler who drove his team and wagon to trade with farmers’ wives in our area. My mother bought blueing for the laundry, coffee, sugar, and spices from Mr. Ward. He threw all the butter in a five gallon lard can. I never knew where he sold it. When we got into high school and college, my mother raised more chickens and got enough hens so she could sell a case (thirty dozen) eggs every week. My father went to stockyards in Knoxville every Wednesday, so my mother took the case of eggs to restaurants in Knoxville that day. It gave her an escape from the farm. She would visit some department stores every week and could watch for bargains. She got to know many clerks and they would alert her to coming sales. She was a keen trader. With five children she had to be. I don’t think she ever paid more than fifty cents a yard for
beautiful yard goods that would sell for two or three dollars a yard. When she died I still had a trunk full of all kinds of fabrics.

The farmers of this county lived through all the many regimes [sic] ordered by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. People had to sign up for a tobacco allotment which still stands today, seventy years later. They could be handed down with the land or traded with other farmers, but never increased. Farmers had to kill pigs and cut back on production to raise the price. I thought this was so wrong when there were so many starving people in the world.

We grew everything we ate on the farm as most farmers in the South did. All summer we canned tomatoes, beans, beets, grape juice, etc. My younger sister and I got one cent a dozen for washing the hundreds of quart and half gallon fruit jars that my mother stored in the cellar. My two brothers dug out and built a basement to store the cans of fruit and vegetables and have a place on the dirt to spread onions, sweet and Irish potatoes for the winter.

My father, brothers, and the hired men killed and dressed two hogs. My father shot the hogs and they were dipped in scalding water to get the hair off and they were hung up on a scaffold of fence rail to be scraped. Then they cut the hog from head to tail down its belly, and the innards fell out into a wash tub. They saved the liver for my mother to make liver hash. My father gave the head and feet to the hired men. The intestines were thrown over the fence into the chicken yard.

Hog killing time was hard work for all of us. That day my mother worked from 5 a.m. till 9 or 10 that night. They had to know the temperature to kill the hogs. If it was too cold, the meat in the smokehouse on tables would freeze before the inside had cooled out and would spoil when it melted. If the temperature was too warm, it would spoil. The hams and shoulders were packed in salt on big heavy tables in the smoke house. They were safe to eat until summer. Every night my mother would cut slices of ham and bacon for breakfast the next day. She cut off the rinds and threw them out to the many cats that were kept to catch the mice and rats in the granary and barn. The fat was cut up in small pieces and boiled in the wash kettle to make lard. My brother Glenn built a lard press. It was a square box on legs with a groove cut so the lard could run down into the five gallon lard can.

I don’t know what part of the hog was used for sausage, but the men worked far into the night grinding the meat with a grinder attached to a plank laid over a wash tub. At the same time, my mother was frying balls of sausage and canning it in half-gallon jars. She would turn them upside down so the grease would seal the lid. Without refrigeration, it was important to
get this done as soon as possible to save the meat. My mother grew red pepper and sage to put in the sausage. It [the red pepper and sage] hung behind the stove. Next morning she would fry the tenderloin, the strip of meat along the spine. This is cut as pork chops in modern times. My mother also fried and canned this to keep it safe until later in the week. Also that week, she would cook the ribs with sauerkraut as soon as possible.

I loved all of this food. The tenderloin she fried for breakfast. I was in hog heaven! The people who got the heads made souse meat with the jowls. When it cooled, after being boiled, it formed a clear gelatin over the meat and could be sliced. I never liked that. Also they ate the brains and ears, I guess.

Behind our kitchen was a pantry where my mother kept a can of that lard [that we had made during hog killing]. She had a flour chest my great uncle Isaac Trotter had built of poplar. The lid lifted up and it held one hundred pounds of flour on one side and one hundred pounds of corn meal on the other side. The corn and wheat was taken in tow sacks to the mill owned by Mr. Reed Wade in Sevierville. Back then, the miller took a toll of the wheat and corn to pay for grinding.

In the 1930s we also got fifty pound blocks of ice from the same mill on Saturday. We made ice cream from pure cream from our Jersey milk cow. It was made in a crank freezer which had a dasher to stir the milk. One of the treats of childhood was the chance to lick the dasher after it was removed.

Our only way to preserve milk and butter was to keep it in a trough of cold water to keep it cool. We had to change the water every two hours in the summer. The water from the well house went into a tile under the driveway into the chicken yard to water the chickens. I envied people on farms around us who had spring houses and cool water to keep their milk cold. The milk would sour or clabber in a few hours so we had to churn often or make cottage cheese with the milk. The cream was skimmed off to churn and the thickened clabbered milk was put in a dish pan on top of our big wood burning cook stove and slowly heated until the curds and whey separated. We put that in cheese cloth and squeezed out the whey which we put in a trough for the chickens. The cottage cheese was dry and firm, so we usually added some cream to it and put it in a dish where we sliced it out. My sister Dorothy would take the leftover biscuits from breakfast and put canned tomatoes on them and a slice of cottage cheese and baked it in the oven. It was delicious. With seven in our family, my mother made a huge pan of biscuits every morning so we kids could take them to school for lunch. We used the sausage, ham or bacon or whatever was left over from breakfast. We loved to take brown sugar from a one hundred pound bag in the
pantry and mix with butter and put between saltines. We usually had apples and pears from the orchard which was between the house and the barn. My mother spread them out on newspapers in a storage room upstairs we called the “long room.”

We put our lunch in a newspaper and folded it over until it became a square. All the country kids stored these on the shelf in the cloak room which was behind each class room in the old high school. We called them duck nests. I would trade my apples and pears with the town kids for their bananas. The town kids always looked down on us country kids, especially in high school. I think of all the fun things on the farm. I sure am glad I had a sister sort of my age. We knew every inch of that farm.

When I first remember, we had a T Model Ford and a small garage at the bottom of the hill. The T-Model had Eisenglass curtains that snapped in during the winter. Then when my father bought a big Essex sedan so that seven of our family could ride together, they built a two-car garage to accommodate the length of that car. This was in 1928 when I was five years old. My mother told me she had not been off the farm in twenty-five years [at that point]. She told us we were not going to grow up on that farm as “red necks” or something to that effect. So with the new big car that would hold seven people, she started planning trips. Our first trip was to Charleston to see the ocean.

There were no paved roads in 1926. The road to our farm was mud with deep ruts up the hill to the Nelson Fox House. At the forks of the road, there was a quarry that my brothers and hired men worked at to crush rock for the road. At that time, there was a law requiring men to work seven days a year on the public roads or pay a poll tax. So my brothers dynamited the limestone rock and crushed it with the powers of a gasoline engine. They hauled it in a specially-built rock bed on the wagon. It was heavy timbers—like two inches by four inches. The side boards were only about a foot high because the rock was so heavy. The bed was made of many of these timbers. They were not attached so one plank at a time was pulled out so the rock could fall out on the road. Then through the years, they [my brothers] rocked the public road all around our farm and up the driveway to the house.

Anyway, when we went to Charleston, there were no paved roads—all “wash board” gravel roads. When we got to Folly Beach there were no hotels or tourist cabins. We rented a tent on the beach with a wooden platform and army cots. I can still hear the palmettos and tent flapping.

In the 1920s, there were very few public bathrooms, so out on the public roads that trip we had to stop at a wooded area and go in the bushes. It’s a miracle we didn’t get bitten by a snake. I cut my bare foot there.
Our second long trip was about 1931 when we went to Florida [on that forty dollars my mother made selling a pony.] In the depression, there were many people who left Sevier County to get jobs packing oranges. Some of my father’s cousins lived in Winter Haven and Lake Wales, so we stayed with them. With seven in our family, they had to spread us around at different homes. For years we went to Florida every year at Christmas when the schools closed. It was the Depression. My mother saved enough from her eggs to take us. Gas was about fifteen cents a gallon. For lunch we would buy a loaf of bread for five or ten cents. She would buy bologna for a few cents and a half gallon of milk. We took eggs, ham, bacon, and potatoes from the farm to cook for supper. There were a few tourist camps with separate little houses. In Georgia and Florida they were heated with little stoves burning pine wood. They used the heart pine for kindling. They called it fat wood. I loved the smell.

My mother was determined that we would know the history of this country by touring it. We were actually there sometimes when it [history] happened. I can remember going with my family to Bristol to hear Herbert Hoover when he was running for president in the 1920s. In 1932, we went to Washington. That year the veterans from World War I marched on Washington demanding the bonus that Congress promised them in 1918. It was the third year of the Great Depression and times were bad. The bonusers had built a huge encampment of cardboard boxes to live in. They had effigies of President Herbert Hoover hung in trees and sitting on toilet bowls. The men had ridden trains in like hoboes. When we were downtown, President Hoover called out the army under General McArthur to force the bonusers out, and they threw tear gas to quell the riot. We were in the middle of it and eyes stung. The tanks rolled through the streets. A black man standing next to us was calling the tanks “catpullers” for the caterpillar-type tracks on the tanks. That night the army or police burned the veterans’ boxes. We were in a cabin on the edge of town and we could see the flames. We saw history in the making. I never knew if the veterans got their bonuses at that time.

In 1936, my mother bought a tent from Sears Roebuck. It was completely sealed against moisture and bugs. There were two windows with mosquito netting. My brother fastened the front over the car and staked the back. We had a new car without a trunk, so my brother built a big black box and attached it to the back of the car to carry the oil stove, our clothes, tent blankets to sleep on, and the food my mother brought from home. We could rent a place to set up the tent for fifty cents. They always had a building with showers, bathroom, and laundry shared by the whole camp. We spent three
weeks in all the western states except Washington and Oregon. When we were in California, we bought fruit on the side of the road. Glenn would turn the motor off on the hills, and we would coast to save gas. We crossed the bay in San Francisco on a ferry long before the Golden Gate Bridge was built. Very few people in Sevier County went on trips then. By the time I was fifteen, I had seen forty states. My mother scraped and saved and got us there.

My brother Wilbur drove us to Philadelphia and New York. Another time I drove my parents and Dorothy through all the New England states and Quebec and back by upper New York State. I also drove my parents all over Oklahoma and all the way to the Mexican border. We drove all over Texas visiting people who left Sevier County fifty years before that. They could start talking like they left yesterday. It was amazing. I am so glad my mother got to take all those trips. It gave her the strength to tolerate life on the farm.

When I was five years old, my sister Dorothy drove me to school in a pony buggy with one pony named Betsy. My mother would go over to the
barn every day and hitch up the pony and bring it out for us rain or shine, and she would be waiting for us to take the pony to the barn. We had a heavy lap robe to put over our laps and legs and often the snow would be piled up on that robe when we got home. We boarded our pony with the Ballards who had a small barn across from the old Sevier County High School. This building had all grades from primer to senior high school. In 1930 Dorothy graduated from high school and went on to college so that year we had to depend on my father to pick us up [from school]. My father spent his day sitting around the stores in Sevierville or at his mother’s house on Middle Creek, so many nights Ernestine and I were standing outside the school in the dark waiting for him to pick us up.

I was always hungry when we got home [from school]. My mother always had big pans of peanuts baked in the shell or roasting ears of corn or some tasty thing waiting for us.

The year my sister [Dorothy] was fifteen years old and in high school, the schools in Sevierville, Knoxville, Newport, and Maryville collected pennies to buy land for the start of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. There is a book in the library of the Sugarlands Visitors Center that lists the names of all the children and teachers who gave money. The teachers gave one dollar and kids gave from ten to twenty-five [cents]. There are names of people still living in this area. The total amount was over one thousand dollars. Wilma Dykeman, genealogist for the state, said that would be worth twenty times that in today’s money.8

At that time my father, Ernest McMahan, and about ten other lumbermen in Sevier County were hired by Champion Lumber to cruise timber and estimate value for purchase by the park. They were provided with mules and they slept in deserted log houses, and my father brought bed bugs home. We ruined every mattress in the house using kerosene to kill them. There were no insecticides then.9

My mother was an excellent farmer. She was forced to be since my father was never there. She took Progressive Farmer and all the farm magazines to keep up on the latest and best methods. She knew as much about farming as any man in the county. She knew about rotation of crops which must have been a new idea in the thirties since so much of the farm land in the South was worn out with planting cotton every year. She knew to plant lespedeza for hay and red clover; then it was plowed under to enrich the soil.10 Before 1920, she encouraged my brothers to grow the first Red Burley tobacco in our county. They were teenagers [at the time].

After breakfast my mother would go to feed the chickens and milk the cow after all us girls were off at college. Her work was never done, but after
lunch she could lie down for about an hour. The mail came by rural carrier about one o’clock, so she could read the newspapers. She read the farm news and the financial news. She took *Saturday Evening Post* at five cents a copy during the Depression and *Collier’s*. Both of these magazines came every week. She subscribed to *McCall’s* and to *The Knoxville Journal* which came through the mail the next day.

Our farm was a totally working farm with herds of cattle, ponies, sheep, and hogs. If the market was good for hogs, the corn was fed to the hogs. If the market was best for corn, it was sold. We always had at least thirty acres of wheat. Before combines came on the market, my brothers used a wheat binder to cut the wheat and tie it into sheaves and throw the sheaves off. My brother Glenn drove the tractor and Wilbur operated the binder. Then the hired men would stack the sheaves into shocks. (I see in the dictionary that this word came from Middle English in the fourteenth century.) A pile of sheaves of grain set up in the field with the butt ends down. Then this was covered with a sheave spread out to protect the wheat from the rain. They started threshing July 1. My father would drive to the neighboring farms and ask them to bring a wagon and an extra man. It took about twenty-five men to haul the wheat to the thresher and then haul the wheat to the granary where the wheat was dumped out in bins about three feet high.

The year I was fifteen years old, when the threshers came, my mother had taken my two sisters to Nashville for surgery, so I had to cook dinner for those twenty-five men. I sent for the hired man’s wife to help me. She wanted to fry chicken and make biscuits, which was our usual Sunday dinner. The men ate it, but they were asking where the ham and cornbread was! We cooked beans, corn, sliced tomatoes, and blackberry and apple cobbler pies. The men out on the back porch waiting to eat would laugh and joke and weigh each other to see how much they ate. We seated eight men at a time. When they finished eating, eight more sat down after we washed the dishes and set the table again.

There was no plumbing in the house. There was a rail on the porch where we kept wash pans. The men pumped water from the well and washed their hands and faces and tossed the water in the yards as was the fashion until after World War II when farm electrification came in. We had a water table with a two-gallon bucket of water with a long-handled dipper which everyone drank out of and put the dipper back in, never knowing or thinking about germs. People who had springs always had one dipper and everyone drank out of it.

Back to threshing day—when I was a child it was exciting to see Mr. McKelder and his tractor and threshing machine arrive just at night. We
rarely had overnight guests. They [the threshers] would travel from farm to farm and stay overnight.

Farming is a treacherous way to earn a living whether it is four hundred acres or forty. Every year the lightning would strike and kill animals. The animals would get under trees or near a wire fence where lightning strikes. We lost ponies, hogs, and cattle to lightning. We lost fields of new corn, wheat, and tobacco stripped and blown down by hail and wind. When there was drought we could lose the whole crop of corn. Years ago there were no drugs to save the animals. In 1938, when I was to start the University of Tennessee, the hogs got cholera and all died. That was our cash crop for the year. The germs stayed five years, so we couldn’t have hogs again. It could be walked in on feet. The money to pay U.T. was lost, but somehow they managed.

My brothers had to get up in the night when the hogs were having pigs. The sows would roll over and kill their pigs or sometimes they would eat them. Often a heifer would die when having a calf. We had a flock of sheep with bells on, and we didn’t hear them. The next morning they were all dead, scattered all over the field with their throats cut and ears chewed off by a blood-thirsty pack of dogs. That was a loss of two crops. The sheep were sheared and wool was sent off to market and every year there was a truckful of lambs to sell.

I was always there when they sheared the sheep. They took them to the barn and caught one at a time, and the wool had to be sheared and folded and tied just right for the market. Then men would seat the sheep on its rear end and hold its back against their legs and then start shearing from their neck down their belly and the wool would roll back on each side. Years ago they used old-fashioned hand clippers with long blades that had to be pressed together to cut and the sheep came out with bloody cuts all over them. Then my brother got a shearing machine on a stand with a wheel to turn to power the clippers similar to those used in barber shops. They sheared the sheep real clean, no more bloody cuts all over the sheep.

Back then before veterinarians, the farmers cut the tails off the lambs and castrated the pigs, calves, ponies, etc., with the pocket knives—nothing for the pain or germs. My father would use his knife to castrate a shoat and then come to the house and peel an apple or turnip for him to eat with that same knife! Imagine!

All the animals had to be watched all the time. My favorite pony got out of the barnlot and came over to my mother’s garden and foundered on corn. Horses and ponies will do this, but mules are smarter and will never over eat. Back then there were no veterinarians, no shots. Every farmer had to treat
his animals as best he could. My brother did everything he could think of. He
got the pony off her feet and supported her on straps hung to the rafters and
gave her enemas. I wonder what a modern veterinarian would do? He kept
copper sulfate in the gear room to pack sores made by harness on the miles.
My mother used that in the water for the chickens. It prevented some disease.

My mother bought our clothing and paid for our piano lessons with her egg
money, and it was precious. In 1934, I wanted to take painting lessons,
so my mother let me raise frying chickens to pay for them. In three months,
chickens would weigh the three pounds needed to sell as fryers. There were
many enemies to deal with when raising chickens. The foxes, skunks, cats,
hawks, and snakes ate her little chickens and eggs. In the night, we would
hear chickens squawking with thieves stealing her chickens. My father would
shoot the shot gun in the air to scare them off. Finally the hired men hauled
in a covered pig pen with a floor and a door where she could lock them in
at night.

Now for the fun things about living on a farm. After our chores were
finished in the house at lunch, I was free to work with ponies and horses. I
enjoyed training the colts to ride, to pull the buggy in double and single har-
ness. I begged and begged and my father bought me a real five-gaited riding
mare I saw at the horse show in Sevierville. My sister and I would saddle up
Patsy Pat and Old Pearl, an old mare that had survived pulling logs in the
time of the sawmills. My younger cousins would come, and we would bri-
dle up five or six of the ponies, and we would ride the logging roads [on our
farm].

When my sister and I were eight to ten years old, we had play houses
everywhere, under the rose bushes in the front yard and under the lilac bushes
in the back yard and in the basement when we were older. We played restau-
rant and served our cousins tomato and biscuit sandwiches from food left
over at breakfast. We had an unfinished room upstairs where my mother’s
books from Converse, unused furniture, and clothes were stored. There was
an old cylinder record player and an old telephone we pretended to call our
boyfriend on—we were about ten years old!

My sister and I rode all over the farm in wagons with our brothers or on
horseback, so we knew every inch of it. We knew where the dog tooth violet
grew up in the “Ten Acres.” Where the wild raspberries and wild strawber-
rries grew near the road in the woods across from the house. Where the mus-
cadines grew in the woods at the “Hill House” and the chestnuts and
chinquapins (which all died out years ago) and the persimmon tree.

Families in Sevier County did lots of visiting kinfolks on Sunday after-
noons in the 1930s. We would take turns going to different homes with
cousins. I really enjoyed this. In turn, they came to visit us. When company came, we sat in the parlor. My mother served the canned grape juice and cake to our guests. At our house, I took all the children out to the barn to ride the ponies and down to the basement to play house.

When we went to my mother’s old home on Middle Creek, we played softball down in the pasture field and dammed Middle Creek so we could swim. We walked over to my uncle’s house on Ridge Road to get the Sunday paper. At one uncle’s house, we played in the storm cellar. It was fun.

When I was living at home on the farm, we were the only family on what is now Ernest McMahan Road. In summer the whole family sat out on the porch till about nine o’clock at night waiting for the house to cool off. There weren’t many cars in the neighborhood going up the hill to Middle Creek. At night we could identify all the neighbors by the sound of the cars. Some cars came from Sevierville to pick up the bootleg liquor hidden in a big stump back along the road at Blalock Woods. My mother always warned us not to tell anyone or the bootleggers would burn our barn.

Then there were the lovers who got stuck in the mud back there. They would knock on our door and ask my father to pull them out, and he actually went to the barn and got the tractor and pulled them out. He would never have done that for us.

The road was mud all the way until about 1931 when my father was elected road superintendent. He rocked the road and put in a culvert at the bottom of the hill at Judge Holt’s. He put bridges and culverts all over this county. When I came back to Sevier County to live in 1988, many of the men who worked on his road crews in 1931 were still living in nursing homes, and they told me how grateful they were to have those jobs when there were no jobs. Later those men got jobs at the Aluminum Company and earned enough money to retire well-to-do financially.13

Sitting on the porch at night, we could hear Shannon Sims playing his guitar on the porch of John Sims’ house. We could hear the fox hunters’ hounds up in the Blalock Woods. They would build campfires and sit around and talk and listen to the hounds. We could hear Laura Snapp who was a widow who lived alone and farmed the Snapp farm. She would wait until dark to call her cows up to the barn. I never understood that.

My mother loved the mountains so every chance we could go on Sunday after church, she fixed a picnic lunch—fried chicken, pimento cheese sandwiches, ice tea, stuffed eggs. We would go as far as the road went up Newfound Gap. I remember giving Easter eggs to the workmen on Easter when they were building that road. Sometimes we went to Elkmont to watch the swimmers in the river. I remember a man made a pond that people swam in on the road to Newport on Sundays.14
When I was little, we had an old radio with a big speaker that we could get WLW in Cincinnati, Ohio, a station in Pittsburgh, KDKA, and one in Chicago. When my brother started teaching agriculture at Sevier County High School, he bought a big battery radio and kept it in his room. Every night we would go upstairs to listen to the news. We listened to “Amos and Andy,” a mystery about Sing Sing prison, Mormon Tabernacle Choir on Sunday, and the Farm and Home Hour from Chicago on Saturday. They would start with “It’s a beautiful day in Chicago,” whether it was raining or snowing. We listened to other programs that I can’t remember.

Before we had the radio, my mother read to us at night. All seven of us would be sitting around the fireplace and later around the stove after supper. Early, we only had very dim oil lamps. Sometime in the thirties, Rawlings store [in Sevierville] got Aladdin Lamps which burned kerosene, had a net-like mantle, and made bright light. We had one in the living room for Wilbur to grade his students’ high school papers.

At night my mother would read to the whole family. She read The Life of Lincoln and The Life of George Washington. My mother would read the newspaper to all of us and discuss current events. She was a strong Republican and couldn’t stand Mrs. Roosevelt because she served liquor in the White House. She had no use for Pearl Buck because she and Mr. Buck swapped marriage partners while in China.15

My whole family enjoyed this [reading]. My father was a sullen man who never contributed to the conversation, so she talked about current events and news in the community. My brother Glenn had a happy personality, and he kept us laughing at meals. He was a joy to be around.

We went to bed at 8:00 because my parents got up at 5:00 every morning. My father built a wood fire in the kitchen stove and in the fireplace in the living room. In the winter, he shoveled ashes over the back log to keep fire till morning.

It seems all my treats as a child were food. My aunt on Middle Creek came to Sevier County as a missionary teacher from South Dakota. She could bake wonderful yeast bread which no one in my family could do, and it was a treat to open her door and smell those beautiful cinnamon yeast rolls.

At our church on Middle Creek, there was a nice man who owned a little country store near the church. Every Sunday he gave us a thick pink mint about the diameter of a quarter, and I remember that as a treat for seventy-five years. I wonder if adults ever know how little it takes to please a child.

I think of the food treats my mother made. We kept home made sorghum molasses in the pantry to eat on hot biscuits. My mother made wonderful molasses cake in a stem pan. At Christmas, she made boiled custard with real whipped cream from our Jersey cow. When I was real little and believed in
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Santa Claus, my sister and I got an orange in our stocking. It was the only time of year we had one. My mother would cut a hole in the orange, and we could suck the juice out through a stick of peppermint. Then we started going to Florida at Christmas, and we could have all the oranges we wanted.

And when we went to Key West to visit my father’s cousin and her husband, I thought the turtle steaks and Key lime pie was the most wonderful thing I had ever tasted.

And I loved the Keys—the blue green water and the Spanish-speaking people were so nice. That was the first time I ever heard Spanish (age fifteen), and I loved it. In 1935 when we went to the Keys, a hurricane had destroyed a lot of the highway between the keys so we had to drive our car on steamboats brought over from the Mississippi to run between the Keys. There was a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the Keys and they were warned to get out before the hurricane, and they didn’t so they all were killed.

Another treat came once a year. Every Christmas when we went to Florida, my younger sister and I would beg to be at Melbourne, Florida, for Christmas Eve. There was a huge tourist camp with cabins, and they had a big recreation room where they had a band and music and dancing. They gave all the children a paper bag of treats. I loved being there. They played a song called “The Missouri Waltz,” and I loved it. When Mr. Truman was president, he used to play that on the piano, but I learned to love it as a child.

The circus came to Knoxville every year, and one year when I was little my father and mother took my younger sister and me to see it. It was the first time I had ever been on a street car. My father bought a coke for my sister and me. It made me sick, and I threw up. I never drank another coke till I was at U.T.

One year my parents took my younger sister and me to the East Tennessee State Fair at Knoxville. I loved the animals and exhibits. We stayed for the fireworks, and I was terrified. Coming from Knoxville, my mother would buy a small loaf of bread for five cents, large for ten cents, no slices. My sister and I loved that. We could eat a whole small loaf before we got to Sevierville. To me it was like angel food cake. Back then we called it light bread.

Things we didn’t like to do: milk two cows before we went to school, especially if it was rainy and the cow’s tail was full of mud. We didn’t like to churn. We took turns cranking the Daisy churn.

My mother believed that education was the only answer for a better life financially and socially, so she worked like a slave on that farm from 1903 to 1963 when she fell and broke her hip and needed assistance until her death in 1971. My mother knew the only way to prevent her five children from
being hired hands on my father’s farm was to get college educations for us all. With her prayers and hard work, she finally got us all through University of Tennessee [U.T.]. My brothers, Wilbur McMahan and Glenn Fox McMahan, both earned B.S. degrees in agriculture in 1931. My brothers lived on one good meal a day in a cheap boarding house to make it. My mother did their laundry and mailed it to them in a laundry bag that resembled a twenty-two-inch suitcase, but it was covered with a water proof material that looked like tent material. My brother Glenn worked at odd jobs to help and of course they came home on summer vacation and raised crops like hay, wheat, corn, hogs and calves to sell in the fall.

My sister Dorothy only lacked three months finishing at U.T. in 1938. Ernestine McMahan Steele earned her B.A. and Bachelor of Music at U.T. Chattanooga in 1944. I earned my B.S. in home economics at U.T. in 1942 and then I studied at University of Pennsylvania for two years. My mother got me into a cooperative dormitory at U.T. where twenty-four girls did all the work. This was fall 1938. We had five committees, cooking, dishwashing, cleaning, hostess, and guest, and alternated these every week. The cost for one year—tuition, room, board, and books—was three hundred dollars.
When I graduated in 1942 and went to University of Pennsylvania, it cost eight hundred dollars a year.

My mother was very religious but not overbearing with it. From her I learned the stories of the Bible. She never had us say grace at meals or prayers at night. Some people have a powerful experience to know they are saved, but I always knew from her that I was. When I got to U.T. most of the girls in the dormitory went to church, and my senior roommates would get on their knees and pray every night, so I learned to do that because of them.

Because of my mother’s awful experience with marriage, she wouldn’t let us date till we went off to college, so I was green as grass as far as self esteem and social graces. My mother was told by Dean Greve, dean of women, that I improved more than any freshman she had ever seen. I had never been in a cafeteria, and my roommate had to show me how to go through the line; I was that inexperienced.

After he graduated from U.T., my wonderful brother Glenn Fox McMahan came home and worked for five dollars a week [on the farm]. He and my mother influenced my father to sell the Emert Place on Middle Creek Road. It connected up on top of the hill to my father’s home farm. They sold the “big holler” across Middle Creek Road from the Dollywood parking lot. My father had a sawmill and sawed out that holler for years. There was a shack where very poor people lived until about 1938. They sold the Lawson field which connected on back of Judge Holt’s farm and extended to the Trotter McMahan farm. By selling these strips of land that didn’t produce farm produce, we were able to get out of debt for the first time since 1921, thanks to my mother and brother, Glenn.

My other brother Wilbur taught agriculture at Sevier County High School from 1932 to 1942. He lived at home but never worked on the farm any more. He was drafted into the army and served three and a half years, much of it in Europe with Patton’s Third Army. He was in the Eightieth Division.

My mother was a beautiful caring woman. A prominent local businessman who owned a large furniture store and funeral home told me she was the prettiest girl in the county in 1901, and she certainly was the most educated. She was one of the first woman college graduates in the county.

With her intelligence and creative thinking, I believe she would have been in charge of some big company if she had been born in modern times. With her perseverance, enthusiasm, and love of education, she would have thrived in modern times that give women independence and freedom to use their skills.

Everything good in my life I owe to my mother. She gave me faith in God from the time when I can first remember. She gave me the education
to have an enjoyable productive professional life and the chance hopefully to have made the world a little better with my forty-four years as a registered occupational therapist in army and Veterans Administration hospitals. I worked with veterans from five wars: Spanish-American, World War I, World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam. In 1988 when I retired I was still working with one hundred veterans a day, four groups of twenty-five in all stages of disability using group activities in reality orientation, sensory awareness, and activities of daily living.

Notes

1. Dexter Edgar Converse, a textile mill owner who was one of the founders of Converse College, a liberal arts women’s college in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

2. This was the battle of Fair Garden, Tennessee, January 27, 1864. A small Confederate cavalry force seeking to curtail the activities of Union troops south of the French Broad River engaged Union cavalry near what became the McMahan farm. The Union troops won the battle but withdrew due to the fatigue, heavy casualties, and lack of supplies. See “Fair Garden Tennessee,” American Civil War, available on-line, www.americancivilwar.com/civil.html.

3. The name the family gave to a small forest adjacent to their farm.

4. “New ground” is newly cleared land.

5. They used cattle as draft animals instead of mules or horses.

6. Early tractor-drawn farm machinery usually required at least two people to operate. One person drove the tractor while the second sat on a seat on the equipment and operated it. For example, an operator was required to turn the hay rake in various directions to catch the mown hay and thrust it into orderly windrows. As equipment became more sophisticated and the power takeoff was developed to power the equipment with power from the tractor, the process became more mechanized and a second operator was no longer required.

7. It was actually 1924 when Congress promised to pay World War I veterans a “bonus” in 1945. The Bonus Army included unemployed World War I veterans and their families who marched on Washington to demand early payment of the “bonus.” About twenty thousand camped on the grounds of the United States Capitol and across the Anacostia River in a swampy area. Hoover indeed ordered the army, under the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, to remove the marchers from Washington, but historians generally believe that Gen. George Patton exceeded his orders by attacking marchers and their families with tank and mounted cavalry.

8. Schoolchildren collected $1,391.72. Wilma Dykeman is actually a Tennessee writer and historian. For more on the purchase of land for the national park and its impact on Sevier County, Tennessee, see Melissa Walker, “The Land of Do Without: The Changing Face of Sevier County, Tennessee, 1908–1940,” in All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919–1941 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

9. Champion Fibre was the largest single landowner within the boundaries of the park. The company hired veteran timbermen to survey the standing timber and
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estimate its value. The company then used this information in its lawsuit against the federal government, seeking additional money for the land the government had condemned. In the end, Champion received $2.35 million for their land, a figure within a few dollars of their asking price.

10. Farmers had actually known about the value of crop rotation for centuries, but the practice was rarely used in the South before the 1930s. Lespedeza is a nitrogen-fixating plant. Nitrogen was an important crop nutrient for such plants as corn. During the growing season, nitrogen attaches itself to nodules in the roots of nitrogen-fixating plants. When the roots of nitrogen-fixating plants are plowed into the soil at the end of the growing season, the soil is naturally fertilized for the next crop.

11. A piece of equipment that combined the functions of mowing and threshing grain.

12. Horses and ponies that overeat can develop laminitis, a potentially crippling inflammation in their hooves.

13. The Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) opened an aluminum smelting and fabrication plant in nearby Blount County in 1913. The plant operated with a reduced workforce and schedule throughout the Depression, but with the onset of World War II, many farmers and farm laborers from outlying counties were able to obtain relatively high-paying industrial jobs at ALCOA.

14. Newfound Gap was the pass over the crest of the Great Smoky Mountains on the Tennessee–North Carolina border. The road over Newfound Gap was completed. Elkmont began life as a lumber camp built by the Little River Lumber Company. The camp could be reached by rail, and the lumber company operated a scenic excursion train to Elkmont on Sundays. The excursion train brought middle-class visitors from Knoxville and Maryville to enjoy mountain vistas. The Wonderland Hotel at Elkmont housed and fed visitors who wished to stay more than a few hours. Eventually tourists began buying small parcels of land and building their own cabins at Elkmont. By the time Elizabeth McMahan Adamitis was born in 1921, Elkmont was a small rustic resort community.

15. After Prohibition was repealed, Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt did indeed serve alcohol in the White House. Pearl Buck was an American novelist and essayist.

16. Glenn also taught school.