

The House My Daddy Built

The John Barrow Addition

I was only eleven years old when the uprooted roots of our gypsy family finally got replanted in the hilly backwoods of Little Rock's John Barrow Addition. The first family we laid eyes on there were the dirt-poor Clouds. I don't know where they had come from themselves or where they ended up after we moved on, but I'll never forget that unforgettable day.

The Clouds were backward and poorly educated yet were the most genuine, unaffected family I have ever seen up close. The five of them and their animals lived inside a fenced-in, brown rectangular army tent. To some, we were no better off ourselves as our own family of six were shoe-horned into a homemade, one-room shack built onto the flatbed of an International Harvester truck that, like me, was probably born in the thirties.

We had been itinerant farm workers at that time and had just finished a season of strawberry picking in northeast Arkansas. I don't know why Daddy chose that particular spot as the place for us to thrive in but he was through with berry picking that was for darn sure even though Mother and me and my three brothers did most of the stooping-over, back-breaking picking due to Daddy's condition. Going-on-thirteen-year-old brother Max told me that a Mr. George Gilbert must have been the one who told Daddy about the place. I don't know much about Mr. Gilbert's life's history either. I had never heard tell of him until our landing day which is understandable seeing as how no one ever told me much of anything and even if they did, I usually quickly forgot. Anyway, it appears Daddy met the man sometime somewhere and let on to Daddy that there was a good level camping-out spot near a running fresh water stream on the outskirts of Little Rock's John Barrow Addition near his truck farm. He said nobody should bother us there. That's according to what I think Max may have said so that's what I now believe.

After finding the south-east corner of the John Barrow Addition using a AAA road map, Daddy kept going straight north up and down the many hills of unpaved Walker Street, that was really just a road like all the other so-called streets—except for paved 32nd Street that the white Little Rock city bus that would later carry us back and forth from downtown Little Rock. Daddy turned the truck-house west onto 29th Street (road) until just before he reached the Gilberts' truck farm. He then made a hard left turn onto Cobb Street and another quick left onto a used-to-be road where he slammed on the brakes when he spotted the level place. The pine tree that we stopped next to was a half-block uphill of a creek full-up of crawdads and tadpoles. Daddy figured that was the spot Mr. Gilbert must have been talking about but we later found out it wasn't exactly the spot because one midnight a car full of cussing drunk teenagers almost ran into our truck. It appeared that some lovebirds still liked to use that road after dark.

It was about midday and the sun was still so hot it was hard to breathe, especially cooped up back there in the truck-shanty. Only Daddy and Mother and oldest brother, Stoy Pate, could fit in the truck cab so the rest of us always stayed in the bouncy room that didn't have no side windows, only an opening in the front part to allow Mother or Daddy to yell back at us whenever they needed to. We eagerly piled out of the truck-house and, after straightening out our stiff legs, right away started to settle in by hanging our tarpaulin off the side of the truck and by unloading the aluminum bathtub, the empty Crisco lard buckets, some pots and pans, a table, and a folding chair or two. The rest of the stuff stayed inside the truck-house as best I can recall.

While Mother began placing rocks in a circle where she would later build a cooking fire, Daddy sent me and my little brother, nine-year-old Dehlin Stanley, out into the world to find some fallen limbs and twigs. It doesn't take long to set up once you get the hang of it.

Suddenly, I felt eyes looking at us from behind some bushes. The eyes belonged to a tall, skinny man with a sawed-off walking crutch. He had long bushy black hair and was standing next to his short chubby tobacco-chewing wife who was at least 40 years old. Next to her was a plain-looking teenaged girl, a vacant-eyed adolescent boy, and a girl child. The simple Clouds neither spoke nor offered to help out. They just silently stared and watched with open-mouthed amazement at what we were doing.

The Clouds....