

Hypocrites are usually wrong

By: Gerald Hodges
The Leading Reporter

Miracles are still with us.
"Hello, this is Dorothy," the weak, hesitating, and raspy voice on the other end of the line said. "You re-

member when your Uncle Fred and Aunt Flossie used to come down and visit Thomas and I when you were little."

My, how the years had slid by, maybe fifty. I knew my cousin Thomas had lost the battle with Pall Mall

cigarettes over a decade ago. And I thought Dorothy had gone, too. The last I heard, she already had her ticket to join him.

"I thought you might like to do a story for the newspaper," she continued. Just what kind of story could Dorothy tell?

Right after the Great Depression, poor southerners had a lot in common with prisoners locked up in solitary confinement. There just wasn't much freedom of choice in life for them.

Dorothy and Thomas were two such people. Their life was centered on putting food on the table and raising four children.

Both were born and raised within a mile of each other. They were childhood sweethearts, who had spent all their life in the small fishing village of Bayou La Batre, Alabama. The movie, Forrest Gump, portrays the town as being right out of a fairytale.

It depicts a lively and booming little town, but the scenes were actually shot near Charleston, South Carolina, not along the Alabama Gulf Coast. The "Bayou" as natives call it, has never been an easy place to obtain material wealth.

"I'd like you to meet me at Brookley Field and take my picture beside that B-24," she continued. "I used to work on them during World War II. That was during the time Thomas was overseas."

This was news to me. My early memories were of a couple with several babies who lived in a small wooden, unpainted house near the tidewater marsh, with no screens on the doors.

She was stout, of medium height, and usually wore a plain dress with the tail of it as she moved about the house in slippers. Her hair was black, with deep blue eyes, and full lips.

He was short and wiry with an alligator face and hands. His skin was dark brown and wrinkled from constant exposure to the sun while working without a shirt in the Gulf. Both hands were calloused from pulling in shrimp nets, and I've seen him walk on oyster shells barefoot. He had a funny looking abdomen. One side was sunk in.

The first thing Dorothy did after hugging everybody was put on a pot of coffee. This was before Mr. Coffee hit the market. Heated water was

poured into the top of an aged black pot filled with strong CDM or Luzitane coffee. With the coffee, there was always a slice of homemade cake.

I got a big glass of strawberry or orange Kool-Aid. Thomas always had some type of skiff or small shrimp boat. Often he would take us out and use a cast net to catch a mess of fish. If it were low tide, the men folks would wade around and pick up oysters.

We would row back to their house, tired and wet, where Thomas and his mother would clean the fish. Dorothy and mother would fry them in a deep iron skillet.

There was a little bayou back of their house that I was allowed to fish in using one of Thomas' cane fishing poles. Along the path were many gnarled oak trees, whose limbs were covered with Spanish moss. They reminded me of crazy old men with beards and long fingers.

The tides brought schools of small fish in, and once I saw a bunch of ducks. One time, I caught a small flounder, and ran all the way back to the house with it. The marsh grass that grew along the water's edge was a nursery for shrimp. I would often sit and stare at the small crabs and other crustaceans scurrying around in the shallow, brackish water.

Another time, I wound up with an ace on my hook. Believing it was one of the dreaded cottonmouth moccasins that inhabit southern swamps, I threw the pole down and high-tailed it.

And there were other pleasant memories. Thomas allowed me to roam around the yard that was filled with worn-out boats, nets and oyster tongs. Often, I would crawl up in one of his skills, and become skipper of one of the world's largest ocean liners.

Visiting with Dorothy and Thomas was my first spiritual awakening. Certain basic emotions, joy, excitement, and affection had found a place of rest.

Often when other members of the family spoke of the couple, it wasn't good. Dorothy had to work in seafood plants, opening oysters or peeling shrimp to put food on the table, because Thomas just wouldn't work all the time, they often said.

As a boy I didn't understand their sayings, but I couldn't question them, either.

During the wheel chair interview with Dorothy, April 3, 2002, I learned that she had quit school and served her country during World War II by

working on aircraft at Brookley Air Force Base. She was able to visit two of the vintage planes she worked on, a B-24 Liberator, and a B-17 Flying Fortress, that made a brief stop in Mobile.

"Seeing them tickled me to death," said Dorothy. "My boyfriend, Thomas (and later husband), had joined the Army. I went to work in August of '42. They sent me to engine repair school, and I worked there until the end of 1944."

"It was hard work, but I enjoyed every bit of it. We all worked together. There was no arguing or fussing, we all came in and did our job. That's the way it was. We thought we were contributing to our boys getting back home."

Discovering this bit of information really made me feel good. All I had known was her role as a housewife and mother. But I also found out why Thomas didn't work all the time. He had received a medical discharge from the Army after losing a kidney and part of his stomach to a Japanese machine gunner and left for dead while serving with Gen. Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines.

"We didn't think he would ever get well," said Dorothy. "It was a long time after he came back from the war

before he was ever able to work. He tried to get on disability, but after filling out paper after paper, he finally gave up on getting anything from the government. The red tape was just too much for him."

It's difficult, it's very hard to explain what I felt, after nearly half a century to learn what other contributions Dorothy and Thomas had made to our world, and how the hypocrites

I knew as a child had been proven wrong—as hypocrites usually are.

I sure am glad Dorothy made that call to me, and yes, I still believe.

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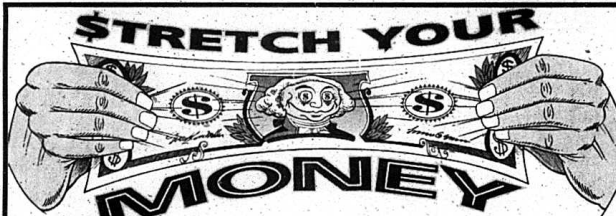
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