

Growing up in Oklahoma

Laced-up boots kicked up clouds of dust along the long stretch of road. A round-faced, brown-haired boy hastened ahead of his brothers and sisters who fanned out along the lane behind him, each carrying a satchel of books. They laughed and their voices floated up into the breeze.

The young boy stooped to pick up a rock. He threw it down the lane. The Oklahoma afternoon sun beat down. A light breeze rustled across the plains. It swirled the dust in the path ahead. But the sun and the dust went unnoticed. The boy sighted a lone figure coming toward him. Squinting, he peered down the lane. He grinned. It was Mother.

‘Bill!’ she called, waving. Then she greeted each of her children as they, too, rushed toward her, ‘How was your day?’ she queried of each child, ‘What did you learn?’

The Bright family lived on a ranch five miles from the little town of Coweta, Oklahoma and for the next two miles, before they arrived home, lively conversation filled the otherwise lonely road. Eleven-year-old Bill Bright and his four brothers and two sisters told their mother, Mary, of the day spent in a rural, one-room schoolhouse. As Bill’s brothers and sisters pushed forward with their mother in animated conversation, Bill’s pace slowed down so he could have some thinking time to himself. He kind of wished he could spend the afternoon back at the old frog pond - even in the height of summer he could still imagine the snow and ice covering everything, icicles hanging off trees, snowballs

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flying through the air, sledding down the hill behind the barn. And ... then ... just behind a grove of trees and within range of the school bell, Bill had discovered the most wonderful thing of winter – skating!

Thump! Startled, Bill's mind left the pond. His brother, wearing an impish grin, had knocked Bill's books off his shoulder. Sprinting past Bill toward the rambling two-storey white house now looming ahead, he turned back to yell, 'Last one to the barn does all the chores!' But it was always the case that all the Bright children did their fair share of household work - race or no race.

Changing quickly into farm clothes, Bill joined his brothers at the barn. They cleaned the barn and milked the cows. 'Hey Bill,' one of his brothers called, 'Meet you at the corn crib!' Hanging up the final pails and rakes, Bill met his brother at the old corn-crib now falling into disrepair. Selecting corn silks from a pile on an old crate, Bill's brother rolled a cigarette for Bill. Then, for himself, he selected brown peach leaves and rolled his own cigarette. Coughing from their first puffs, the boys grimaced. 'This tastes awful!' said Bill. 'Yeah,' agreed his brother. But neither boy put his cigarette down. It made them feel grown-up ... like their father, Forrest Dale Bright. After the first few splutters, the boys leaned back and gazed off at the sun. It lingered just a few feet from the tips of the waving golden wheat.

'Tomorrow will be a big day,' Bill mused out loud. It was June – harvest time for winter wheat. After days of combining, they were finally finishing up the last field. Bill loved the sight of the golden fields waving in the purples and oranges of the setting sun. He loved it almost as much as the smell of new-mown hay or the fruit trees newly budded in the spring.

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All of the children were expected to help with the harvest, as well as with the chores on the 5,000-acre ranch. Tomorrow, they would help the men bring in the rest of the wheat. Other Saturdays were spent repairing fences, driving the herds to pasture, and cleaning out the barns. It wasn't all just hard work though. They had fun times too. Bill had just learned to ride his father's horses bareback. He hoped his father would soon let him ride bronco-style too.

But Oklahoma in the 1930s meant hard work for most folks. Days after Bill's eighth birthday, New York's Wall Street stock market crashed, and people were suddenly out of work. Even though New York was 1,700 miles away from the ranch, Bill could tell that things had changed. His father referred to it as the 'Great Depression.' Families lost their homes and followed the crops looking for work. Many lived out of their cars. And when Bill went to town with his father, he saw people standing in bread and soup lines.

Bill's grandfather, Samuel, had been a pioneer in the oil business and was very successful. While many families lost everything, the Brights still had food on the table and clothes on their backs. Bill's mind went back to yesterday when they had passed a traveling black family on the road. The father politely asked Mrs. Bright for directions to town. They were looking for work, he told her.

As the family walked down the dusty road, Mrs. Bright sighed at the disappearing figures. 'We have great privilege. We have been given much by God. Never forget that. You are no better than anyone else. Never look down on someone because of the color of his skin,' she warned.

The two brothers puffed their last puffs on their makeshift cigarettes and Bill rose to his feet. 'Let's go in. I want to finish my homework before supper.'

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Mrs. Bright bustled between the stove and the dinner table, while Bill worked on his homework. The smell of fresh baked bread wafted to where he and his brothers lay sprawled in the parlor with piles of books around them. Bill reached for his favorite magazine, anxious to finish just a page.

‘Bill, Glenn, Forrest, Dale!’ Mrs. Bright called, gathering her family to the table. Reflecting her German heritage, it was customary for Mrs. Bright to serve her husband and her children first, wait upon them during the meal, and eat later. As the Bright family gathered around the table, Mrs. Bright noticed there was still one empty spot. With a sigh and a twinkle in her eye, Mrs. Bright hastened to the door of the parlor. There he was, still enraptured by the magazine story before him.

‘Bill,’ she whispered into the now emptied room, with an understanding smile. She loved to read as well, and Bill, more than any of her other children, was a dreamer like her. His mind would fly away to an imaginary world as fast as her own. But, her husband would be hungry and the food was getting cold.

‘Bill!’ she called louder this time, turning to hasten back to the dinner table, ‘It’s time for dinner. Don’t make your father wait!’

After dinner, with the dishes cleared and washed, the family gathered in the parlor once again. Each evening, the children would gather before the fireplace to listen to Mrs. Bright read from her favorite classics. Before marrying Dale Bright, Mary Lee Rohl had been a schoolteacher in Indiana. Her cousin was the popular poet James Whitcomb Riley, whose poems they read on occasion. But tonight, they were reading the exciting adventures of Achilles in *The Iliad*.

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Mrs. Bright, seated close to the fire, read out in a clear voice and Bill began to think about the characters he was hearing about. 'Achilles' mother must have been beautiful,' he thought as he gazed at his own mother by the fire. 'Surely, she was as beautiful as my mother.'

Bill could never remember his mother being angry with the children. She disciplined them, spanked them even, but not in anger. She did not criticize, but often reached out in kindness. Their neighbors frequently turned to her when ill or in need, for she was known for her compassion. Their ranch had become a social center for their disheartened community. Many would come for homemade ice cream or watermelon socials. Others would come to ask Bill's father, Dale, for advice about cattle.

'Time for bed!' The call broke Bill out of his thoughts. He scurried up the stairs after giving his mother a kiss. Tomorrow was a big day, he remembered, as he pulled his nightshirt on.

Hours before sunrise, Bill woke to the sound of his father's stomping into the kitchen with a fresh pile of wood for the fire. Bill and his brothers hastened to find their socks and working clothes. Scrambling down to the kitchen, the boys quickly ate breakfast, eager to get their chores out of the way. Then, they could help with the harvest. Bill's mother, her braid of hair not yet pulled up into her bun, winked at her boys as they raced out to the barn.

A cluster of men emerged from the early morning mist and prepared to help Bill's father bring in the last of his harvest. 'There might be a treat toward the end of the day,' Forrest whispered to Bill. 'Father might bring out that wild bronco he just brought in and try to break him, if we get the harvest in fast!' he finished excitedly.

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Bill's face broke out into a grin. No one was a better rancher than his father, he thought, Father could ride the wildest horses and steer¹ – he had a gift with animals.

'My father goes into a corral of wild horses,' bragged Bill to his schoolmates one day, 'and they just tremble.' Bill trembled a bit, too: His father had a will of steel. And, while he was never abusive, he had a temper. Bill knew that if his father's voice was raised, he ought to obey, no questions asked. Dale Bright's strong will was best seen when he was breaking in a new bronco. It was wise, Bill and his siblings learned early on, not to disagree with their father. Their neighbors learned it as well. Bill's father counted on the honesty of men, often transacting large business agreements and sealing the deal with nothing more than a word over a handshake.

But Dale Bright's strong will was part of what made him successful in conquering this western territory. And Bill wanted to be like his father.

The harvest day passed quickly and soon, the last of the wheat was cut. Bill's father made arrangements for his new threshing machine to be sent over to his neighbor's farm a few weeks later. Sharing resources and caring for others was a lesson Bill learned at an early age.

Bill leaned over the fence. He listened as Mr. Bright showed his neighbor the machine. His father might be a bear of a man, thought Bill, but he was kind in his own way.

Mr. Bright noticed the line of boys hanging off the fence with pieces of straw clenched between their teeth and simply jerked his head to the right. It was their cue to get off the fence. As they jumped down, Mr. Bright then nodded to the barn. Wide smiles appeared on each boy's face. It was time to let out the broncs! As the boys ran to the paddock, their

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shouts of glee floated along the breeze. For the rest of the afternoon, the children watched their father try to break the bronco, finally seating him as the sun began to set in the west.

After the excitement died down, Bill grabbed the pitchfork to clean out the stalls in the barn. Inside the quiet of the stable, he walked over to his own horse, whom he had named Pet. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a carrot and pushed it up to the horse's mouth. 'Hey there,' Bill whispered. 'Don't you worry,' Bill continued, 'I still like you best over that new bronco. Maybe we'll get to ride tomorrow.'

Riding Pet was one of Bill's favorite things. Bill was learning the whole length of the ranch – all 5,000 acres. He and Pet would often gallop across the prairie. There seemed to be no end. Bill sighed. 'Maybe tomorrow,' he whispered.

After dinner, Bill's mother reminded the children that baths must be taken that night. 'Church tomorrow,' she called as she headed to the kitchen to boil water. The boys grimaced. 'We are going to Grandfather Bright's house for dinner afterwards, so you will need to be extra clean,' she finished. Bill looked down at his hands. He knew his face must also reflect a day spent in the fields. Sure enough, evidence of the hard day's labor floated by Bill in the tub that evening while he was scrubbed. But soon enough the scruffy little farmhand was all pink and fresh. Bill then headed off to bed, for a night filled with dreams of wild bronco riding.

The next morning, after chores and breakfast, Bill and his brothers and sisters dressed in their best clothes before heading into town with their mother and father. Arriving at the Methodist Church, Bill watched his father say goodbye. Mr. Bright went to join several townsmen to talk politics

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and business. Church was for women and children, Bill had heard his father once say to his mother.

As soon as the service was over, Bill and his siblings raced to find their father, to begin the fifty mile drive to their grandfather's house. Bill could not wait to see his grandparents. He was in awe of Grandfather Samuel Bright, who had even been elected mayor of the town.

One of Bill's favorite memories was during last year's summer trip. His grandfather had taken him into town on a business errand. Before they left, Grandfather Bright handed Bill a store-bought ice cream cone at the town drugstore! He knew his grandson had a sweet tooth.

'Incredible,' Bill thought, feeling the cold ice cream slide all the way down to his stomach. But there was a warm feeling in Bill that day too. He felt extra special all day.

Now, with the harvest cut, Bill's parents decided it was a good time to visit the senior Brights. Would cousins be there, the children wondered? What treats would Grandmother Bright have in her kitchen? What new games would she have? Excitement grew with each passing mile. Soon, the house loomed into view.

'Welcome, dear ones!' Grandmother Bright called from the porch. She was elegant with perfectly groomed light brown hair and a warm smile. She reached out to hug each child as they scampered up to meet her. She was always warm and loving, so Bill thought her to be the best grandmother anyone could have. Every child was important to her. She just made him feel like he belonged, thought Bill.

Wide-eyed, Bill and his brothers and sisters stepped into the house and eagerly looked around. The floors were so polished Bill could see his face in them. And the bearskin

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rugs! Bill had never seen bearskin rugs until he came to Grandfather Bright's house!

A tall, impressive figure with a regal appearance stepped from the fireplace, beaming at his family pouring into the room. Grandfather Bright made quite a figure with his own elegant manner.

'Welcome!' he greeted them, crossing the room to shake hands with Bill's father and kiss Bill's mother lightly on the cheek. 'Greetings to all of you, you Bright children,' his voice sang musically, turning to greet the seven children, each in turn. 'Are you hungry? Dinner is ready, I believe.'

Over steaming piles of mashed potatoes, a roast chicken, gravy, beans, and freshly-baked bread, Bill's father and grandfather discussed their latest business ventures and talked politics. The children listened quietly. They knew this was not the time to speak. Bill's father talked about the harvest and the bronco he had worked with. Grandfather Bright leaned forward, anxious to hear the story. 'Ah, it's been too long,' he sighed with a faraway look in his eye.

After a moment of silence, Bill timidly spoke up.

'Grandfather,' Bill queried, 'Will you tell us again the story of how you came to Oklahoma?'

With eyes twinkling, the imposing man laughed heartily for a moment.

'Well, Bill, didn't I tell you that story the last time you visited?' his grandfather teased.

'Yes...' said Bill, blushing now.

'Oh, please, Grandfather! Do tell us! You must tell us!' came a chorus of voices from around the table. As Bill's brothers and sisters clamored for the story, Grandfather winked at Bill. Regaining his confidence, the eleven-year-old joined in with his brothers and sisters.

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‘Well, there’s not much to tell,’ Grandfather Bright began. The lilt in his voice suggested quite the opposite. ‘Oklahoma was known as Indian territory in 1889. The United States government wanted men and women to settle the land and they were willing to give the land away in land grants. And so, in the years between 1889 and 1895, they had great land-grant rushes. I was a schoolteacher,’ Grandfather Bright continued, glancing at Bill’s mother with another wink, ‘but I wanted adventure! So, I saddled up my trusty horse one fine spring day, went to the land-grant office and signed up to “make the run.”’

Grandfather Bright picked up his glass as if he were done with the story. He leaned back in his chair, seemingly content with the amount of information he had given.

Voices clamored again: ‘What happened then? Grandfather, you can’t stop there! Tell us about the run!’

Chuckling, Grandfather Bright closed his eyes. He seemed to go through a catalog of memories in his mind. Then he opened them, having selected just the perfect one.

‘We all lined up. Each of us held stakes with flags. We were to ride out to the land we wanted, and drive the stake into the land we were claiming. Now, as we waited for the race to start, some of the horses were more skittish than others. And some folk, ... well ... some folk had hardly ridden a horse in their lives. There were wagons, even a bicycle or two. Women and men lined up. Some of the wagons had children hanging out of them! But there was one thing we all had in common,’ Bill’s grandfather paused as he surveyed his grandchildren’s faces, ‘We all had fierce determination. We were going to get some land!’

Telling the story spurred on his own excitement.

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‘Crack!’ he yelled out. The children all jumped. They did it every time, even though they had heard the story often. Thrilled expressions appeared on the boys’ faces, while the girls recovered more slowly from their shock. ‘The pistol was fired! We took off ... hundreds of horses lunging forward! My neighbor ... Mr. Whippenstead ... well, his horse reacted poorly to the pistol. He reared up and turned around. But my neighbor held on for dear life! I don’t know much of what happened to him after that since my horse took off at a gallop. We closed the distance on those in the lead pretty quickly.’

Grandfather Bright leaned closer to the table. ‘Now,’ he whispered looking into each child’s eyes, ‘I had spied out the territory the week before. I knew where I wanted to claim my land. I saw two other riders ahead of me, and so I dug in, urging my horse forward with everything he had.’ Grandfather Bright’s voice grew louder and faster with each sentence. ‘I chased those two riders like a dog chasing a rabbit.’

Giggles erupted around the table, but quickly quieted.

‘Before I knew it, I had moved ahead of the first rider. Gallop! ... Gallop!’ Grandfather Bright punctuated the story with sounds. ‘I crossed the hill where your barn sits now. Gallop! Now, I was on the piece of land I had wanted. Gallop! Gallop! Before that first rider came over the hill, I jumped off my horse!’

Grandfather Bright’s eyes gleamed. ‘I nearly broke my leg, jumping off a galloping horse! I tumbled to the ground. But I got right up, picked up my stake and thrust it straight into the soil! Exhausted, I collapsed. Riders whisked past me. I could see their frowns and heard ... well, let’s say colorful language!’ He glanced apologetically at Grandmother and

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Mrs. Bright and then chuckled, 'It was pretty tense for a minute there. I wasn't sure if they were going to pull out pistols on me or not!'

Seeing concern flash in his granddaughters' eyes, he laughed loudly and quickly added, 'But they did not. They moved on to the next piece of property. And so that is how your old grandfather "made the run" and helped settle this great state of ours,' he finished. 'And,' he added, 'I made friends with the two riders who became neighbors that day. We have remained friends to this day.'

Bill knew that once the competition for the land was over, his grandfather had exhibited the same behavior he witnessed in his own father. Community and shared resources were more important than competition. Once, Bill learned, his grandfather had convinced a group of men to invest in oil property that did not turn out as well as he had hoped. His grandfather refunded the men's money with a loss to himself. His grandfather was an honorable man.

Later that afternoon, as Bill and his family left to go home, Bill gazed back at his grandparent's house for as long as it was in sight. With such a heritage of courage and honesty and strength, Bill thought, there was much expected of him. Could he be brave like his grandfather? Or like his father riding the bronco? Would he have the courage to do something like 'make the run'? Would he be compassionate like his mother? What territory was out there that he could claim? What stories would he have for his grandchildren some day?