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Anna Bell and Jess Bolin, Jr.
photo provided by Bob Warren

The brave five-year-old did as she was told, then watched as Momma climbed out the same window, ran to the family car, and collapsed on the fender crying. The children couldn't understand why she was crying. They thought the fire was exciting.

Everyone escaped with only the clothes on their backs, but neighbors and relatives took them in and soon gave them a "shower" of gifts, clothing, and other necessities so they could start over. Ann remembers living in a windowless smokehouse while the house was being rebuilt. While the carpenters were working, Ann and her brother didn't want to take a nap, fearing the house would be completed while they slept.

After three days of plowing through the mud twice a day, they gave up on schooling for the year, making little Anna Bell "a first grade drop-out."

After moving into their new house, things settled down for a short while. Anna Bell started to school in Allen, but then, in 1929, came the "Great Depression" with falling prices and hard times. Mr. Bolin soon saw that he was going to lose the farm, so he traded his equity for two houses, one in McKinney and

A Sharecropper's Daughter

By Bob Warren

SO WHAT IS A SHARECROPPER? You old timers know, but for you "young'uns," the dictionary says, "A sharecropper is one who works the land for a share of the crops." This was a very common practice all across the South in the early 1900s.

On June 24, 1923 a baby girl was born to Jesse and Ethel Howington Bolin in a sharecropper's cabin. It was on Mrs. Crozier's farm near the village of Lebanon, now a part of Frisco that Dr. Perry, an Allen physician, delivered the baby who was named Anna Bell for both of her grandmothers.

For years I have listened to stories and gathered facts about the life of this sharecropper's daughter, hoping to some day write the life story of Anna Bell, now known as "Ann," my wife of sixty-four years. Looking through some of my notes, here are some of the things she recalls about her early years – perhaps the first few pages of my book.

Like most sharecroppers, the Bolins dreamed of owning their own farm. With a few good crop-years and lots of hard work – even helping with West Texas

harvests – they were able to see their dream come true. They made a down payment on a small farm near Allen and moved into the nice little farmhouse. Things were going well with the family, which had grown by one, a baby boy they named Jesse Junior.

But Ann tells of a tragic event that happened when she was five years old. It was on March 31, 1928, her mother's birthday, and as was his custom, Mr. Bolin got up before daylight, built a fire in the woodstove and went to the barn to milk. When he finished and came out of the barn he saw the entire roof of the house was on fire. He dropped his milk buckets and ran to the house yelling, "Get out! Get out! The house is on fire!" The strong March wind was blowing flames over the roof 'til they touched the ground, leaving a fire-free tunnel on the leeward side of the house. Mrs. Bolin ("Momma") put Anna Bell, Jesse Jr., age three, and a visiting, eighteen month old cousin out the bedroom window. She told Anna Bell to hold the children's hands and lead them to safety by walking close to the house, avoiding the flames.

one in Frisco. While looking for another place to sharecrop, he moved his family to the house in Frisco, putting his little first grader in school here. After a few months the family found a place near Wylie and moved into the house, nothing more than a shack. Their new place was located on a dirt road about three miles from the Wylie school, and with no school busses, Mr. Bolin had to take his daughter to and from school. After three days of plowing through the mud twice a day, they gave up on schooling for the year, making little Anna Bell “a first grade drop-out.”

Ann tells of the house they lived in on that farm. She says, “It wasn’t much of a house – had pine floors with cracks so wide we could look through the cracks and see the chickens scratching around in the dirt under the house. But the cracks came in handy when we swept the floor. The dirt and crumbs fell through the cracks, so nothing was left to pick up.”

She also remembers the dirt road to town. When it was muddy, cars made deep ruts, and the ruts remained after the mud dried. It was there she learned to drive – at least she thought she did. Her mother would position their Model “T” securely in the ruts and turn the wheel over to her little daughter to “drive.” I asked Ann what she did when they met another car using the same ruts. She said, “I don’t remember ever meeting another car.” How’s that for heavy traffic?

The Bolins soon found a better place near Parker, where Anna Bell entered the second grade, suffering no ill effects from having attended three schools or from having missed much of the first grade. But, that’s another chapter in my book-to-be.

And that’s how life was for this sharecropper’s daughter – a first grade drop-out, but a hero at age five!

Frisco native Bob Warren is a humorist, historian, and former Frisco Mayor.




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