

Going to the Storm Cellar

It was 1961. We had just been in our new house about a year. Prior to its construction, the land had been farmed, then sectioned and sold as lots for houses. Our house was one of the last on the block to be completed. There were few houses that had been built on the street behind ours. Dallas Street was four blocks long and the block I lived in was curved almost in an elbow-shape. Our house was on the inside of the elbow resulting in a much larger backyard than the front yard.

It was a mid-summer evening and the setting sun was still illuminating the sky. It was between nine and ten o'clock when my dad decided to take a shovel and began to dig the perimeter of a storm cellar. Digging wasn't as much of an effort into the rich soil that had once been a farm. There were no rocks and tree roots. Daddy didn't dig late into the night, and I'm sure thankfully so. After "sleeping on it" he decided that instead of the cellar being located straight out the back door of the house more or less in the center of the yard, it should be dug in the back northwest corner where the fence met on two sides. One bordered a neighbor's yard and the other the alley that ran down between the back fences of all the houses on the block.

Daddy hired my oldest brother David to help dig for a quarter an hour (far below minimum wage) and it wasn't long before a step ladder had to be used to get in and out of the large rectangular hole. I remember the loud truck with the rotating bin pouring cement mix down the wood shafts that formed the walls.

Our storm cellar was a decent sized rectangular space with steep wooden steps along one end with a steel entry door. The door was far too heavy for anyone to open it without the aid of a pulley system. I was glad our storm cellar wasn't like the only other one on our block. One neighbor had one of those pre-fabricated capsule-types you purchased, dug a hole and sunk into the ground. It definitely would have driven a claustrophobic mad within minutes!

Daddy was always ahead of the times with regards to safety gadgets such as seat belts and smoke detectors before they were common, or required by law. He may have felt the importance of digging a storm cellar due to his Mississippi roots. As a boy of 17 in 1936, Tupelo, Mississippi was hit with a deadly tornado just 20 miles from his hometown. It killed 216 people and injured 700 and still ranks number four in terms of people killed. Though our town was located in what seemed a "tornado alley," I never considered the danger.

When the cellar was completed, it was a cool place to play. I don't use the word "cool" in the 1960's sense in it being a fine or grand place to play, though it was, I mean the temperature remained cool down in the cellar year round. Daddy built a large wooden shed on the top for tools and partitioned a wall and added a window for me to have a playhouse.

Around the age of eleven or twelve, during stormy weather the radio reporter advised us to take shelter and subsequently the sirens would blow. I began to view the trips to the cellar as drudgery. As a teenager they were a major inconvenience and source for extreme boredom. Summertime was supposed to be freedom from schoolwork and long lazy days, not rain and hail, and evenings spent waiting in a storm cellar. Oh, and the music between weather reports was awful. It was this slow, twang, country gospel

music. When I complained about it my mother replied, “What else would you want to listen to at a time like this?” It wasn’t the gospel so much as the tempo and twang!

Daddy used our time in the cellar as his opportunity for a captive audience. He recited riddles and told the same jokes acting out the stories as he told them. He would get so tickled, laughing just anticipating his next line. I know for sure that he enjoyed it more than we did. It took years of aging and maturity to appreciate those times. For old time’s sake, when my dad was eighty, we videotaped him telling some of the jokes. With his “age and maturity” he couldn’t quite remember the lines so we prodded him on, but this time we were laughing as much as he was!

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