

# *A Legacy of Farming and Faith*



Life Stories of Joe and Jerry Tarbet

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NEW MEXICO

Ruidoso •

Levelland • • Lubbock

Hobbs •

• Lamesa  
• Ackerly

Possum Kingdom Lake

• Fort Worth

OKLAHOMA

TEXAS

MEXICO

*Gulf of Mexico*

# Childhood

I had a good relationship with both of my parents. Dad was a busy man and a hard worker. We worked side by side, and I learned a lot of mechanical skills and how to farm by helping him. Mom taught us good manners and ethics. She was strict. She brought us up right and didn't take a lot of nonsense. Mother only finished high school, but she could have been a college professor. She was intelligent and loved to learn. She would find new words in the dictionary and teach herself how to use them. She read through her Bible no telling how many times. She was a good lady.

I was born at 4 o'clock in the afternoon on February 15, 1930, in my grandparents' home in rural Dawson County about 70 miles south of Lubbock, Texas. We were tenant farmers, so our family moved around a good

bit while I was growing up. At one time, we lived in a box-and-strip house. It was made of vertical 12-inch planks with a one by four nailed over the cracks. It didn't have sheetrock on the inside, just building paper nailed on with tacks. There was no ceiling, just wood shingles, and sometimes you could look up and see the sky through tiny, little holes in the roof. Lots of dirt came in when the wind blew, and in those days, we had a lot of wind blowing. We lived in better houses, too. Not a lot better than that, but some of the houses were sealed with sheetrock which gave the house a double-wall, so it was warmer and not so dusty.

There were usually four rooms in the house; a kitchen and dining room combination, a living room, and a couple of bedrooms. We got electricity around 1942, but plumbing didn't come until later. Instead, we had an outhouse and a wash basin. There was a windmill outside that pumped water into barrels. When it was needed in the house, we'd go out with a wooden bucket and dip up some water. We all drank out of the same dipper, and we took our baths in the kitchen in a #2 galvanized tub.

I've always been good at working with my hands, and from an early age, Grandmother Tarbet encouraged me in carpentry. When I was about six or seven years old, Grandmother brought home some old wooden produce boxes along with a nickel's worth of shingle nails. With a coping saw, I could cut curves as well as straight lines. I enjoyed making quite a few things at a young age. One was a trailer house made from an apple box. The back of it sloped a little bit, so I put the axle under it and used leather straps to hold on the doors.



*Left to right: Don, Nelda and Joe with the trailer Joe built, 1937.*

Later on, I made toys, little tractors and such. I sliced up thread spools to use for the wheels. I thought those toys would be a big thing, and I tried to sell them at a local store, but I didn't sell very many. It was not profitable, but it was a fun hobby.

Our family lived very close to my father's parents. Grandmother Tarbet's was a great place to play. They had a huge woodpile behind the house with mesquite roots dug up from putting in farmland. We climbed all over that thing – I don't know how we kept from getting hurt. There was an old wagon chassis that we liked to push and ride down the hill. We played hide-and-seek, catch, Red Rover Come Over, and Annie-Annie-Over, throwing a ball over the house. We even enjoyed rolling a tire up and down the road. We played many different games, but our number one game was Cowboys &

Indians. We rode stick horses in the brush around the house, which gave us a lot of good hiding places.

Living on a farm, there were always plenty of chores to do. Being the oldest of seven children, I had some extra responsibilities. I took out the trash and gathered chicken eggs. When I was a bit older, I milked the cows. I did not care for that chore. I had to get out there early before the school bus came, so it was often chilly. If it had rained the night before, it would be messy and muddy. The cow would swish her tail to shoo away flies and hit me in the face. It wasn't very pleasant.

## School Years

During the Depression toward the end of the Dust Bowl, things were getting bad on the farm, so our family moved to Lamesa, Texas. We paid rent to another family and shared a house with them. Dad had trouble finding work. He tried some different things. He shoveled caliche into trucks for a construction company that was building a highway. For a time, he dismantled cars at a wrecking yard for a dollar a day.

Dad bought a Model A Ford pickup, and we went to South Texas so he could find employment. He had a friend who wanted help running his garage, but it didn't work out. We were living in the country again, and I remember going with Dad to pull up young tumbleweeds for the horses and cows to eat. Tumbleweed will grow, even if it never rains. Dad bought a ten-acre patch of

tomatoes that was already picked over. He went through it to get the last of the tomatoes, then filled up the Model A and hauled them to sell in Lamesa.

Times were hard, but our parents shielded us from it pretty well. We never went hungry. We were poor, but so was everyone else; we didn't know any different. On the farm we had eggs and milk cows – five or six cows and about a hundred chickens. We gathered eggs and hatched some of them to raise into fryers. On Saturdays, we took eggs and cream into town and sold enough to buy the groceries we couldn't raise. Since we didn't have refrigeration, Mother did a lot of canning to preserve our food. You could buy tin cans and lids to use with a sealer. You put them in a pressure cooker on the stove, and it built up steam, cooking everything in the can. We had cans of beans and peas and even pork sausage, and they carried us through the winter.

Neighbors depended on each other a great deal. We were pretty close knit. One might borrow some flour or a cup of milk, give you a ride into town or help with a certain chore. We depended on the neighbors and they depended on us.

Our family was still using horses for farming when I was young, but Dad didn't like me to handle them. When I was eight years old he let me try one day, but he was concerned that I couldn't turn the team around. Dad and Granddad got a tractor fairly soon after they became available. Their first one was a John Deere "Poppin' Johnny." It was a loud two-cylinder machine, and Dad said his ears would ring all night after plowing all day. Pretty soon he traded it in for a six-cylinder tractor that was quieter, smoother, and more powerful.

That's when I began my tractor-driving, when I was about 10 or 11 years old.



When I was five years old, they discovered I had asthma. When I had an attack, Mother would rub Ben-Gay on my chest and put hot cloths on me. It was worse at night. I would often sleep sitting in a chair, so I could breathe easier. Mother tended me through the night as I needed it; sometimes she didn't get much rest. I began first grade during the short time we lived in Lamesa. I missed about half of the year because of my asthma, but they went ahead and passed me on to the next grade. I rode a bus to school, and the bus driver called me "Smilin' Jack" after a popular comic strip character.

Recess was a lot of fun. I couldn't play many sports because of my asthma, so I often wound up being the referee. When I was in the sixth grade, we made guns out of rubber bands and clothespins. They made terrific weapons. The bands were made from red car inner tubes that were live rubber and very stretchy. The principal allowed us to bring them to school, as long as we kept them in our lockers and only got them out at recess. We'd take them out to the school yard and have a big time.

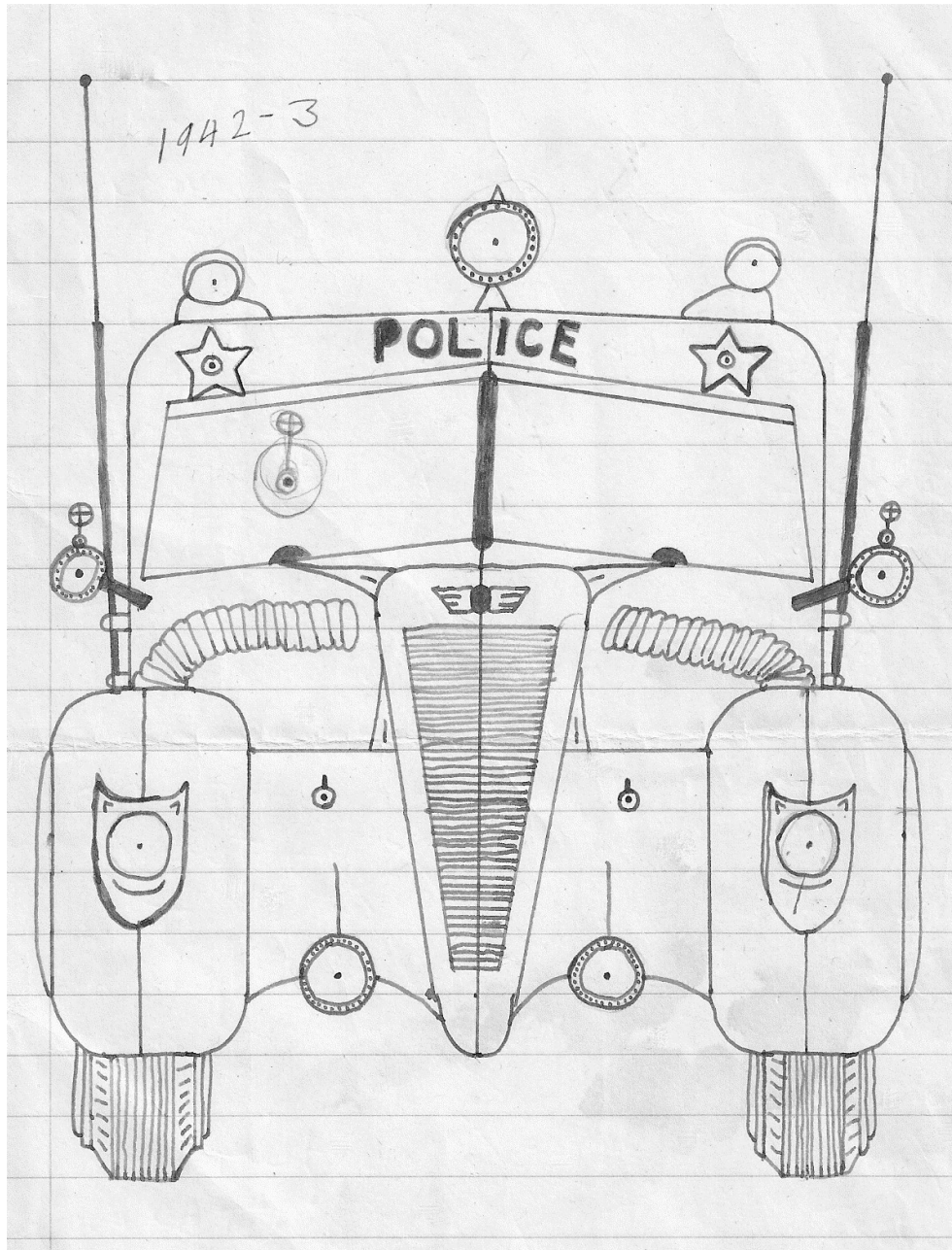
I attended Five Mile Junior High near Sparenberg, Texas. One year, some friends and I decided to play hooky on April Fool's Day. I think we went into town and got a coke or an ice cream cone or something. I don't



*Joe's school photo, 1940.*



*Left to right: Joe, Price, Ethel holding Bob, Nelda and Don, 1941.*



*One of Joe's sketches, 1942-43.*