

Family Reunion

Joe Dutton

It seems peculiar to me that an event of one's childhood which was at the time a dull and tedious affair, to say the least, so often returns a few years later with a sense of charm or pleasure that one is certain he never had in experiencing it. So the family reunion is with me. Not long ago, one could scarcely pass any public parks or farmhouses without seeing, strung between two tall trees, a large, white banner, bearing a family name and announcing that a reunion was in progress. Now, to the delight of the young and sorrow of the old, the family reunion as a planned and organized annual event is disappearing from American life, even in rural sections of the country which were once its stronghold.

I was nine years old when I last attended a reunion, but I can remember well the reactions of my family to the postal card which bore our invitation. As for myself, dreading the prospect of being asked to recite and the observations everyone would make about how I had grown, I reminded my parents of the car sickness from which I always suffered and proposed that I should stay at home with my two older sisters. This suggestion was met with hearty enthusiasm by my sisters because they too would find little pleasure in an entire day spent with people who were practically strangers to us and the inevitable allusions to their growth. All our schemes were fruitless, however, because Dad felt strongly about family unity and had determined that we all should go.

My grandmother, who was my maternal grandmother and thus not obliged to go, had lived long enough to have experiences in common with almost everyone and was rather eager to spend a day with people of her own age who would meet as strangers, but who would probably separate as close friends. As far as I knew, Mother had decided as readily as Dad that we would all go, for she immediately started worrying about whether she should bake a ham or a devil's food cake as our contribution to the feast. We all knew, of course, that in the end it would be both a baked ham and a devil's food cake, probably with the addition of baked beans and candied sweet potatoes.

We had all been to family reunions before; we knew what to expect and were not disappointed. The day was hot. The creaky, old farmhouse in which the event was traditionally held stood on a hill far from the road. When we arrived, the

house was surrounded by automobiles and there were already signs of activity in the yard and near the dark red barn, which was, oddly enough, a round barn. We were greeted by shouts and half-familiar faces. Chickens scurried in a mad, zig-zag fashion to avoid the wheels of our car. The women were in the enormous, old-fashioned kitchen, carrying stacks of gleaming white plates from the cupboards, opening ample lunch baskets, and with no slight pride, spreading the contents on the big square table. On the long porch, men were smoking and chatting over political prospects, the summer crops, and legal difficulties concerning long-forgotten inheritances. In the yard some of the younger men were playing horseshoes and the children were romping about, switching from one game to another with the rapidity of little squirrels. But the really interesting scene was in the front parlor where the old folks of the family had congregated to talk of the changes that time had made, whose cousin had married whose step-daughter thirty years ago, and the whole scope of things upon which people who have a lifetime behind them can readily pass judgment.

Soon it was time for the meal — and what a meal it was! My mouth waters still to think of the assortment of food spread on that table. There were hams and chickens and spiced fruits and cakes and pies of all sorts. I remember one cake, in particular, a very large and beautiful one with several layers, each tinted a different color. For some reason farm women seem to prefer commendations on the good table they set to any compliments on their beauty, their charm, or any other personal quality; and so at family reunions they outdo themselves to prove their worth as cooks.

The time between the meal and our departure seemed the most unpleasant part of the day. Feeling discomfort at having eaten too much, we arranged ourselves around the stuffy and ornate front parlor. Only the women who had volunteered to wash the dishes and an old man asleep in the hammock outdoors had managed to free themselves from this traditional ritual. First, the group pictures from the previous year's reunion were shown, and everyone was forced to laugh about how much we had all changed and how nice it was to have six new members in the family this year — as if six added to ninety or so made much of a difference. And then someone suggested that the red-haired twins play a piano duet; and, when that ordeal was over, all the children performed in turn, displaying more self-confidence than talent, I am afraid. In the next room, someone's Uncle Something-or-other was enter-

taining the small tots by taking out his false teeth and snapping them in the air to the accompaniment of childish shrieks and giggles.

Before leaving, I took my customary trip to the barn, where I tried to hold my breath to avoid the smell, but where I had a great deal of fun staring back at the cows and climbing in and out of a dilapidated old carriage. Meanwhile my parents were in the house, extending and accepting invitations with no intent of fulfilling them.

It was not long then before we were again on the road, Mother and Dad reminiscing about reunions of the past; my sisters praying they would be home in time for evening dates; Grandmother smiling peacefully with the satisfaction perhaps only the old can feel; and I, with a boy's healthy appetite, longing for just one more piece of cake.

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The Runner

Behind him on the road some toil, but few
Can match his pace. The clam'ring crowd grows shrill
As he, his burden light, ascends the hill;
They strew palm fronds upon the avenue.
The others when they pass run this same road,
But nature's will has not ordained their fate
To lead them yet to wreathes; they plod and wait
Until this power will deign to lift their load.
He forces on, but slower, now his back
Is bent, his heart grown weary with new pounds,
While to his throbbing ears the cadence sounds
Of steady steps, familiar with their pack.
He crosses last and pleads his load was great—
But all were judged and all had equal weight.

—Nancy Hendricks.

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The Modern Atlas

Atlas am I; the earth rests on my back
And makes so lame my speech and slow my walk;
I groan for scars that granite mountains scratch.
Depressed by treaty, jarred by jingo talk,
I fast for common pangs; my toes are cold;
All men remark this stooping frame and jeer;