

Chapter 1 GROWING UP IN PARIS



I was born in 1924 in Vernon, Texas, a growing center of trade and commerce some two hundred miles northwest of Dallas. The 1920s were a time of optimism as an economic boom opened opportunities for more and more Americans. During my early childhood, my family seemed destined to lead a comfortable middle-class life. I do not remember the details about our life in Vernon or even about the promise of the 1920s, but I do remember how that promise evaporated with the Crash. I do remember how my mother and dad and I spent the decade of the Great Depression working hard to survive on my grandfather's small farm outside of Paris, Texas, and I do remember seeing my dad devastated by economic forces beyond his control. Those experiences have stayed with me my entire life, as did the values I learned while growing up poor during those hard times.

Both sides of my family had roots in the South; both had moved to Texas in search of opportunities. What I know about my father's father comes from family stories, a few old photographs and newspaper clippings, and his detailed Civil War military records that an Alabama attorney living in Washington, D.C., secured from the National Archives and mailed to me in 1992. I read my grandfather's military records at a time when I was most interested in understanding the impact of my military service in World War II on my own life. The parallels between our experiences some eighty years apart in two of the nation's major conflicts were of tremendous interest to me.

My paternal grandfather, Henry Benton Love, was born in 1839 and grew up near the small Alabama town of Athens on the outskirts of the larger city of Huntsville, a trading center just south of the Alabama-Tennessee border some one hundred miles west of Chattanooga.¹ His family had lived in the area for at least two generations. Unlike southern Alabama, with its large cotton plantations that used thousands of slaves, northern Alabama, where Henry Benton Love was raised, was in the "hill country," unsuitable for large-scale farming and, therefore, not dependent on slave labor. When the Civil War began, however, my twenty-one-year-old grandfather enlisted as a

private in the Fourth Alabama Infantry, which became a part of the Army of Northern Virginia. His four years of service and the defeat of the Confederacy marked a turning point in his life.

Henry Benton Love saw heated action as an infantryman in thirty-three of the major battles of the war. His unit first marched to Harper's Ferry, Virginia, the site of a major Union arsenal. Slightly wounded at the First Battle of Manassas, he went on to fight at Chickamauga and Fredericksburg, where he suffered more serious injuries to his hands, face, and thigh from bombshell explosions. He was wounded a third time at the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse and engaged in action close to his grandfather's farm near Huntsville before taking part in the pivotal battle at Gettysburg, where his unit fought at Round Top.

He returned home after the war walking on a crutch. His fate is summarized in a note on the back of one of the few photos I still have of him: "When I got home, everything was burned. My sweetheart was waiting for me. We decided to go to Texas."

In the chaotic aftermath of the Civil War, he and his young wife, Louisa Fielding Love, made their way to northeast Texas, where they acquired a 154-acre farm outside of Hopewell, near the larger city of Paris, Texas, a farming center and the seat of Lamar County located about one hundred miles northeast of Dallas. There he settled down and began a new life.

After Louisa died in 1882, my grandfather married Mollie Fooshee of Paris in 1884. He had a total of twelve children from the two marriages. Large families were common among farmers in that day. Children were expected to help with the hard work of growing crops and livestock for food and raising cotton to bring in much-needed cash.

My father, Benton Fooshee Love, his father's tenth child, was born in 1887 and grew up on the farm near Hopewell. His mother died when he was only seven. A local newspaper article (undated, but probably from the late nineteenth century) about the family of H. B. Love includes a photograph of "the widower" and his twelve children. After reviewing my grandfather's service in the Civil War, the article concludes, "there is not a man in Lamar County who is held in greater esteem by his friends and neighbors."²

My father's life took an abrupt and difficult turn when Henry Benton Love became terminally ill. With his older half-brothers and half-sisters already living away from home in various towns in Texas and Oklahoma, my father, still in his early teens, became the "man of the house." He dropped out of



My father, Benton Fooshee Love Sr., before we moved to the farm in 1932 (Love family archives)

school and took care of the family, including one older sister and two younger ones. Their source of income was the farm. My father had grown up helping his father, and primary responsibility for the farm now passed to him. He met the challenge with a sense of duty and a well-developed work ethic that held the family together both before and after his father's death in 1912.

From the age of fourteen, my father, Benton Fooshee Love Sr., was an adult. He was a good farmer, particularly adept at raising and selling cotton. While still a young man, he had earned enough respect from the other farmers to be named Lamar County Cotton Weigher, a public position of considerable importance in a county so dependent on cotton.

In these years, he grew especially close to his youngest sister, Bess, and he provided her with a home until she married Oscar (O. K.) Allen, an engineer from Louisiana. Uncle Oscar met Bess while he was working on a project at Lake Gibbons, the lake near the Love farm that supplied Paris with its municipal water. After the project was completed, the Allens moved to Winnfield, Louisiana, finally freeing my father to leave the farm. An older



My mother, Nell Scott Love, about the time she married my father (Love family archives)

half-brother and half-sister had moved to Vernon, Texas, several hundred miles west of Paris, and my father relocated there to take a job buying cotton for Hyman Samuels Cotton Company, a Houston-based trading firm.

In June 1923, my father married my mother, Nell Scott, and they established their home in Vernon. She was one of nine children, born on a farm near Ladonia in Fannin County. While still in her forties, her mother died of diabetes in the days before insulin, and her father, William Scott, visited us only twice that I recall. The one time I especially remember was when I was about five or six. I had dug a hole at the base of our front porch steps to create a “lake” to collect water. When my grandfather—known in the family as “Poppa”—came out of the house, he stepped in the lake, fell hard, and broke his arm. My mother’s sisters viewed me as one dangerous kid!

If my mother can be taken as representative of her side of the family, the Scotts were a determined lot with a passion for education. I do not know whether her ambition came from her mother or her father, and I do not know how much education her father had, but I do know that his three sons and six daughters revered him. My mother always had a total, complete dedi-

cation to her own education and to the American system of public education. Her dream was to teach in the Dallas school system, and she achieved that goal, teaching high school English there before her marriage. Quite unusual for her time and place, she also took supplemental summer college courses at Cornell University, Columbia University, and the University of Chicago. Her experiences at these well-established universities no doubt fueled her passion for the education of her only child, which was of prime importance to her. Many of my lasting memories of childhood are of her efforts to assure that I had the best opportunities available and that I took advantage of them.

My first eight years of life were in Vernon. My own memories of those years are rather limited but deeply engraved in my life's quest to excel. The town had about five thousand inhabitants in the 1920s, but because it was the county seat, the population swelled on Saturdays as Wilbarger County farmers came in to buy the goods and services they needed. Stores and banks lined the courthouse square, and the town had a well-developed school system where my mother taught second grade. We lived in a neat, one-story white house with a green manicured lawn and colorful flowers tended lovingly by my mother, with weekend help from Dad. Our yard regularly won awards as the "most beautiful" in Vernon. In these years, we even enjoyed the luxury of a family vacation, once driving all the way through Houston to the Gulf of Mexico at Galveston.

My dad bought cotton from farmers in West Texas and Oklahoma. In those days, cotton was king in Texas, just as timber had been—and oil would become—a dominant commodity that shaped the state economy. Cotton, which remained labor intensive until the coming of mechanized harvesting after the 1930s, was the central economic pursuit of hundreds of thousands of farmers in the region who grew, picked, and sold it as their cash crop. My dad and hundreds of men like him played a central role in connecting the regional cotton farmers with broader markets. The cotton they bought was shipped down through the Port of Houston to customers all over the world. In the process, cotton prices, crops, and markets influenced positively—or negatively—the health of diverse enterprises, from retailing to real estate, throughout Texas.

My dad's job required him to drive a lot, so his company supplied him with a shiny new Chevrolet each year. The car my parents owned was a plain black Model T Ford sedan, just like most of the cars on Vernon's uncrowded streets. My father, who had worked hard to secure a place for his family off

the farm and in the middle class, must have felt justifiable pride in himself, and the new shiny company car no doubt was a symbol of his success.

★ THE GREAT DEPRESSION

After I turned seven, I knew something was happening that worried my parents frightfully. My mother no longer taught school; my father no longer bought cotton or went on long business trips. One day, he drove his shiny new Chevrolet to company headquarters in Houston, left it there, and returned to Vernon on a Greyhound bus. The company he worked for had—like so many—gone out of business, and my father no longer had a job. The Crash and the Great Depression that followed put 20 percent of this nation's able-bodied men out of work. They could find no jobs, and their families suffered accordingly.

The price of cotton dropped from twenty-nine cents a pound to six cents a pound in an eighteen-month period from 1932 through mid-1933, which was catastrophic for the Texas economy. The Port of Houston had been exporting from one million to more than two million bales of cotton each year through 1935, and this export volume plunged by more than half by 1940.³ Such a destructive blow to the state's major industry fed a downward spiral in the economy as a whole. Retail stores in San Antonio went out of business, real estate values in Dallas plunged, and so it was throughout Texas. Gloom and doom were everywhere as I grew up during the Great Depression.

My father believed that he really understood the cotton business, so after the Hyman Samuels Cotton Company closed and he lost his job, he collected what money our family could scrape together and invested all of it in the cotton futures market, betting cotton prices would rise. But the price of cotton continued to plummet. Worse yet, the bank in Vernon where my parents had their remaining savings went under. In the days before the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, a bank's failure would wipe out its depositors. It was the final blow for our family.

The financial cost was tragic, but the human cost was even worse. I have never forgotten the stark reality of what happened to my father, even to this day. I was not old enough to talk with him about his thoughts, but I think the spirit was taken out of him. Life was never quite the same for him. A muscular, handsome man, about six feet two and 210 pounds, he had developed the

quiet assurance of a self-made man. He lost that, along with his job, his savings, and his upward mobility at the onset of the Great Depression.

Yet choices still had to be made; lives had to go on. Like many other people who felt the sting of hard times, Mom and Dad turned to family for help. Fortunately, we had family members willing and able to provide assistance.

My father's youngest sister, Bess, enjoyed good fortune despite the economic dislocations of the times. Her husband, O. K. Allen, had prospered, becoming wealthy finding and producing oil near Winnfield, Louisiana. In 1918, Uncle Oscar served as the assessor for Winn Parish. There he met an ambitious young politician named Huey Long and joined a small group of local men who supported Long's initial campaign for public office, his successful run for a seat on the Railroad Commission of Louisiana.

Long's strong personality, oratorical skills, and driving energy impressed Uncle Oscar, who, according to my dad, responded to Long's urgent request for campaign funds with a meaningful five-hundred-dollar contribution—large in that era—that allowed Long to buy a Model A Ford and continue to travel from town to town speaking to voters. The early bond between the two men grew stronger. As Long ascended to the governorship of Louisiana in 1928, Uncle Oscar was elected to the state senate as part of the Long slate. Governor Long then appointed Uncle Oscar to the Louisiana Highway Commission, where he helped initiate and engineer a massive highway construction program that built new bridges and replaced many impassable dirt roads with concrete highways. “Long-Allen” signs throughout Louisiana identified and marked this new highway construction and helped solidify Long's political support.

When Long was elected to the United States Senate in 1932, Uncle Oscar also won a landslide victory for the governorship. As a Long loyalist, Governor Allen was expected to look after political affairs in Baton Rouge while Senator Long moved onto the national stage in Washington.⁴

Uncle Oscar and Aunt Bess thus had done quite well in Louisiana, financially and politically, while our part of the family experienced economic disaster in Texas. However, they remembered her big brother's care in the years after her father's death, and they stepped forward at a crucial time to repay this kindness.

My father left one morning from Vernon on a Greyhound bus headed to Baton Rouge to visit his sister. My mother told me that the purpose of the trip

was to ask Aunt Bess to lend him enough money to buy the now-abandoned 154-acre Love family farm near Paris. Mother explained to her young son that Dad did not have enough money left to pay the mortgage on our nice home in Vernon. The only thing left to do was to move to the family's old farm, which was for sale at the distressed price of twenty-eight hundred dollars.

My parents could not and did not try to shield me. We became a unit of three in dealing with the problems resulting from the nationwide economic collapse called the Great Depression. I matured rapidly, emotionally and mentally, if not physically. Thus, before I had turned eight, I had learned what seemed to me to be a fundamental truth: nothing in life is guaranteed. Devastating times can erupt suddenly and with scant advance warning, destroying the plans and dreams of even hardworking people. For me, the key lesson of the downward spiral that plunged the nation into the Great Depression was simple: economic insecurity was a fact of life.

Dad returned from Baton Rouge and told us that Uncle Oscar and Aunt Bess had agreed to buy the farm and allow us to live there. We would leave for Paris as soon as we could pack. Two days later, in the summer of 1932, we climbed into our tightly packed Model T and began our journey to a new life . . . slowly. Always a cautious driver, Dad began the long drive, ambling down the narrow highway at thirty miles per hour.

★ A CITY BOY MOVES TO THE COUNTRY

As we neared the farm, the concrete highway gave way to a dirt road marked by deep ruts. We were all excited, but my mother's excitement faded visibly when she looked beyond the two giant cedar trees, which had been there when my grandfather first arrived on the farm after the Civil War, and viewed the small, unpainted, dilapidated house surrounded by waist-high weeds and covered by a roof with visible holes and missing shingles. In fact, she began to cry. Maybe the contrast to the neat home she had loved and left in Vernon overwhelmed her.

My dad gazed silently at the rundown house and the nearby smokehouse that was falling down underneath a huge walnut tree. Sheets of galvanized metal were missing from the roof of the barn. The barnyard and pasture were empty because the farm had no cows, horses, or mules. The barren peach and pear orchard to the left of the house was overgrown with weeds. Everywhere were signs that the farm he had run as a young man had been deserted and

neglected. At every turn, we saw evidence of how quickly and thoroughly nature can reclaim an abandoned house in the country.

But my eight-year-old spirits were high! Upon seeing a yellow-breasted field lark fly by, I excitedly grabbed my Daisy air rifle, filled it with BB pellets, whistled to my collie Tip, and ran after the bird. The open spaces in this new world seemed to present unparalleled possibilities for a “city boy” like me.

★ A HARD LIFE ON THE FARM

It quickly became clear just how much our life had changed. In Vernon, the three essentials—food, clothing, and shelter—had been so readily available that we took them for granted. When we moved to the farm, those three necessities seemed unattainable without monumental effort and extraordinary luck.

As for the first essential, the nearest grocery store was in Paris, six miles away. Mom and Dad had barely enough money to buy staples such as milk and flour and a little gasoline for the car. On our first day at the farm, Mother spotted a plot of ground near the old house that she suspected had once been a garden. She and Dad immediately cleared the weeds and brush from the plot and began to plant vegetables. Then Dad turned his energies to the peach and pear orchard while Mother wrote to the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A&M University) and asked for all of its publications about growing vegetables, melons, and fruits.

After the first year, we grew more vegetables and fruit than we could use, and so we congregated with other farm families on Saturdays at Market Square in Paris to sell our excess produce to the people living in town. But Great Depression hardships had also visited the shoppers. They were unrelenting in their quest for ever-lower prices, and the Market Square’s cash-strapped farmers became Saturday prey for townspeople who walked from wagon to wagon bargaining for cheaper prices. It became a “take it or leave it” process, very harsh and very serious. Yet Saturday’s struggles on Market Square provided an indispensable—albeit small—trickle of cash for us during the summers.

At other times, Mother bartered these crops for services like medical care from the kindhearted Dr. Goolsby and speech lessons for me from the ablest teacher in Paris, Miss Henrietta Bentley. My mother determined that speech lessons would help me overcome shyness, and whatever speaking ability I de-

veloped in life originated from her deal with Miss Bentley for my Saturday speech lessons during our first three years on the farm.

Mother also supplied most of the second essential, our clothing, with her vegetable money. She would buy bolts of material and make her dresses and most of my clothes on a Singer sewing machine she had brought from Vernon. So serious was my mother about my education that she insisted that I wear to Hopewell rural school clean starched shirts and short pants similar to those worn by students in the Highland Park classes she had taught in Dallas before her marriage. Though my fancy homemade outfits forced me to learn to stand up to schoolyard bullies clad in blue denim shirts and striped overalls, they were also part of Mother's larger plan to demonstrate that she had different ambitions for me than those of the other parents of farm boys who attended my two-room elementary school in Hopewell.

The third essential, shelter, was the most difficult to come by. My father soon found enough tin to repair the roof, but it seemed to leak more each time he patched it. When it rained hard, Mother put out empty syrup buckets to catch the water as it cascaded through our porous roof.

At first, we had a woodstove for cooking and heating; after two years we were able to buy a Florence-brand kerosene stove with far superior heat controls. Mother's baked goods began winning blue ribbons at the Lamar County Fair. But both stoves together could not keep our house warm during the frigid gales of a North Texas winter. It was not a question of insulation. The old house had none. It was a question of holes. The house had settled unevenly through the years, leaving gaps in the walls. The cold wind whistled in!

Like most farms in Texas, ours was without electricity in the early 1930s, so we did not have a radio or electric fans. Until President Roosevelt's Rural Electrification Administration extended service to the farm four years after we moved there, kerosene lamps provided our only light. Thus, from the fourth through the seventh grades, I studied after dark under their dim glow. For refrigeration, we relied on an uninsulated icebox. The twenty-five-pound block of ice delivered each week from Paris quickly melted in the summer heat.

Of course, there was no running water. Throughout my boyhood in Hopewell, our household water came from a cistern that was supplied entirely by rainwater that flowed into it through gutters off the roof of the house—that is, when we had rain. For hot water, we heated the cistern's cool

water in a bucket on top of the woodstove and then poured the warm water into a round metal washtub that served as our bathtub inside at night and as Mother's laundry tub outside during the day.

During our second summer on the farm, it did not rain for two or three months. Our cistern ran so low that the bucket went all the way to the bottom, then came up only half full with dirty brown water. It was obvious that the cistern had not been cleaned out for years and, with the water so low, Dad decided that now would be a good time to remedy that situation. We had no idea what else besides muddy water might be at the bottom of that pit. Even animals and snakes could have fallen in!

At nine years old and by far the smallest member of the family, I was the logical candidate to climb into the bucket and be lowered to the bottom to clean out the cistern. The job was vital to the family's well-being, and I took it on with a sense of adventure mingled with pride. How many other nine-year-old boys had been lowered into a deep, dark hole perhaps filled with dead animals—maybe even live snakes—and where the only light that entered its five-foot diameter came from an opening twenty-five feet above?

Using a short-handled hoe and a spade, I filled the bucket with mud and shouted for Dad to pull it up to the surface. He poured out the mud and lowered the bucket back down to me, where I waited to do the same thing again. I remember the feel of the soft, cool muddy ooze on my bare feet and the strange echo in the bottom of the cistern as I yelled up to Mother and Dad.

When Dad pulled up the first bucket, I made the mistake of looking up and got a face full of slimy mud. Time and again, I was drenched by mud as my father pulled up bucket after bucket of slime from the bottom of the cistern.

At lunchtime I rode up in the bucket and emerged blinking in the bright sunlight, covered with mud from head to toe. Mother and Dad, who seemed not to recognize me for a moment, used a little of their precious clean water to wash off a bit of the mud before feeding me lunch topped off by my favorite dessert, brown caramel pie.

We finally finished late that afternoon. I was so tired I could barely stand, but the floor of the cistern was clean. If dead rats or cats had been there, I had shoveled them into the buckets with everything else. I felt wonderful. I had helped my dad do a job he could not do by himself. That was the first day of my life that I had performed sustained adult labor, and I felt the sense of achievement that comes from a hard day's work well done.

Even the best efforts of our three-member family could not, however, fix the many problems with our dilapidated house. During our third summer on the farm, my parents decided to find some way to build a new house, and again they turned to Aunt Bess and Uncle Oscar. Dad hoped to persuade them to lend us eight hundred dollars. Dressed in his best clothes, Dad drove our Model T Ford to Paris and boarded the Greyhound bus for the governor's mansion in Baton Rouge. In her customarily thorough manner, Mother had already solicited estimates from out-of-work carpenters who almost begged to be given the job. Grown men working as day laborers were happy to be paid a dollar a day—plus lunch—for toiling from sunup to sundown.

Because we had no telephone and telegrams were not delivered from Paris to our farm, we had to wait five long days to learn our fate. Finally, Dad stepped off the bus from Baton Rouge with a smile on his face and a bounce in his step. He also wore an expensive, handsome suit, compliments of Uncle Oscar, who had handed down some of his old suits. Dad happily gave Mother a check for eight hundred dollars. Thanks to the help of family, a new house was no longer just a dream.

Soon our sparkling new four-room, square home arose on the exact spot behind the two tall cedar trees where my grandfather had built his original farmhouse after the Civil War. My parents and I had shared the only bedroom in the old house; now I had my own room. The new house also had a bedroom for my parents, a kitchen with a small dining table attached to one wall, and a living room dominated by the Victrola we had brought from Vernon. Its cabinet was filled with nothing but Mother's precious opera records that featured such soloists as Lily Pons, Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink, and Enrico Caruso.

The glory of the house was its newness. It even smelled new. The paint was clean and fresh. Mother papered the living room and their bedroom with cheerful flowers; she papered mine with rich brown and orange stripes. The colors contrasted starkly with the drabness of our previous surroundings. All three of us were elated. Since the 1930s, I have moved into several homes, including my current home in the upscale River Oaks section of Houston, but none has ever filled me with the same excitement as that new four-room square home in Hopewell.

As we struggled to secure food, clothing, and shelter, my father worked hard to grow cotton on much of our 154-acre farm. With only two mules and little equipment, this was a big job. I helped with the work, especially when it

came time to pick the cotton. We also had the help of a hired hand named Charley Harris, who earned a dollar a day by assisting with the planting and harvesting of the crop. Itinerants, who picked most of the crop, were paid a set rate per hundred pounds of cotton picked. Our farm was by no means the smallest in the region; our hard work was by no means uncommon. People throughout Lamar County, Texas, and the South as a whole, struggled mightily to make money by raising cotton during the Great Depression. Before mechanization revolutionized cotton farming, this was literally a hard row to hoe. My father's days behind our mules were far more physically demanding than his earlier days behind the wheel of his company car. Indeed, our new life on the farm demanded adjustments from the entire Love family.

★ EDUCATION: THE TOP PRIORITY

Our move to Paris did not change Mother's primary focus—assuring that I had the best education possible under the circumstances in which we lived. Given her own background, she knew firsthand that a good education could broaden my horizons as well as my choices in life. Above all else, she believed that my escape from the poverty of the Great Depression depended on the quality of my education. She played an active role in finding the best available options for me in Hopewell and in Paris, but her “tough love” creed made it implicit that it was *my* job to study and be fully responsible for my results.

The fall after arriving on the farm, I entered the fourth grade at the Hopewell School. Each school day, I walked about a mile from our farm down a dirt road to the two-room structure. In one room, one teacher instructed about twenty students in the first through the fourth grades; in the other room, the principal taught twenty or so students in grades five through nine. No one expected a Hopewell farm child to “waste time” going to school beyond the ninth grade. After all, an education did not teach boys how to farm or girls how to keep house. The boys also reasoned that school was for children; freed from its demands, they could be doing “man's work,” helping their fathers plow the fields.

My mother had different plans for me. Her passion proved to be contagious: early on I began to see myself as different. One day the principal asked each boy what he aspired to do when he grew up. The answers were all the same: “I hope to be a farmer like my old man.” When it came my turn, I an-

swered rather shyly that I wanted to be an inventor. At that, the class bully whirled around in a flash and snarled at me, “An inventor! I can eat anything you’ll ever invent.” At first, I was terribly embarrassed, but later I wondered if my classmate was scared of the world, scared to try anything new or different, and was trying to scare me so that I would be afraid to try to improve my future, too. Even as a nine-year-old new boy in school, I had begun to share Mother’s belief that I was destined for a future that would take me far beyond Hopewell.

During my fourth and fifth grade years at Hopewell, I learned—often the hard way—about ignorance and bullies and limited horizons. However, my mother, with her motivating encouragement, planted the seeds of ambition in me. The desire to achieve more helped me overcome two trying years as the tall, skinny new boy from the city in a country school full of farm children.

A trip to see my relatives in Louisiana during my tenth summer encouraged those seeds to take root and grow. After two years of adjusting to the hard life on the farm, I received a letter from Aunt Bess in Baton Rouge inviting me to spend a week with my cousin Asa Benton Allen, who was then nine. The contrast between the luxury of the governor’s mansion and our situation in Hopewell drove home to me the importance of education in expanding my options in life.

Uncle Oscar and Aunt Bess sent their chauffeur to Hopewell to pick me up in their personal Pierce-Arrow touring sedan. When that long, black, shiny, expensive car rolled into the farm’s dusty driveway, I was so overwhelmed that I experienced severe qualms about climbing in and leaving my family behind. I had never before been outside of Texas. My rather solitary life on the farm had made me self-sufficient, but I now feared that I did not have the clothes and social graces required to mix with my cousin and his friends.

Would my meager knowledge of the world embarrass everyone if my aunt or uncle asked me a question? I knew how to pick cotton, clean a cistern, milk a cow—but I also knew the deep humiliation of being poor. Above all else, I knew that my life-on-the-farm experiences had not equipped me to feel at ease and confident with those I would doubtless meet in the Louisiana governor’s mansion.

As my dad stowed his battered suitcase filled with my freshly washed clothes in the limousine’s vast trunk, I thought I noted mist in his eyes, but before I had time to look again, we were off and I was absorbed in the ad-

venture of a long car trip over unfamiliar terrain. I learned that the friendly chauffeur, Jim, was a Louisiana state trooper assigned to drive for the governor's family. As we crossed the Texas-Louisiana border, we were met by two uniformed motorcycle police officers who escorted us all the way to Baton Rouge, sounding their sirens whenever traffic slowed our speeding sedan.

In about two hours we arrived at the large, beautiful mansion, guarded by white columns and surrounded by an acre of manicured green grass and colorful flowers. Armed guards admitted us through the gates. We parked in a basement garage and took an elevator up to the living quarters. My bedroom was enormous; it seemed almost as big as our entire four-room farmhouse. I had never seen a room so white. The lace curtains were white; the carpet, which sank like quicksand beneath my feet, also was white; the bedspreads were white and looked luxuriously expensive. Bouquets of fresh flowers brightened the room, as did two colorful sofas and the scattering of plush upholstered chairs. If my room could be this grand, I wondered what the remainder of the mansion must be like.

As a pleasant young maid named Mary unpacked my suitcase, Aunt Bess burst into the room and hugged me hard, making me feel welcome. After talking briefly about my parents, she excused herself and said she would see me that night at dinner. My cousin Asa soon arrived and told me about movies we could see, horses we could ride, and places we could go.

He mentioned that Mary would be back soon to bathe us before dinner, then continued: "Pop always wants all of us to be seated in the dining room when he arrives. He is constantly rushing around, but at dinner each night the family gets together and it is usually fun unless Huey Long phones from Washington." Well, I had a hard time listening to what he said after the words, "Mary will bathe us." I could not imagine being bathed by the maid! I had bathed myself even before we left Vernon for the farm. I shuddered, a sense of growing apprehension fed by my customary modesty and shyness. Yet, I feared that if I protested too vigorously, I might appear ignorant if being bathed by a maid was the custom for boys my age in a governor's mansion.

Before I could decide how to resist, however, Mary admonished us both to hurry and prepare for our baths so she would not be blamed if we were late for dinner. The next thing I knew, Mary had Asa and me in a battleship-sized bathtub, scrubbing our backs. Asa laughed at my red face and totally delighted in my discomfort. He seemed to enjoy introducing me to an affluent

life where maids cleaned your room, others laundered your clothes, someone named Mary bathed and helped dress you, chefs cooked your food and butlers served it, secret service and militiamen guarded you, and chauffeurs drove—all in stark contrast to the self-sufficiency of my life on the farm.

Dinner was another adventure. A huge chandelier hung over a long dining table filled with beautiful place settings on a white linen cloth. Mother's careful coaching on table manners was quickly replaced by sheer panic. I forgot everything. I feared that I would be exposed as a country bumpkin, and I deeply yearned to open the door and run back to the farm.

During the next seven days, I witnessed how people lived when their decisions and actions were not controlled by poverty. I observed how the ultimate power—political power—affected millions of people, including those who wielded it. This was my first exposure to substantial wealth and to a family that was simultaneously revered and feared because of its political power. Every day brought new revelations of how the other half lived, and I gradually relaxed.

On one particularly memorable day, while Asa was taking his riding lessons, I explored the mansion and wandered into the huge pantry quarters. The butler welcomed me and offered me a Coca-Cola. I thought he was offering to drive me to a store, because I had never seen Coca-Cola anywhere except in a grocery store. I thought such a trip would be fun, but I worried about the cost. My mother had given me three nickels to spend on the trip, and if I bought a Coca-Cola for a nickel, I would have only ten cents left. As I pondered my dilemma, the butler opened a refrigerator that held more Coca-Colas than I had ever seen—even in a grocery store! I was dumbfounded. I tried to decide what to do. Perhaps the butler was selling the drinks as a sideline to supplement his income. If so, I was certain they must be really high priced, perhaps even beyond my fifteen cents. Unable to sort out such possibilities, I awkwardly declined, excused myself, and retreated to my room to think through the situation alone.

The next afternoon I walked back down to the kitchen area and opened the door that led to the butler's quarters. To my discomfort, he was there, and he again offered me a Coca-Cola. Before I could decline, he took one out, popped off the cap, and thrust the frigid bottle into my hand. Red-faced with confusion and consternation, and intent on not appearing to be a beggar, I looked up before I took a sip and asked how much I owed him. He answered that I owed him nothing and that I could have another cold drink any time

I wanted one. I knew that I must have missed something. Did he see me as a poor relative, unable to pay? My fierce pride overcame even my desire to preserve the three nickels in my pocket. I knew the price of a Coca-Cola, even though I had bought only three or four in my life, and I pulled a nickel from my pocket, handed it to the butler, and thanked him for the drink. He thanked me in a friendly but confused tone, and I realized I had much to learn about manners and money.

That week in Baton Rouge gave me my first glimpse of a totally different world from that I had known and to which—like Cinderella—I would return in seven days. What I saw in the governor’s mansion was not a fairy tale. These were real people, my three cousins, my aunt, and my uncle. Mother had always impressed on me the value of making excellent grades, but the rewards for doing so had never been clear in my mind. Now they were. For the first time in my life, I had seen with my own eyes a world free from the insecurity and limitations that defined my world. During those seven days, I was never more certain of my shortcomings, but I returned home more determined to amend those shortcomings and make something of myself.

★ “MAKE YOUR WORD AS GOOD AS A GOVERNMENT BOND”

Before I entered the sixth grade, my mother made a move that dramatically changed my education and my life. Deciding that I was not receiving an adequate education at the Hopewell school, she engineered my transfer into the much larger and better school district in Paris.

Her first hurdle was convincing school officials that I could do the work at West Paris Elementary School. She drove the Model T to the school, which was six miles from our farm, and spent the day lobbying the principal and two of the sixth grade teachers. The principal sympathized with my mother, but the teachers raised numerous objections. They reminded Mother that she would have to pay fifteen dollars per semester tuition because I would be coming from another school district. They also warned her that I would probably be moved back a grade as no Hopewell student could hope to do grade-equivalent work at their elementary school. But Mother persisted, pointing out that, as a former teacher, she was certain that I would make top grades at West Paris Elementary. She won her argument, and several weeks later we received a letter informing us that I could attend the school in the fall.

That was half the battle. Now we had to find a way for me to make the

twelve-mile round trip each day. I had walked to school in Hopewell, but Paris was simply too far away, especially in the winter when frequent storms plagued the region. We could not afford the gasoline to make the trip by car, and often the dirt roads between the farm and the school became so muddy that our Model T would get stuck anyway. Mother's solution was simple. She sold her engagement ring for fifty dollars, and Dad scouted the area for a dependable horse. He finally found a wholesale grocer in Paris willing to sell a red pony named Billy, complete with saddle and reins, for fifty dollars.

I rode Billy home that day, trailing behind our slow Model T in a long trip back to the farm. After some initial concerns about Billy's health, we determined that we could count on him. We were right. He reliably got me to school and back for the next two years. We were not always on time when it was sleeting or snowing hard, but my teachers considered the fact that I was doing my best, both on the road and in the classroom.

Our routine was always the same. I awoke at six o'clock, dressed, and ate a breakfast of scrambled eggs, ham or bacon, and biscuits. As I ate, Dad fed and saddled Billy. Then I gathered my books from underneath the Aladdin kerosene lamp on the table where I had studied the night before, put them in a canvas bag, and hurried to the barn. Mother walked with me, carrying my lunchbox in one hand and my thermos in the other. Dad put my books into one saddlebag and my lunch into the other, opened the barn gate to the pasture leading to the dirt road, and off Billy and I would go. The pleasant interlude of this morning ritual fortified me as I headed off to school. Looking back, I understand more clearly the love and encouragement embodied in my parents' concern for me each morning.

The six-mile ride also quickly became a routine. Billy and I passed out of our pasture, through a gap to Tigertown Road, across the Pine Creek Bridge, and to the edge of West Paris. From there, I led him to a small barn within walking distance of the school, where I unsaddled him and gave him water and hay. After school, we reversed the trip, often returning home near dusk.

However, this routine proved anything but routine when the weather turned cold or rainy or both. In 1936, the coldest winter in years blew through North Texas, blanketing the fields with snow and ice, but West Paris Elementary School was open every day, blizzard or no blizzard. Those who lived in the city had little trouble getting to school, but the roads to and from our house were terrible. When Dad protested that it was too cold for me to ride

Billy, Mother countered that she would wrap me with enough layers of clothes so that I would not freeze. When she took such a firm stand, Dad always complied.

And so, all through the winter of 1936, Billy and I regularly faced cold rain, sleet, and snow driven by howling winds throughout our daily twelve-mile round-trip trek. The sleet cut into my bare cheeks, and poor Billy walked with his head lowered close to the frozen, rutted dirt road. His hoofs often slipped on the glass-like surface, but he never fell. Such trips took much longer than usual, but my teachers did not scold me for being late; in fact, on many frigid mornings they seemed surprised when I appeared at all.

Billy and I also survived the Great Flood of 1937. After four days and nights of rain, the shallow creek in our pasture roared out of its banks like Niagara Falls, but even “Niagara Falls” did not prevent West Paris Elementary School from opening on Monday. As before, there was no doubt about whether I would ride Billy to school. If school was open, I would be there. Our major obstacle was the Pine Creek Bridge. The storm had swelled the creek so much that the bridge’s wooden plank roadbed was completely submerged. Billy and I edged warily forward. As we advanced, the water churned up above Billy’s belly, threatening to push us against the bridge’s steel guardrail or, worse, over the rail into the swirling creek. Turning back was no option, so we moved forward, one step at a time, with no alternative but to make it over the bridge. We made it! And when Billy’s hoofs finally hit land, we both shuddered in joyful relief.

My grades continued to be straight As, which pleased Mother and me. I guess my teachers were pleased, too, because near the end of my sixth grade year the principal called me into his office and told me that he and the West Paris teachers had chosen me to be president of the seventh grade class when school convened in the fall. I certainly had not anticipated such an honor!

The climax of graduation week at West Paris Elementary was the seventh grade play. Each year the class president was assigned the lead role. And each year parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and classmates packed the spacious West Paris Auditorium for the major school event of the year.

My class chose to perform *The Stirring Life of William Penn*. We rehearsed for weeks. Nearly everyone in the seventh grade had a part, but the action revolved around William Penn (me), so I memorized not only my own lines,

but the lines of everyone else. As the lead, I felt responsible for the play's success, and my classmates and teachers seemed happy that I accepted this responsibility.

The play was to be performed on the final Saturday night before graduation. On Friday, about midnight, a gentle rain began to fall. On Saturday morning, the heavens opened and unleashed a deluge that seemed intent on drowning everything on earth! By Saturday noon, Dad told Mother that the Tigertown Road was impassable for the six-mile trip into town. Our alternative was an eight-mile drive on the asphalt Sumner Road, but we lived two miles from the Sumner Road, and the flood had made the dirt road leading to it as impossible to drive as the Tigertown Road. However, two miles of mud was shorter than six miles of mud, so the choice was clear.

Now, Dad was born before the automobile was invented. He grew up with the automobile. Always visibly muscular and effortlessly coordinated, Dad could drive his old Model T through Hopewell's deep ruts and mud as smoothly as a golf pro could swing his two-iron on St. Andrew's windswept Old Course. But despite his experience, skill, and confidence, he told Mother at 5:00 P.M., two and one-half hours before curtain time, that even the two-mile dirt road to Sumner Road was impassable. He felt sure the play would be rescheduled due to the drenching rain. And he began to take off his gray tweed suit.

Mother became very, very quiet. I learned early in life that, when Mother became noticeably silent, there was much truth to the saying, "the quiet before the storm." Suddenly, she turned to Dad and declared, "Those people in Paris drive on concrete streets, Benton. They don't even know it is raining. The play will go on as planned, and it is our responsibility to get our son there. Everyone is depending on him. Our family's honor is at stake! We gave our word to Mr. O'Brien that he could depend on us, and our word must be as good as a government bond!"

Well, Dad knew the decision had been made. I had to be at the West Paris Auditorium before 7:30, and he had to get me there. He donned his old work clothes. Resigned, he told Mother that he would hitch Rough and Rowdy (our two mules) to the wagon, then chain our Model T to the wagon and try to pull the car the two miles through the mud to Sumner Road. Mother and I climbed into the Model T; Dad sat in the wagon, drenched to the skin, his prematurely gray hair limply hanging over his forehead. And slowly, our

wagon-car procession began to move. I have always wondered what he was thinking at that moment as he held Rough and Rowdy firmly with the reins.

We arrived at Sumner Road at 7:00 P.M., just thirty minutes before curtain time. All three of us knew the teachers must be wild with anxiety about whether we would be there by 7:30—or at all. Dad quickly pulled the chain from the car; Mother roared off toward school at thirty-five miles per hour, determined to get me there in time. Out of the rear window, I saw Dad standing in the rain waving to us.

When we arrived and breathlessly rushed in, at about 7:28, Mr. O'Brien hugged us both. I had never seen him emotional before. But that stormy night, he was emotional as he said, "I announced to the audience a moment ago that this terrible storm might delay you, but that I was sure you would arrive because you were dependable people." But the audience never knew about the family drama, starring my determined mother and my compliant father, that was still unfolding a scant two minutes before the first curtain went up.⁵

Throughout my childhood, Mother repeated the standard of honor, character, and responsible behavior she had learned from her father, William Scott. That standard was encapsulated in a single sentence, oft repeated: "Make your word as good as a government bond." For the rest of my life, this single experience of defying the weather and getting to the play on time influenced my actions, my acceptance of duty, and my determination to follow my Mother's and Dad's example by making my word "as good as a government bond."



LEARNING THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP AT PARIS HIGH SCHOOL

After seventh grade, I moved up to Paris High School, a change that required numerous adjustments. The high school was in downtown Paris and could not be reached by a quiet side street suitable for riding Billy. Nor was there a barn nearby. My transportation to school again became Mother's problem, and she attacked it with her characteristic blend of determination and activism. She learned that Texas law required Lamar County to run a school bus to surrounding rural areas that were without a four-year high school if a minimum of forty parents in those areas signed a petition demanding bus service

to the “consolidated” high school (in Paris). Facing skepticism from many of the parents in Hopewell, she nonetheless set about the task of collecting signatures within that ten-mile radius. Driving from farm to farm at night after the chores were done, she finally convinced forty farmers to sign her petition. Her progressive action and her courage in the face of sometimes nasty opposition provided high school educations for many who otherwise would have been denied the opportunity.

In the fall of 1937, I began a new daily routine. Now instead of the six-mile horseback ride to school, I walked two miles to the store that served as the school bus stop en route to Paris High School. However, my school days remained much the same: I was on a mission to prove that I belonged, to justify my mother’s confidence in me. Excellent grades continued to be the measure of my progress. I made a determined and successful effort to earn high marks as a symbol of my transition to high school and continuing quest for an education.

There were personal adjustments as well. PHS had about eleven hundred students, and I was not accustomed to so many people. Living isolated on the farm, I knew relatively few other students, and my natural reserve and shyness prevented me from making friends easily. I remained focused in the class, and at noon I would return to the school bus to eat the sandwiches Mother had prepared for my lunch.

In my sophomore year, I began to gain more confidence and standing with my classmates, in large part through participating in debate. The speech lessons my mother had bartered vegetables for with Miss Henrietta Bentley provided me with a foundation, but a redheaded history teacher named Katie Feeser steered me toward the debate contests that gave me the forum to improve my public speaking.

I discovered an aptitude and a passion for debate. My partner Sam McClure and I traveled as far as Dallas, Waco, and Tyler to tournaments where we more than held our own against teams from larger schools that boasted more highly developed debate programs. As we won debates, I lost some of my shyness and began to work harder to get to know my classmates. To my surprise, I was elected vice president of the PHS sophomore class. That was quite something for a boy who rode a bus to school each day and could not, therefore, participate in the town’s teenage social events.

In my junior year, I devoted myself to study and debate, and Sam and I won most of our matches against other schools. One day, after hearing me

speak to the local Rotary Club, the manager of the Paris radio station asked me to try out as an announcer. I passed the test and worked four hours a day that summer as an announcer at Paris's only radio station, KPLT ("Keep Paris Leading Texas"). Despite all this, and the fact that my grade average improved to more than ninety-seven, I was not elected an officer of my junior class. This disappointment caused me to pause and wonder if I had concentrated on grades and debate so much that I had forgotten to pay attention to the other kids. Looking back on this episode, I realize that I was already beginning to form attitudes about the basic principles of leadership. High school obviously is different from later life, but not totally so. You still have to care sincerely about those around you and pay attention to them. You must be cheerful when you say hello and call people by name, but you also have to excel at something so that people look at you and say "he can really do that well." Otherwise, you are nothing more than a backslapper and glad-hander. I started to understand this facet of leadership after my junior year, and I was quite pleased that at the end of my senior year my class of 319 students elected me its "permanent president."

My senior year was a blur of activities. With a 97.3 average, I ranked seventh in my class. Sam and I won every major debate tournament before the district meet, including a major tournament in North Dallas. There, in the finals judged by three men from Dallas, we defeated the eventual state champions in their home auditorium. At the end of the year, the faculty chose me as the "Best All-Around Boy," which was considered the school's highest honor. This award confirmed that I had experienced a successful senior year, one that filled Mother and Dad with pride and bolstered me with new confidence in myself. And I needed confidence, because we continued to struggle with financial limitations so severe that they called into question whether I could attend college.

Pride and confidence would not pay for college tuition. My radio announcing job and a sales job at Sears provided me with my first-ever spending money, but it was far short of the amount I needed for college. The valedictorian and salutatorian of PHS were assured two-year scholarships to Paris Junior College, but I did not rank first or second in my class. I realized that all of my hard work and awards would be small consolation if I could not attend college. Without more education, my career would probably be a full-time sales job at Sears. I placed my hopes on receiving a debate or academic scholarship, and Katie Feeser, my debate coach, and Charles "Preacher"

Dickey, my pastor at Central Presbyterian Church, took the initiative to seek a college scholarship for me. I had come to idolize Charles Dickey after attending his church for four years. In fact, I had confided to Mother, and later to Dr. Dickey, that I was considering departing from my long-held ambition of becoming a lawyer in order to become a Presbyterian minister.

On the final day of classes, Miss Feeser burst into my Latin class, unable to conceal her excitement. Proclaiming that “Dr. Dickey is on the phone, and he has some wonderful news,” she grabbed my arm and practically dragged me to the principal’s office. Dr. Dickey got straight to the point. He said: “Dr. Wear, the president of Trinity University, has just advised me that Trinity is offering you a debate scholarship, full tuition paid, and has an afternoon job arranged for you in Waxahachie’s large department store, Cheeves Brothers, that should pay enough to handle the cost of room and board.” To my embarrassment, tears started running down my cheeks. I was going to college! Through choked sobs, I mumbled, “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Dr. Dickey.”

NOTES

1. The city of Huntsville, Alabama, subsequently developed strong historical ties to Huntsville, Texas, a city about fifty miles north of Houston. The families of several prominent twentieth-century Houstonians, notably Gus Wortham and Judge James Elkins, had roots in Huntsville, Alabama, before migrating to Huntsville, Texas, and then on to Houston.

2. “Captain Henry Benton Love,” *Paris Morning News*, undated newspaper article.

3. Walter L. Buenger and Joseph A. Pratt, *But Also Good Business: Texas Commerce Banks and the Financing of Houston and Texas, 1886–1986* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 112.

4. T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

5. Ben F. Love, *Once Upon a Time . . . Memories of Life on the Farm*, Love archives, Houston. This is a series of anecdotes about the lessons learned while growing up on the farm, including the one entitled, “Make Your Word As Good As a Government Bond.” These stories were recounted in the 1950s by Ben F. Love to his children and then written down for the next generation. A number of these episodes are related in this chapter.