

# Pioneer Woman Fay Brooks Leonhard

By Sarah Williams

I may have waited too long to write the experiences of my Great-Great-Aunt Fay Brooks Leonhard. As COVID 19 has presented many challenges, nursing home visitors have been limited, and it has been hard on Aunt Fay's memory. Fortunately, Aunt Fay was able to take a family home visit where we were enlightened on her early days growing up in Jones Valley, known as the Rattler Community, on the edge of Mills County.

Fay (Brooks) Leonhard was born March 3, 1929, the second child of George and Virgie Brooks. Aunt Fay's parents moved to Mills County when her father sold his half of a service station in Buffalo Gap, Texas. Aunt Fay's older brother, Horace, my great-grandfather, was the only child at that time and Sydney wasn't born until after the move.

They moved on 375 acres of land in the North Bennett Community northeast of Goldthwaite around 1926. The homestead had an old one-room dirt floor with a fireplace where they grew small grains and cotton for prosperity.

The Great Depression in 1929 caused Aunt Fay's parents to lose their land. They moved to Jones Valley in December 1931 on their land near the Colorado River. Her father traded for some land in Jones Valley (Rattler) with E.B. Anderson for \$150 for 150 acres with 36 annual payments having their first payment due in November of 1932. During the move, my aunt remembers getting motion sickness on the move from North Bennett to Jones Valley in the "Texaco" truck. Horace being the oldest, rode on the roof of the truck on a mattress. The move took two days because they had to go back to North Bennett to move the steel-wheeled tractor and the animals. My great-grandfather told Fay their parents put everything they owned in the truck making me envision the TV show "The Beverly Hillbillies."

After the move, they grew maize, cotton and corn, which they sold to the general store or traded with the neighbors to make a living. This community which consisted of the Berrys, Hales, Wilcoxes, and the Renfros all helped each other out.

Aunt Fay said that growing up near Renfro Dam as a kid was a wonderful place to play. The rock floor below the dam was the best because it usually was only a few inches deep. The river was the life of the Rattler community. It supplied entertainment for the children, water for the crops, and water to the families' homes. Aside from the river, the Brooks had a hand-dug well which supplied their small home water. Later in 1934 they purchased a windmill for \$5 and was delivered to their farm by wagon.



Fay Brooks Leonhard with her great-grand-niece Sarah Williams.

Now that they had a fully-functioning farm, the entire family had to share the chores and farm duties. Virgie, Fay's mom, prepared game and canned goods daily for food. Occasionally in the summertime, she might get a block of ice so they could have hand-churned ice cream.

Life was established and good until 1936 when "The Great Flood" came to Mills County. The Colorado River had flooded before, but never like this flood. It was Horace's birthday, and the water came so quickly that before the family knew it, the water was lapping the porch and the barns were floating away. George, Fay's dad, put the family in a flat-bottom boat, took them to higher ground and then told them to continue alone to the Hale's place. Funny enough, during the whole fiasco, Virgie was carrying Horace's birthday cake.

Meanwhile, George returned to the property to save what animals and supplies that he could, then to help his neighbors. Eventually the water rose to five feet in their home. The round oak dining table was floating in the house with a kerosene lamp sliding back and forth. The only reason the house remained was because it was tied to rocks.

Long afterwards, Mr. Anderson came for the land payment, but Aunt Fay said, "He was a Christian man, and he forgave that year's payment."

As a result of the flooding, George decided to move their house to higher elevation in case of another "once in 100-year flood." The neighbors and George placed their home on logs and rolled it to the upper part of their place, forgetting God has a sense of humor. This "once in 100-years floor" happened again in 1938. This time, the flood brought the water chest high in their new location, and the community families had to be relocated into the Rattler one-room schoolhouse until the families could return to their homes.

Surviving the challenges of the flood, in 1938 the Brooks' raised peanuts until the mid 1960s. The adventure of farming peanuts was slow but rewarding. Before long they were able to buy their first kerosene refrigerator from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. The Rattler community flourished and the school along with it. The Wilcox, Hale, Berry, Bell, and Smith kids all filled the community with hard work and laughter. Aunt Fay stated, "Life was tough, but they were happy until Horace had to go to war."

"Life went on," Aunt Fay said, and so sometime in the 1970s, her father took ill, and they moved to Goldthwaite. Sydney bought the Rattler farm and after his death it was sold to the Rainbolt family from Mullin, Texas.

As I listened to her tell the story, it felt surreal, but I felt her emotions, passions, truths, and her losses. It is amazing what she has seen in her life from wagon times to people going to the moon, to cell phones.

Aunt Fay deserves a "Big Thank You" for being a strong pioneer woman who embodies the reason why Mills County is a great county to live in.