

The Willow Tree

By *Lacey
Wynes*

When I was young, we moved around a lot. It was just a fact of life. I was too young to understand that we were migrant farm workers, following the work related to produce grown in California's Central, San Joaquin, and Sacramento Valleys. I rarely had the chance to make a friend or finish more than one school year in the same place. I had to rely on myself and my siblings for comfort and entertainment.

My father comes from a long line of dairy farmers. He grew up working hard on his father's farm, and as soon as he was old enough to drive, he would deliver milk into town for the family dairy. He was one of fourteen kids and situated in the middle of the brood. My father was skilled in fixing anything with an engine. This afforded him the ability to often land a job located at or near where my father would work as the foreman, mechanic, or both, for whoever owned the farm.

One summer I remember with fondness. I was a young child, around five or six.

I was so excited—a new place to explore! We had been in the car for what seemed like forever. My legs were starting to sweat, causing me to slip and slide against the vinyl seats of the station wagon. The squeaky sound my sweaty legs made against the hot vinyl was not enough to distract me from my excitement. My sister Sara, two years younger and my constant companion, and I excitedly watched as the road started to widen, and a little white cottage came into view. The road continued past the house back into the orchard, but my dad stopped the car in front of that little white house. Sara and I leapt out of the car as soon as it came to a stop, running toward the house facing us.

"Wait a minute and help your mother!" Dad yelled. Oh man! I knew he meant me and Sara, but somehow it always ended up being me who had to help with the younger children. At the time, I didn't make a stink about it; the sooner I helped the sooner I would be able to explore. I turned around and assisted Gracie, my other sister who was four years younger than myself, so my mother could get my baby brother from the car seat. Now we could explore this new place, an old cottage, with big windows, and a four-foot-deep front porch that extended across the entire width of the house. We ran up the steps onto the porch and pushed open the wood-paneled front door.

Sara and I entered directly into the living area, open to the kitchen on the left side. The dark brown wood floors contrasted with the white paint that covered the walls and the old woodwork so typical of late 1890s-style farm cottages.

We ran from there to the two bedrooms, which were situated at the back of the open space, opening

closets and peering out the windows. Between the two bedrooms was a small bathroom with an old cast-iron clawfoot tub and a pedestal sink.

"Wow!" we exclaimed at the same time, "Fancy!" We circled back into the main living space.

There was not a stick of furniture to be found, and we had not brought any with us. Hitched to the station wagon was an old camping trailer, which would serve as our bedroom during our seasonal stay here.

"Come over here girls, and give me a hand," Dad motioned to us. "See those cinder blocks there? Drag 'em over to me."

Now my sister and I were maybe all of fifty or sixty pounds wringing wet, and we had no idea how

heavy those cinder blocks would be to us, but we soon found out.

"Ugh!" I exclaimed, "These are sooooo heavy!" I realized I should set the block down fast, otherwise I might lose my grip and drop it on my foot.

"Here," Sara came over to help. We worked together to drag and push the blocks across the room. Well, we pushed only two of them. Dad picked up the rest and started to arrange them while we pushed our selected cargo across the room. I don't know how we didn't scratch up the floor; maybe we did, and we didn't notice it at the time. Dad spaced out the blocks into four pillars, stacking them up until they were about as high as our chests. Then he did something that astonished us. There was a huge door, leaning against the wall. *How did we not see it before when we were whirling around and exploring the house?* It was the front door to the house! He must have taken it off the hinges while we were exploring.

Dad picked up that huge door like it was a big piece of paper and plopped it right down on the cinder blocks.

"There you go!" he stepped back, rather pleased with himself, "Your table for dinner."

We dined at that table all summer, standing to eat, my mother and father sitting on the floor. It was new and different, like camping but not. I don't recall my mother bringing dishes or pots and pans. But she must have because I recall standing on a makeshift stool of cinder blocks and wooden planks to reach the sink and wash the dishes with my sister after dinnertime in the evenings.

I was looking forward to the first night, because as the eldest, I had the privilege of sleeping in the old army cot that fit securely into the space above the camping trailer's dining table, becoming a sleeping bunk. My sisters were also excited to be sleeping in the trailer. We watched in wonder as my father demonstrated how the table would detach from the wall, and then slip snugly between the two bench seats. Presto chango! A bed for my sisters where there was once a dining space. Even though the trailer was very small, only about fifteen feet long, a dedicated space for a double bed was at the opposite end of the trailer, where the roof eventually sloped to meet the floor. My parents took that spot, while my baby

brother's bed was in the sink.

The first night sleeping in a new place is always exciting, so I lay in my cot bunk, listening to the sounds of the owls and crickets and tossing and turning, until eventually I fell asleep.

The trailer was parked directly across from the front door opening to the house. The house had running hot and cold water, a functioning kitchen and bathroom, and electricity. Sleeping in the camping trailer and using the house for everything else was something new, but that was also part of the adventure. I can only guess it was because we brought no furniture with us; I never questioned it until now.

The front door to the house was never put back on the hinges. We never had a need. I guess my dad thought we were safe because he was the boss of that farm for the season, and no one would dare mess with him or his family. There was not a screen door that I can remember. We were outside most of the day. Bugs were a part of life and not an issue. I don't remember mosquitoes, but they had to be a part of our evenings. We just didn't take any notice.

The summer was like any other in central California. Cool mornings greeted us as we explored the orchards and the fields in our bare feet. Shoes were for school and church days; otherwise, we had no use for them. We never ventured so far that we lost sight of the house. There were stacks of white boxes, beehives, on the dirt road that framed the straight, symmetrical rows of fruit trees. One day, the beehives were there, like magic! We were told to stay away from them, and we did. We had no intention of getting stung.

One morning we were eating our breakfast of Mom's homemade granola, and one of Dad's workers came to the door. I had seen him around now and then. He would go to the rickety wooden shop that was about fifty yards from the house with my dad to get tools or whatever else they did. My dad would tell him to get this or that, and he would. My dad must have trusted him because there were no other workers ever near the house. The worker had in his hand a wooden barrel. I had never seen a barrel like it. There were metal rings hugging the bottom and top of the barrel's wooden slats. He motioned to my mother to take it.





“Honey,” he said, “for *bambinos*.”

My mother smiled and pointed to the corner behind the door-table we were standing at. The man came into the house and placed the barrel in the corner right next to me.

“Look,” he lifted the lid off the top of the barrel, “honeycomb—good!”

I looked over and saw a strange block with hexagonal shapes emerging from the gold, sweet-smelling liquid the barrel contained. He pulled off a chunk and handed me a piece, still dripping with sticky honey. I had never held a honeycomb in my hands and didn’t know what to do with it.

“Eat,” he motioned his hand to his mouth,

licking the residual from his fingers.

I took a bite. At first it was crunchy, but then an explosion of warm, sticky, sweet honey ran down my throat. Then the honeycomb was chewy, chewier than any gum I had ever had. But I didn’t care because with every bite more honey would kiss my tongue and trickle down my throat.

“Thank you,” my mother said, and with that, the man turned and left.

Most of the time we were a minority, the White kids of the boss, surrounded in school by Hispanic migrant workers’ kids, who did not speak much English at all. It wasn’t until years later when I was rummaging through old report cards my mother

had saved for me that I looked up the school. It was labeled as a school specifically for migrant workers. Who else would be out in the middle of nowhere? You would think that I would’ve learned to speak Spanish, but I never did pick it up. I was used to relying on myself and my siblings for entertainment, so unless the other kids interacted with me, I didn’t go out of my way to interact with them. We would just be moving soon anyway, so why bother?

Another summer I also remember with particular fondness. When I turned ten, we moved to my uncle’s dairy farm. My dad worked for my uncle for a while until he could find a new job. We moved into a double-wide 1970s trailer that was situated across the

creek and downhill from the main house and milking barn. There was a big section of land with trees, a pond, and a sectioned-off swimming hole between the creek and the main house. Everyone in the family called it The Park.

It was great to have cousins to hang out with. My cousins were a couple of years younger than me, but that was okay. Like my sister and I, my cousins were already decent swimmers, so we were allowed to swim without adult supervision. We hung out from dawn to dusk, swimming and climbing trees, and sometimes we would even pitch a tent made from tarp and rope, and then we would camp out.

There was a creek about a half a mile down the

road that we would occasionally be allowed to walk to. A small bridge went over that creek, and under it grew wild blackberries as big as your palm. We would gather them up, and with the figs from the tree in The Park, we would have a great feast.

In the middle of The Park was a huge weeping

hands a little at a time. *Just a few more swings! Don't let go!* Then BAM!

PAIN . . . So much pain! My backside was on fire! *What happened? What is that?* I was holding on for dear life, and it happened again—I could feel my body slam against the hard edge of the top of the

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willow tree which became a source of great fun for my younger cousins, my sisters, and myself. My uncle had placed a giant wooden spool under it; I have no idea why. We decided it would make a great launch point, and we climbed to the top of it. This was not as easy as you would think. The top of the spool was as tall as my shoulders, so we had to find other things to use to step on to climb up.

Once on top of the spool, we would grab several long branches in our hands, jump up and off the spool, and swing back and forth until the branches would start to slip through our hands, and then we would jump out into the air and land on the grass. We took turns swinging and jumping, marking our landing spots, and trying to best each other. We played this game all summer long until, one day, something happened.

I was swinging along as I had so many times before, back and forth, my grip sure, my rhythm steady. Back and forth. Back and forth. This was going to be the best distance I had ever achieved; I could feel it. *Concentrate! Don't jump too soon!* I could feel the branches and the leaves slipping through my

spool, and then I was propelled to the ground. I was stunned, and then I was screaming in pain.

“Help me!” I yelled.

My sister and Marcie, the cousin closest to my sister's age, ran to help me up. I could stand; I had not broken anything.

“You hit it with your butt!” My sister was laughing so hard she could barely get the words out.

“You sure did!” Marcie was in stitches also. “Let's see it!”

All I knew was that I had hit that thing hard. My back and my butt hit the spool, but it was my butt that was on fire! I twisted around, pulling my pants down to inspect my butt. All I saw was a million tiny, brown splinters attacking my flesh. My entire backside was being attacked, and I felt every dirty, old, brown spike half-buried in my skin.

“Wow! That's a new one,” my sister said, still giggling and pointing.

“Help me!” I was screaming and in pain.

My sister and Marcie walked me home. It seemed to be miles, but in actuality, it was about 100 yards to get to our trailer, up the stairs, across the makeshift

porch (which was a trailer bed with wooden slats for a tractor trailer), and in the front door. My mother approached me, puzzled, and my sister recounted the entire incident.

“Let's see it,” my mother said. I complied, hoping she would have some quick solution to my incredible pain. Unfortunately, she did not. It took the entire rest of the day and some of the next for her to pick out each of the splinters from my butt and thighs using only a needle and tweezers. I screamed and cried the whole time. *It hurts! I don't care how old I am, I am injured!* At the end of the day, my uncle stopped by to inform my mother that the spool had been relocated.

“Now you kids stay off that tree,” he chided me and my sister, wagging his finger at us. “I told your cousins too. No need for anyone else to get hurt, and no need to be pulling off any more branches!”

But we didn't pull any branches off! But I was wrong. The next day I went to survey the damage, and indeed, several branches lay detached from the tree on the ground.

Marcie, my sister, and my other cousins were flaming mad at me for spoiling the game. If I hadn't gotten myself hurt, they could still be swinging from the tree. I couldn't blame them for being mad, I would be too. It took a week or so before I could sit comfortably.

That was our last summer on the farm. The following year, my dad got a “real” job, and we moved to the “city.” I was twelve, and the trajectory of my life was about to change in ways I could never imagine. Now, every time I see a willow tree, I think of that carefree summer, and the freedom of running barefoot and the clean country air. Whenever I need to feel peace, I think of that time, and then I laugh a bit.



Lacey Wynes

Lacey Wynes, a recent Technical and Professional Writing graduate, has been in various roles in public service for over 25 years. Her attention to detail and tenacity have contributed to her ability to take on complex projects and meet challenging deadlines. Although she was raised in central California, she considers Arkansas her home. She considers her greatest accomplishments to be the memories she has made with her family members over the years. She enjoys gardening and spending time with her family.