

Environmental Alliance



for Senior Involvement

MOUNDS

And Memories

Larry Gordon

I am keenly aware that the title of the book, “You Can’t Go Home Again,” is appropriate. But for some reason I occasionally revisit a few locations where I lived long ago with my parents Andrew and Dewylee Stewart Gordon and my brother Ladd. I recall many locations in New Mexico and southeastern Arizona, but a few seem more intriguing because they are now simply isolated mounds of earth rather than decrepit structures still standing.

When our family first moved from Oklahoma to New Mexico in 1928, we settled into the two-room wooden teacherage at Page, NM, near the sawmill community of McGaffey. Mother and Dad had contracted to teach at Page because the school year commenced earlier than others jobs they were offered, and they needed the money. We arrived with all our belongings in a car, and the four-wheel trailer in which Dad’s saddle horse, Nester, was also transported. The trip itself was an experience with numerous flat tires and a boiling radiator. In later years I joked that, unlike the Joads in “The Grapes of Wrath,” we were too poor to get all the way to California so we had to stop in New Mexico.

Officially, Dad was the School Principal and Mother was the other teacher in the two-room frame schoolhouse. Neither the school nor the teacherage had electricity or running water, but we did have a battery-powered radio that received the Gallup station. Dad also worked as a Brand Inspector for the New Mexico Cattle Sanitary Board, and cultivated potatoes on adjacent land. The winters were extremely harsh with accumulations of several feet of snow. Dad constructed a crude snow sled upon which four chairs could be placed. Dad’s horse pulled the sled when we traveled to visit nearby neighbors.

Heavy snow fell early during our first winter at Page. Mother and Dad drove to Gallup for winter supplies, leaving Ladd and me with a visiting Aunt. The snow accumulation was so deep they could not drive back to Page on the Zuni Mountain. They borrowed a Caterpillar from McKinley County, and drove it to Page to be with their two sons. The Caterpillar sat in the schoolyard much of the winter, as no one was able to retrieve it.

Mother and Dad constructed a smoke cellar for smoking and storing pork from hogs that he purchased from some neighbor. Family baths were taken in a large galvanized tub after several buckets of water had been carried from the distant pump to the tub and heated on top of the pot bellied wood stove located in the center of the living room and kitchen. Being the younger, and therefore presumably the cleanest, I would have the first bath, followed by my brother Ladd, then my Mother, and finally Dad prior to the bath water being tossed out the back door. Our outhouse was definitely upscale, as it was a three-holer with the usual Montgomery Ward catalog hung conveniently.

During the winter, Dad had to shovel through the deep snow to open a passage to the nearby schoolhouse. The teacherage walls consisted of lumber nailed to a frame, board walls covered by paper on the inside, and no insulation. During winter storms, I recall awakening the next morning to find a thin mantle of snow on the bed my brother and I shared, as well as on the floor and the sparse furnishings.

Dad occasionally cut a nearby pine tree that he chopped into firewood and stored in the wood shed for use in the school and the teacherage. Potbellied heating stoves were also used in each room of room schoolhouse. Mother and Dad performed all the school maintenance and janitorial functions. My brother and I were not old enough to enroll in school, but we spent time in the school with our parents absorbing a little of the knowledge as the students recited their lessons. Each schoolroom had a framed print of George Washington on the wall and an American Flag in the corner. Mother convened the students in the morning and following lunch and recess with her hand-held school bell. When the water pump wasn't frozen, students drank from the twenty or so perforations in a 2 inch galvanized pipe extending from the nearby force pump while one of them worked the pump handle energetically. Each schoolroom also contained a water bucket and a dipper used as a common drinking cup.

During warm fall and spring afternoons, Ladd and I played in the dirt with a couple of miniature toy cars on the warm west side of the teacherage, or perhaps just sat under a nearby pine and observed the fascinating clouds. We also had a captive chipmunk or two that would run vigorously in a tumbler in a small cage. I had seen a red scooter somewhere in Gallup, and yearned for a scooter as I gazed out the window at the muddy, rutted adjacent road thinking I could zip along the road if I only had a scooter. Occasionally, Ladd and I rode behind Dad and had a lengthy horse ride. Mother and Dad bought a burro for us to ride, but the burro disappeared after I was bucked off.

Dad enjoyed trick roping from the ground or from his horse. He attempted in vain to teach the art to Ladd and me, but we mostly enjoyed having him rope us as we ran in circles and "bellered like a calf."

We had about the same living conditions as our various friendly neighbors, most of whom were of hard working immigrant stock from eastern Europe and Russia. Most of the neighbors farmed, and many also worked for a pittance in the lumber industry at nearby

McGaffey, which boasted a general store and a post office.

Road conditions allowing, we attended church in Gallup. A few times, Ladd and I went to a movie while Mother and Dad attended an Eastern Star or Masonic meeting.

We were not “victims.” No state or federal bureaucrats suggested that our housing or school was substandard or that we were needy. No one was lamenting that the students could not learn because the schoolhouse was not modern.

Only some rocks that outlined the crude foundation of the Page school and teacherage remain in addition to an earthen mound that served as substrate for the school steps.

Those were Happy Years!

After a couple of years at Page, Mother and Dad determined that Dad should return to college at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Mother then accepted a McKinley County Principal and teaching job for the one room adobe school, grades one through six, at Guam, near Coolidge, New Mexico. Coolidge was an Indian Trading Post and post office address. Guam was an AT&SF railroad section station near the Continental Divide on Route 66. There was no teacherage, so Mother and Dad managed to obtain a decrepit small frame building from Fort Wingate and place it on a large trailer pulled by two borrowed Percheron horses. The horse’s hooves were so large that they walked right over the intervening cattle guards. During the trip, a large rat scampered out of a wall of the building, but was promptly dispatched by Dad’s ever-present Colt 45.

Dad attempted in vain to dig a well near the building that my parents improved to become a teacherage. Lacking a well, Ladd and I carried our drinking water in buckets several hundred yards from U.S. 66 from an AT&SF storage tank that served the few dozen “section hands” who lived at Guam and worked for the railroad. The section hands’ children, a few Navajo children from the adjacent reservation, and a few children from sawmill families on the Zuni Mountain comprised the small student body.

This was during the Great Depression. Bums and hobos were a frequent problem due to the proximity of the railroad and U.S. 66 that was then only dirt, occasionally graveled road. Since Dad was away attending college, Mother learned to have the “45” in her hand whenever someone approached the teacherage. Occasionally, Mother provided a meal in return for some wood chopping for the stoves in the school and teacherage. Curious coyotes, seeking a meal of one of our chickens, found that Mother could shoot straight. Ladd and I had BB guns, but that didn’t impress the coyotes.

When the banks closed during the Great Depression, even the County was unable to pay teachers for a time. We were ecstatic to find two silver dollars in a trunk stored under the teacherage.

We frequently walked the two miles to nearby Coolidge hoping to get a letter from Dad or a grandparent. We were usually not disappointed, and I still have a few of those keepsakes. We often received mail relating to correspondence courses Mother was taking to further her education. Typically, the three of us attended church in Gallup on Sundays. When the U.S. Forest Service at Tijeras hired Dad as a Ranger, we moved from Guam.

The teacherage was gradually demolished for the lumber or fire wood. There is no indication that a family once lived there. Traffic speeds by some two miles away on I- 40, and there is little sign of the sector of US 66 near where we lived.

The Guam school is now only a mound.

Those, too, were happy years!

Many years ensued following numerous residential locations in New Mexico and southwestern Arizona. World War II was over. Mother and Dad were living in a two-room rustic adobe house with dirt floors at Veguita, New Mexico. The house had no electricity or running water. That abode was meant to be temporary while Mother and Dad were developing land and supervising construction as the first New Mexico Boys Ranch Managers. They supervised the initial construction, built the first fences, re-seeded much of the grassland, developed the first water well and storage tank, and started a farm and ranch operation for the Boys Ranch.

Ladd was discharged from the U.S. Navy in March 1946, and I was discharged on July 4, 1946 -- my personal Independence Day. I took the train to Belen, hitchhiked to Bernardo, arriving about midnight, and walked across the brightly moonlit Rio Grande Valley and up a few miles of sandy road to the small adobe home in Veguita that I recognized by the family car in the yard. I entered and removed my Navy whites for the last time. I was a civilian again. A joyful and grateful family was united again following WW II.

We took baths at night in a nearby irrigation ditch. Ladd and I assisted as farm and construction laborers until returning to UNM in September 1946. Ladd later quipped that he was the first boy at the Boys Ranch, so I guess I was the second.

Our home in Veguita is now another mound of adobe. The irrigation ditch flows nearby.

A few years later, Mother and Dad decided to develop their farm and ranch land north of La Joya, New Mexico, which they called Amber Acres. They fenced the property, developed a water supply for drinking and irrigation, cleared hundreds of acres of tamarisk from the bosque, leveled the fields, developed an irrigation system and planted crops. At first, they lived in a one-room shack on a small rise --- no running water. They did have electricity.

Mother and Dad mixed adobe in the bed of a pickup, shoveled it into crude forms, and built a three-room poured adobe house. Still no running water, and the two-holer was located

nearby. Ladd and I visited and helped as our academic schedules allowed. Mother and Dad were constantly in dire financial straits, but had plenty of homegrown fruit and vegetables, beef and chickens.

The Amber Acres home is now another gently rising mound of dirt surrounding a rock fireplace built by my Mother, still standing after more than 50 years.

Infrequently, I return to one of these mounds. I look around as I might have decades ago, thinking, listening, imagining, trying to re-create, feeling a chard of an old dish; observing a piece of weathered wood, a length of rusted barbed wire or metal roof, a piece of glass, part of an ancient stove, a rock from an old fireplace, or a nearby tree---- and wondering. Sometimes I almost hear the nightly ritual, “Good night Laddie; Good night Larry; Good night Mother; Good night Daddy. Say your prayers.”

You really can’t go home again, but some of us try.

Dad earned a U.S. Civil Service retirement following numerous contributions to conservation in the Southwest. Mother and Dad made successful real estate investments, and believed in “working like hell and saving your money.” They succeeded in both.

Ladd’s service to the sportsmen of New Mexico earned him a national reputation as a Conservationist. The various New Mexico Game and Fish Department waterfowl areas in the vicinity of Casa Colorado, Bernardo and La Joya are now part of the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Management Complex in honor of Ladd’s many years of service to the Department and New Mexicans, culminating as a long-time Director of the New Mexico Game and Fish Department and later as Regional Director of Ducks Unlimited.

My parents and brother are gone. They all achieved and contributed.

The mounds, the memories and I remain.

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Larry Gordon is Adjunct Professor at the University of New Mexico. He and his wife, the former Nedra Callender, live in Albuquerque. Daughter Debbie and her husband Rick Dunlap own and operate Merit Insulation, and Debbie is the first woman President of the Albuquerque Country Club. Son Kent and his wife Elli own a marketing research firm, S-M-A-R-T, in California. Son Gary is a partner in an Albuquerque law firm and President of the Albuquerque Academy Board of Trustees. Gary’s wife Terri is the President and Owner of GenQuest,Inc., a human relations consulting firm.

Gordon has served as:

New Mexico Cabinet Secretary for Health and Environment,

President of the 55,000 member American Public Health Association.

Founding Director, New Mexico Scientific Laboratory System,

Founding Director, New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency (NM Environment Department),

Founding Director, Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Environmental Health Department, continues as a

Commissioned Officer (Navy Captain), U.S. Public Health Service Inactive Reserve, and

Consultant to various national public and private entities.

He has over 230 professional and technical publications.

Gordon is a recipient of the:

National Society for Public Administration (New Mexico Chapter) Distinguished Public Administrator Award - 1996

Univ. of Michigan School of Public Health Alumni Society Distinguished

Alumnus Award - 1995

Distinguished Leadership in Environmental Management Award, American Society for Public Administration - 1994

County of Los Angeles Lester Breslow Award for Distinguished Service in Public Health - 1994

University of New Mexico Alumni Association Zimmerman Award for bringing credit to UNM- 1993

New Mexico Governors' Distinguished Public Service Award - 1988

American Public Health Association Sedgwick Award (the highest honor bestowed by the APHA)- 1987

American Lung Association Clinton P. Anderson Award for Outstanding Efforts to Improve the Health and Environment of New Mexicans - 1987

New Mexico Public Health Association Larrazola Award - 1987

American Academy of Sanitarians Wagner Award for Leadership Ability and Professional Commitment - 1984

New Mexico Hospital Association Commendation for Leadership in Health Care - 1981

Honorary Fellow Royal Society of Health For Distinguished Work in Connection With The Promotion Of Health, London, - 1981

National Environmental Health Association Snyder Award - 1978

New Mexico Public Health Association Award for Distinguished Service - 1970

National Secretaries Association International, Boss of the Year Award - 1970

New Mexico Sanitarians Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Sanitation - 1967

Sanitarians Distinguished Service Award, International Sanitarians Assoc. - 1962

Western Branch, American Public Health Association Sippy Award for Meritorious Service to Western Public Health - 1962

National Environmental Health Association Mangold Award for Outstanding Contributions to Professional Advancement - 1961

Samuel J. Crumbine Award for Outstanding Development of an Environmental Sanitation Program - 1959

Gordon planned and gained legislative authorization for the:

Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Environmental Health Department,

New Mexico Scientific Laboratory System,

New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency (now the Environment Dept.), and the

New Mexico State Health Agency.

He also developed and gained enactment of numerous state and local public health and environmental health statutes, regulations and ordinances.

Gordon earned the degree of Master of Science in Biology from the University of New Mexico and Master of Public Health in Environmental Health from the University of Michigan.

Gordon is listed in:

Who's Who in America, 1988 - current

Who's Who in the West, 1970 - current

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