

Bobby Pelton was the second husband of my mother's mother. I called her Merner ; he was Bobby . Bobby served in the Navy after getting out of high school, but moved back to Portales, which is in eastern New Mexico. He started farming once he finished his tour of duty. He and Merner lived in a small farmhouse in the middle of forty acres, just outside of Portales by a mile or two. The house had two bedrooms, an eat-in kitchen where people usually gathered around the kitchen table and a large living room that ran the whole width of the house. The bathroom was off the kitchen; My Aunt Catherine swore that it was so close that if you farted very big you could blow the napkins off the table. A yard sprawled all the way around the house and a tall wood fence skirted the south and west sides. Trash was put in fifty gallon drums on the outskirts of that yard and then burned every few weeks. I can remember empty aerosol cans exploding, sounding like bombs going off. If a gust of wind came along at the right time and carried the embers onto the yard it could catch on fire, resulting in a lot of excitement trying to put it out.

Bobby had an old Murphy bed in the back yard that he kept covered with a tarp. In the summer when it was hot in the house, he'd sleep out in the back yard. I'd occasionally get to sleep out there with him. Merner dried her laundry on a clothesline and I have fond memories of laying in that Murphy bed, smelling those line dried sheets, looking up at the billions of stars in the sky and talking to Bobby about everything and nothing. On the other side of the fence was an area that Bobby stored and worked on his farm implements and a dilapidated old house that had been the original farmhouse on the property that had become Bobby's storage shed. The tall elm trees towering over that old house was where the flock of guinea hens that Bobby kept would roost overnight and twice a day the cacophony they created signaled the sun going up or down. Along the north side of the back yard were a couple of boxcars that he also used for storage. Within the boxcars, Merner had a chest type freezer big enough in which to stash a body, and Bobby stored his tools, and depending on the season, seeds for the coming year. Everywhere outside this immediate area around the house was farmland. The view from the house

could alter dramatically with a change in plantings, transition of weather patterns and the evolution of the Seasons. For awhile it was fenced off with a single strand of electric wire and was full of cows. Other times it would be rows and rows of maize, which is tall like corn and creates a visual barricade. Other times it would have tomatoes, peppers, or green beans growing there. Bobby and Merner had a roadside stand at the end of the driveway that came up to the house from the highway which was known as the Airbase Cutoff. In that stand Merner sold the things that Bobby grew on the farm, which included several types of watermelons and cantaloupes, peppers, tomatoes, green beans, and cucumbers. Bobby farmed a number of different plots of land around that area and in addition to what they sold at the stand he farmed peanuts, cotton, and alfalfa among other things.

Bobby called watermelons pisschunks and he taught me how to tell when they're ripe by thumping on them. If they sound hollow, they're ripe. You can tell cantaloupes are ripe by smelling them. If you put your nose to the spot where the vine was attached and it smells sweet, it's ready. Any time we wanted a bite of watermelon, we'd step into the field, thump them until we found a ripe one, then pick it up and drop it on the ground breaking it open. You could then reach in and scoop the heart out of it and eat it. No need to mess with the seeds.

Bobby wore a ball cap or a straw cowboy hat anytime he went outside. He always wore a short sleeve button up shirt and blue jeans and work boots. The only time he'd put on a jacket was when it got down to freezing. He had wavy black hair that would probably have curled if he let it get long enough. He never did. He smelled of tobacco, Brylcreem and clean sweat. His hands were rough and calloused and of course he had a farmer's tan from riding around in the pickup with his arm hanging out the window. I can remember how the paint on his blue and white two-tone Ford pickup had worn away just underneath the driver's side window revealing the metal underneath from where his arm rested. Both of Bobby's trucks had a tank just behind the cab that were as long as the truck was wide and had rounded ends. Bobby used butane to power his trucks and kept a big tank of it back behind the house



THRIVING — Bobbie Pelton examines the production end of a peanut vine. The new goobers show no sign of fungus or rot. Portales News-Tribune

which he used to refuel. He also used the butane to fill the tires on the trucks. If it were particularly muddy he'd let most of the air out of the tires so there was more surface area on the ground and when he got through, he'd attach an air hose to the butane tank and re- inflate the tires.

In the fall, my mother and Merner would start getting ready for winter. They'd do marathon sessions of bean snapping and shelling putting up quarts of green beans and black-eyed peas. Several different kinds of pickles were tucked away in crocks. They'd pickle beets and can them. Merner would make hot sauce that was hotter than the hinges of hell which she'd then put in baby food jars and freeze

in that chest freezer out in the boxcar. As we would be headed into the holidays, they would then turn to making peanut brittle or peanut patties, a regional favorite of peanuts in a pink, sugary candy.

The peanuts that they used were those that Bobby grew, a type of Valencia called the McRan peanut that could be traced back to a single peanut that a friend of Bobby's, Joe Randolph, "found" in his clothing after returning from a trip to Tangiers. Randolph had given the legume to Bobby to develop into seed stock. Bobby took that single peanut and by the fifth season grew more than ninety tons of nuts which were then again turned around and all used as seed the next year. Those seeds were planted at about one-hundred pounds of seed to the acre, generating upwards of four thousand pounds to the acre, nearly double the average yield of peanuts up to that time.

My memory stores snapshots of my two younger sisters and me being taken out in the fields in the summer when Bobby was irrigating. Some of the things Bobby grew were gravity flow-watered by running water down the rows of plantings. Water was pumped out of the earth, headed toward a spot where the irrigator would then channel it down the rows of growing crops. . Where the water was pumped on the ground it would get very muddy and kids being kids, we were allowed to play in the mud while Bobby watched the water. We could bury ourselves completely in the mud or have mud fights. When it was time to go home Bobby would chuck us in the back of the pickup truck. He'd drop us off at the vegetable stand where Merner was working and then take off, not to return until supper. He knew that that Merner would be madder than an old wet hen at having to deal with three mud-covered youngsters. Where Bobby didn't irrigate, he used sprinkler pipe. The earliest version I remember were about twenty-four foot sections of lightweight pipe that had a Rainbird sprinkler in the middle of it on a twenty-four inch riser. I moved lots of that pipe. When you picked up the piece to move it, you twisted the riser from twelve o'clock to about three o'clock and a latch that held the two sections together would release. You could then move that piece over eight rows and connect it to the other end of the row you were laying. You'd water that section then move the pipe over again until you'd watered the

Untitled -- by Jerry Morris

whole field. As technology evolved, Bobby upgraded and had sprinklers that were mounted on pipes that were in the middle of wheels that were about six feet in diameter. In the middle of the run of pipe was a machine that would roll the pipe over the requisite number of rows in order to begin the next section of watering. Even later he had sprinklers on a pipe with wheels that turned on a pivot and watered the field in the familiar circular shape that you can see from an airplane anytime you're flying.

Bobby worked by himself in the winter, but in the summer he hired hands to help with hoeing the fields and harvesting the vegetables to take to the stand to be sold. He had many of the same Mexicans come back year after year to work on his farm because he treated them well. In the spring he'd drive down to the Mexican border to pick them up. He'd prearrange a time to meet them and they'd ride on the floor in the back seat of the car, staying out of sight until he got back to Portales. He called them wetbacks, it was only years later that I understood why.

Bobby taught me how to drive when I was seven. I would drive the pickup through the fields and the hands would load whatever we happened to be harvesting at the time in the back of the pickup. I was driving a tractor by the time I was ten and Bobby gave me my first beer not long after that. Bobby smoked unfiltered Camels, usually to the tune of a couple packs a day. He would carry stick kitchen matches in his shirt pocket to light them with, usually flicking the end of the match with the thumb nail of the same hand that he was holding it with, not unlike holding a disposable lighter today. He could also lift up his leg slightly and run the match along the underside of this thigh on his jeans to get the match to light. He drank Coors beer if he could get it otherwise he drank Budweiser. I can remember going with him to the bootleggers to buy beer as Roosevelt County was a dry county. My family eventually relocated to Colorado, but any time we went down to the farm we took a trunk load of Coors because it wasn't being distributed to New Mexico yet from Colorado.

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When I was younger, any time I went with Bobby to town, we'd stop by PK's market. Bobby would buy me as much Dubble Bubble bubble gum as I could cram in my mouth at one time. I can't remember how many pieces it was, but I know when we left PK's, I'd have a wad so big in my mouth that I could barely chew let alone talk.

Bobby was always working on something that wasn't operating the way it was supposed to. He kept the wire that held bales of hay together in the back of the pickup as it always came in



handy to hold something together. I can remember more than once getting back in the pickup and he'd have blood dripping off his hand or down his arm and he'd have no idea what he'd done. He was oblivious to pain. I don't remember him ever going to the doctor, which coupled with his smoking habit was responsible for his undoing. After Bobby and Merner got divorced, we'd go see him occasionally, but once he remarried things were never the same. He remarried a woman named Margie that I had known all of my life. We got a call from Margie one day telling us that a couple of months prior Bobby had started coughing so much that he finally broke down and went and saw a doctor. He was told that he had advanced stage lung cancer. After the crops were all in, Bobby threw a barbecue inviting a bunch of friends and all of Margie's family over. After the meal was over and while things were being cleaned up, Bobby had gone out to the boxcar to grab something. A loud bang was heard coming from the

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boxcar When someone went to investigate they found that Bobby had taken a pistol and ended his life. He had no intention of being sick and incapacitated. He'd gone down earlier that week and bought a plot at the cemetery and arranged for his own funeral. He'd picked out his own casket, written his obituary and gone down to the bank and made all of the arrangements so Margie wouldn't have to deal with it. He'd had the barbecue as an excuse to have all of Margie's friends and loved ones around so that she wouldn't have to deal with the aftermath of his decision by herself. That is how I remember Bobby—a plain, no-nonsense, man of the earth who lived on his own terms and who chose to die the same way.