

## The Bard of Argyle

by Jim Morriss

Several years ago, there was a series of three movies called "Back to the Future." The main character had a kooky scientist friend who invented a time machine and used it to journey to both the past and to the future in his own home town. The series was very entertaining and cleverly written to contrast how things were different at various times in our history. It would be wonderful if we had such a device to take us back to other times and visit the Cross Timbers that used to be, but Marty McFly, Dr. Emmet Brown and the Flux Capacitor do not exist. What we do have are the writings of a really colorful character who once lived here. His name was H. L. Harrell. He was a farmer for the first 60 years of his life. But for the last 38 years, he was a philosopher, poet, and author who lived right here; and he used to be known as "**The Bard of Argyle.**"

After the Civil War, a very young Confederate soldier from Georgia, named John B. Harrell left the wreckage of his home state and migrated to the west. John eventually married a young lady named Sarah Jane Edrington, who came from northern Mississippi. The two settled on a farm a little north of Austin, Texas and started to raise a family there. On July 14, 1878 they had a son who they named Harry Lee Harrell. Harry grew up on the farm and went to the rural school house where he learned the three R's but his teacher must have found that young Harry was unusually gifted in writing. Even so, after graduation, Harry discovered that there were few opportunities for a young man with a talent for writing so he turned to farming.

Harry's mother died before 1900 and his father appears to have fallen to some debilitating illness and retired to a Confederate soldier's home in Austin. Harry, the oldest son, took on the responsibility for his siblings and two elderly aunts at the farm in Williamson County, Texas. Finally in 1911, at the age of 33, Harry married a girl named Mimmie Dubose. The couple had two daughters and two sons and farmed in New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. The four Harrell children grew up, married and started families of their own. Just before WWII Harry sold his 66 acre farm in Denton County and retired to a residence in Argyle. Mimmie and Harry lived out the remainder of their long lives there in their modest home on Dallas Street.

Those who remember the Harrells recall that they never had a telephone, radio, or television set. Both of them seemed to have a remarkable affection for the peace and serenity that they found in south Denton County. They were members of the Argyle Church of Christ. Harry was a tall old gentleman who loved to

tend his garden and take long walks. A vital part of Harry's days were the quiet times in his rocking chair where he kept his mind active by reading the area newspapers. He made daily walks to the post office to pick up his mail and to send off his regular contributions of letters which frequently were printed on the editorial pages of the Dallas, Fort Worth and Denton newspapers. Much of the sage advice that H.L. Harrell offered found its way into print and some of it can still be recovered from the microfilm archives at the Denton library. He had views on deficit spending, war, race relations, state's rights and the United Nations that are well worth noting. However, Harrell's best gifts to us were his, first-hand recollections of what it was like to grow up in Texas in the late 19th century. People now have a belief that our environment was once more clean, pure and much safer before we polluted it with our modern lifestyles. Mr. Harrell left us with some emphatic contrary evidence.

Harrell said that long before central heating or air conditioning, houses in our area were usually three room, unpainted clap wood structures with no insulation and poorly fitted doors and windows. They were drafty and cold in the winter and stifling hot in the summer. Heat was provided with stone fireplaces or what they called a "box stove." Cooking and heat was supplied by wood and light was provided by candles. Sometimes in the winter, wind whistled through the cracks and made it difficult to keep candles lit. Later, brass coal oil lamps with glass chimneys were a big improvement. In the summer there were no screens and the heat made it necessary to leave the doors and windows open. That put everyone at the mercy of the flies and mosquitoes. Harrell recalled how once on, a pitch black night, his whole family was awakened by his dogs barking. They could not get them to quiet down. Finally his dad got up and lit a candle to find that there was a three foot long rattle snake coiled up in the kitchen, ready to strike. Good reliable dogs were treasured to keep skunks, possums and other varmints out of the house.

Each community had a one room school house for kids from about 7 to 20 years old. The complete integration of all age groups must have posed problems. Many of the older boys chewed tobacco and were not shy about spitting anywhere they wanted. Standards of cleanliness were nowhere close to what we expect today. H.L. Harrell could recall how, from late fall through early summer, many of the older boys never bathed or changed clothes. He could remember seeing lice and bed bugs crawling on fellow students. Many children never saw a doctor or

dentist and never used a toothbrush or comb. Sharing a small school room with some of these students must have been quite unpleasant. Despite the impressions that we now have, Harrell reported that most of the Texas school teachers were male and had to be physically strong enough to mete out the corporal punishment that was needed to keep some of the older boys in line. Discipline was enforced with a paddle not a hickory stick, and they never heard of a "time out."

In the late 19th century, adult men often chewed tobacco and smoked pipes or cigars. Cigarettes were rare. Older women might dip snuff but used none of the other forms of tobacco. In the winter people sometimes tried to ward off influenza with various remedies such as asafoetida. It was a potent smelling herb that was tied up in a small piece of cloth and worn around the neck. Mixtures of this with chopped onions or garlic, with molasses and sulfur were said to keep all kind of bad things away. In the spring and summer, Texans often drank balmony tea which was supposed to eliminate parasitic worms and cure digestive problems. Many of the old home remedies were just herbal laxatives and sometimes the cure was worse than the disease. Many infections that we never hear of now were major problems to people in the Cross Timbers. Our extravagant use of soap and clean water have just about eliminated many of the problems encountered by H.L. Harrell when he was young. He reported that when he was a kid, ailments like diabetes and appendicitis were death sentences.

Harrell had fond recollections of the times as he got older when the Texas communities had traditions of staging annual summertime parties, barbecues or picnics. Great quantities of chicken, mutton, beef, vegetables, bread and pickles were brought out. He remembered lemonade and stick candy being a big treat. There would be a dance platform for adults with whatever music the talented members of the community could provide. Of course you had to have at least one fiddle in the band. Young teens often played a popular game, called "Snap." It was a card game that involved several players. Each player, in turn, flipped over cards until a duplicate came up. The first player to slap his or her hand on the pile got to add all of those cards to his or her own pile. This often resulted in young boys actually touching the hands of girls. That was quite a thrill for the painfully shy boys of Harrell's generation. There were also regularly scheduled church camp meetings with similar feasts followed by "fire and brimstone" sermons accompanied by praying, singing, and rejoicing.

Another forgotten Texas tradition that Harrell spoke of was the community wagon yard. In the fall farmers brought their produce to town to sell. An area was set aside where wagons were parked and horses tied. For

those who lived too far away to return the same day, the wagon yard became a camp ground where farmers and their young sons laughed and talked away most of the night around a big communal camp fire.

H.L. Harrell died in 1976 just a month before his 98th birthday. He once said that he loved recalling the past but did not want to go through those times again. He had a profound appreciation for antibiotics, automobiles, tractors, refrigerators, screens, sewing machines, washing machines, gas stoves and paved roads. We probably should all heed his advice and not take for granted his miracles plus others such as central heat and air conditioning, personal computers, HD television, cell phones, interstate highways, and modern air travel. The editors of the Dallas Morning News enjoyed printing his poetry and his letters and they gave him the name of "The Bard of Argyle." Harry outlived most of his close friends but many of his neighbors in the Cross Timbers remembered this good natured, optimistic gentleman fondly. He gave advice freely and tried to make his little corner of the world a better place. One of the great messages that was left to us by the Bard of Argyle is this:

*"I had to grow old before I learned what a wonderful thing cheerfulness is. - - - Cheerfulness is one thing you can squander and it will benefit and make you happy. - - - It really pays off big. - - - Cultivate cheerfulness, never let it die."*



The final resting place of H.L. and Mimmie Harrell is in the Roselawn Cemetery in Denton; just up the road from the garden that the Bard of Argyle once loved to tend.



Jim Morriss  
[jmorriss@aol.com](mailto:jmorriss@aol.com)  
817-491-4201