

Mayday in Deadwood

Wetzel LaGrone

I can hardly believe I am standing in front of the congregation of the Deadwood, Texas United Methodist Church on the first Sunday in May, Mayday, 1998. I see faces of people who were in their twenties and thirties when I was a kid and I thought they were old then. I see faces of people my age that I have known all my life but I haven't seen some of them in more than forty years. They have honored me by asking that I speak to them today. As I touch the worn surface of the old wooden pulpit I seem to feel the presence of all who have stood there before me. Then memories rush through my mind as I try to stay in the present.

When I was a child Mayday was a time to gather at the Deadwood Methodist Church and actually work to clean up the adjacent graveyard and decorate the graves. Now part of the activities on Mayday is to elect officers of the Deadwood Cemetery Corporation and collect money for the graveyard upkeep.

This church and cemetery play an important role in my life. It is one of the first places I remember. I had walked around the cemetery earlier in the day to visit the graves of my parents and all of my LaGrone grandparents dating back to the grandfather born in 1781 who settled in the Deadwood area in 1836. The first person buried there was my great, great, great grandmother in 1847.

Mayday has always been a time of family reunion, of dinner on the grounds, of preaching and singing and visiting and renewing old acquaintances. When I was a kid how many times did I hear "Why you must be Chesley's boy. My you've grown. I hadn't

seen you since you was this high". The hand was always held out to show how high. Of course you might have seen them a couple of weeks earlier. Some of the women even wanted to kiss you long after you were too big for that stuff.

There was always a visiting speaker on Mayday. The little church would be filled by the women, children and a few of the men who had a part in the program. The other men stayed out under the big oak tree at the southwest corner of the old church. They could pretend to be listening to the sermon through the open windows. When a boy got big enough to stay outside with the men he thought he was something.

Immediately after the church service we would eat. Oh, I can remember dinner on the tables built under the trees behind the church. My great uncle, Horace, was usually asked to say the blessing. Uncle was hard of hearing but he did not need an amplifier to be heard. Just as people tend to sit in the same pew in church they tended to spread their food at the same place on the table each year.

Everyone brought about twice as much food as their family could eat. Us boys, who liked to eat, soon learned who had the best of everything. My grandmother LaGrone, made the best chocolate pie in the world. You had better get a piece the first time you had a chance or it would be gone. My mother and grandmother were about equal in making chicken dressing. For you people who not be from the south that's cornbread dressing. Theirs was never dry and had just the right touch of sage. Mother also made sweet potato pie that was to die for.

After dinner, notice we say dinner not lunch, many of the adults would go back into the church for a singing. After he got back from W.W.II daddy's brother, my uncle Truman would play the piano. The gospel singing would go on for about two hours.

While the singing was going on kids were allowed to stay outside and play. The pressed paper plates of the day were the forerunners of today's Frisbees. There was always a contest to see who could sail a plate the furthest. I must add we were always expected to clean up the trash before we went home.

Uncle Truman had a piano so sometimes after the singing at the church some would gather at my Grandparents house to play and sing. There were some young people who were very good musicians and would bring other instruments. A very good way to pass a Sunday afternoon.

Suddenly, I feel the old pulpit under my hand again and realize I had slipped completely into the past. As my eyes refocus on the faces looking at me I remember where I am and to stop standing there daydreaming. I am not in the church building of my youth, which was damaged by a tornado, but in a modern one with stained glass windows which, incidentally, were made and donated by my oldest sister.

As I clear my throat to say the first words of my sermon, certain that the congregation was getting antsy it hit me. No time had elapsed. These memories must have just flashed through my mind and nobody noticed my flight into the past.

I say the first words, and it is all downhill from there. I can't remember all that I said just that it just felt like the right thing to say. I finished to a chorus of "Amens" and stepped down and went back to my seat.

There is a sign at the corner of farm to market road 31 and the county road going to the church that says "Welcome to Deadwood. Home of 107 friendly people and one old grouch." The leading candidate for that old grouch position approached me after the service. He seemed a little embarrassed when he mumbled, "best sermon I ever heard"

You can go home again. You can reinforce old memories and make new ones that will be with you for the rest of your life.