

# Where the Primroses Still Grow



BY PAIGE EATON

**BERNIECE SWAIN WAS BORN IN DECEMBER**, and this year, she'll celebrate her 92nd birthday. While her steps may have slowed, her vivid blue eyes twinkle with a light twice that of many folks half her age. Her memories, sprinkled with wit and charm, roll lightly from her tongue.

She's a fan of Wood County Electric Cooperative; after the Van tornado of May 10 devastated the region, she wrote to us:

"I'm so thankful for the men who work so hard and long to keep us with power! I was living on this property in 1939 when we got electricity. It was the REA [Rural Electrification Administration] then. What a difference from kerosene lamps."

She went on to recount the aftereffects of the recent storm and the power loss. She ended her note with "Thank you and God Bless."

Her kind gesture and words made us want to reach out to Swain to hear more recollections of her life and about "when the lights came on." She was charitable enough to comply and tell her story of a time before electricity came to her little community of Primrose, in Van Zandt County, and about some of her joys thereafter.

Swain was born in 1923, a few years before the start of the Great Depression. "Of course, nobody had any money," she muses.

She recounts that when her mother, Ada Music Williams, was sickly and heavily pregnant with her, the mother's husband abandoned her and Swain's 5-year old brother, Gordon, on the doorstep of Ada's parents, Helen and T.P. Music. Ada's brother, George, lived there, too. It was so fortunate that he did, because when Grandfather Music died in 1933 and Ada in 1938, Uncle George became the children's guardian.

Swain never really knew her father but smiles when she talks about her Uncle George, the man who became her father figure. She relays that he was quite an important man of the times and very community-minded. He was a schoolteacher and the church Sunday school superintendent, and he led the music at church. He also owned one of the few cars in the community, which was only used when necessary. The family traveled by foot to school or to other places, or by horse-drawn wagon to go to church.

"During those times, our church was on a circuit," she says. The church did not have enough money to pay a full-time preacher, so they shared

a pastor with another church, which limited them to services only two Sundays per month. When the preacher did come to town, he always had Sunday lunch at the Music house. Uncle George was the one to take up the collection to pay the preacher. With hard times and all, sometimes the funds would not be adequate. So Uncle George would visit the community asking for donations of chickens, which he'd sell to make a payday for the preacher. Uncle George also used this technique to help pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the local cemetery.

Even though times were hard, Swain talks about playing as a child. "A toy in those days was made from what you had laying around," she says. "We had a round ring that came off of a wagon wheel." She says they flattened out a tin can and nailed

to it a small, dried tree limb for a handle. The game was called paddle and wheel. The idea was to see how long you could keep the ring rolling in the sand. She also remembers how she and her girlfriends would play “house.” She says they used tree limbs to lay out the house, and then they’d use leaves and foliage to make dress-up outfits. She says they were also known to use her grandmother’s old snuff bottles and push them around in the sand, pretending they were cars. Play took a lot of creativity and imagination, but it was no less enjoyable.

Work, on the other hand, could be gruelingly hard. As for food, sugar and flour were the only things bought, and those came in 50-pound sacks that had to be lugged home. Everything else was farm-raised, including vegetables, cows, pigs and chickens. The family made canned sausage and smoked and dried meat for the winter.

To light their home, they used kerosene lamps, and that kerosene was purchased in 5-gallon cans. Baths were taken in a No. 3 washtub with water heated and hauled to fill the tub. Washing clothes was even more difficult and accomplished by boiling clothes in a big iron pot and then rubbing them on a washboard to get them clean. Another hallmark of the times was the ice man, who would sell 25-pound blocks of ice that would be carried into the house and wrapped in quilts and a tarpaulin for insulation to keep longer.

Speaking of refrigeration, the family did eventually get a kerosene refrigerator. Swain laughs as she recalls one of its trials. The inside of a kerosene refrigerator maintains a nice cold



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temperature, but the outside gets hot, almost like a stove. One day Gordon, as older brothers will do, was trying to boss her around and make her wash the dishes. And like most siblings, Swain did not like it. In a temper, she slung some berry cobbler at him and it hit the refrigerator instead. She said it burned up and dried onto the surface of the refrigerator almost instantly. “We almost never did get it cleaned off,” she laughs.

She says it was 1939 when the REA came through with electrical lines, and she remembers it clearly, “A young man, named Bennet, I think, did the wiring in our house.” When they finally turned the bulbs on, she was already in high school. She joked, “Of course I wanted to look good. When you dressed by kerosene lamp, you thought you looked pretty good. What a shock it was when you got electricity. What a dif-

ference the light made!”

In 1941, Swain met and married her husband, Junior Swain, and they moved out to California for his work. Their first child, Larry, was born in Oakland, but when it came time for his schooling, the Swains moved back to Texas to raise him and their two daughters, Diane and Liane. In 1954, the Swains bought a house on a gravel road 3 miles north of Tyler. When it was paved years later, that road became what is now Highway 69.

In 1947, Berniece Swain inherited the land in Ben Wheeler in the Primrose community where she was raised. Her son and daughter-in-law, Patty, moved onto the land in 1982, where they raised their family. One of her grandsons also has a home on that land, and Berniece lives close by.

She was right there on May 11, 2015, when the devastating tornado blew through. She said the storm came within just 200–300 yards of her, and it did a lot of damage on her road.

“It hit at 8 p.m. Sunday night, and we got electricity at around 5 on Monday afternoon,” she says. “I drove my car west on my road, and there must have been five or six Wood County [Electric] trucks and a lot of orange-coated men working very hard to clear and repair the lines. You could hardly get down our road for trees and parts of barns and houses. How fortunate we are to have such a caring company. May God bless them.”

From a schoolgirl named Berniece to the silver-haired Mrs. Swain, this lovely lady has blossomed into a beloved “Memaw” of seven grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. She has many stories to tell and does so with a gleam in her eye. She’s especially enthusiastic about her electricity and the time when it came to Primrose, saying, “Electricity was just great, dear!”



Steven,  
Donna B.,  
Linda, Jared,  
Ronnie, Jake,  
Preston, Lance,  
C.H., Rachel,  
Will, Patti

Ramon,  
Asa, Paige,  
Daniel J. M.,  
David S., Sharon,  
Daniel L. M.,  
Trey, Daren,  
Donna M., Tina,  
Chris



Ronney,  
Brian, Gustavo,  
Steve G., Sue,  
Darren V., Brant, Jay,  
Casey, Irene,  
Mitcham, Keith,  
Roberto,  
J.A.

Lalo,  
Denise, Harold,  
Debbie J., Nelson,  
Brangus, Jason J.,  
James, Corie,  
Johnny, Ronny,  
Debbie R.

All of us wish all of you joy of the





*Steve C.,  
Paula, Jana,  
Thomas, Rusty,  
Steve M., Wesley,  
Summer, Bradly,  
Kim, Darren C.,  
Jason C.*

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Kylie, John H.,  
Shannon, Zack,  
Johnnie, Angelica,  
David H., Gary,  
Daniel W.,  
John P.,  
Terry*

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Aaron, Chuck, Craig,  
Dakota, Joe, Rick,  
Marcus, Tommy, Brandon,  
Larry, Tony,  
Lawanda*

# season and a very Merry Christmas!

