

Auld Lang Syne

I missed a couple of days from work at the Levison Towers this week. I hate coming back from an unexpected absence to all of the phone messages and unopened mail. While I was gone, someone rented out my office - I think it was that rotten Phill. Anyway, the new guy gave me back my chair when I explained to him that I had been at a funeral. For my grandfather.

Wow, what a weird week! This column marks my one year anniversary with the Levison Group, and so far, no stalkers, no hate mail (thanks Mom) and only minor editing mistakes. "The Passion of the Christ" was the number one illegally downloaded movie this week- proof that God loves columnists when He dishes that one up. Seriously, what kind of person steals that movie? And my 82 year old grandfather passed on.

This could have been a column about trusts and estates, if grandpa had had anything. He didn't. In fact, most of what he owned at his death fit neatly into two small boxes. With the exception of his library and a barely worn pair of cowboy boots, it all fit neatly.

One of the boxes, a pressboard treasure chest, contained papers. Old papers have a distinct smell. They feel almost like parchment, and none are as bright and white as they were in their prime- look who is talking, right?

There were old letters in the box, swapping news and gossip. A recipe for Wolf bait (let me know if you are interested; I think you can probably get most of the ingredients, with the exception of the wolf guts, at your local grocery store. Depending on where you live.) Cancelled checks written and signed in pencil. These papers testified to a bit of my family's history that I never knew existed. Most dated back to the 1930s and 40s, when my grandpa was the age my children are now. Back then, his father, my great grandfather, farmed in rural Texas.

A large part of the papers in the box were legal documents. Almost all of them were debt related. Original contracts, empty coupon books, paid-in-full stamped notes, releases of liens. The papers told a story- a mortgage on a 30 acre peanut farm. Liens on dairy cattle production for about 15 cows. Chattel mortgages- the equivalent of automobile title loans - on two horses: one 10 years old and fifteen hands high, the other ten or eleven years old and 15 ½ hands high. Horses valued at under \$100. I vaguely, vaguely remember chattel mortgages from law school (who am I kidding, I don't remember much of anything from law school) but seeing my great grandfather's signature on the bottom of one gave a new perspective.

Many of the loans and liens were with the Farmers Home Administration. This arm of the federal government sprang to life on the heels of the depression, in an attempt to stop riots on farms. It was essentially defunded when I was a boy. And it never meant a thing to me, other than a problem on a history exam, until I touched those papers.

I occasionally whine about how tough it is to be a trial lawyer today. Tough to get cases, tough to work out the logistics of trial, tough to figure out what partisan politicians will do to my clients while they sleep. Seeing these papers reminded me of how good my life is- I can't imagine scratching out a living as a share cropper in arid Texas. It is almost inconceivable to do so with the next season hanging in the balance, on margins so thin that every decision was life or death. One bad crop, and they come for the horses. Or the dairy cattle. Try running a dairy without cattle. Or working land without horses to pull the plow through the dust.

My sons are asleep in their beds as I finish this column. Neither of them worry that the family farm will be gone when they wake up, the result of too little rain. Or that the sick heifer in the barn might not make it, toppling a line of dominos that will take them to God knows where. No question that my grandfather's childhood is as foreign to them as their X-Box was to him.

My oldest boy read an assignment this week about subsistence farming in Africa and told me how far away that seemed. It never crossed his mind that the old, frail man he called great-grandpa had lived that experience, in a land almost as far away.

(c)2004 Under Analysis, LLC. Under Analysis is a nationally syndicated column of the Levison Group. Spencer Farris is the founding partner of The S.E. Farris Law Firm in St Louis, Missouri. Comments or criticisms about this column may be sent c/o this newspaper or directly to the Levison Group via email at comments@levisongroup.com.