

The Slab: A memory that keeps on giving

Written by By DON HATLEY, Ph.D.
Tuesday, 27 December 2011 10:50

From the earliest time I can recall, the two mile strip of concrete, known to everybody in northeastern Hopkins County as the Slab, ran in my memory.

The Slab was, probably, one of the more successful Hopkins County road projects built by the WPA (Works Progress Administration). People unfriendly toward the WPA said the letters stood for "We Piddle Around." That's why Daddy sometimes joked about it.

Building the Slab is where Daddy discovered concrete. When we moved to the hill overlooking Dike, he poured concrete in places nobody had ever poured concrete.

That included putting a concrete roof on our pump house in our back yard. If nobody tears it up, Daddy's concrete roof will, without doubt, last until Hell freezes over.

Eventually, it will sport a plaque from the National Register of Historic Places naming it a secondary cultural tourism draw to go with our primary tourist attractions, the baseball diamond behind Tot Herman's house and the Caney Loop starting at Pate's Pool.

The Slab began a half mile south of current I-30 at the Cotton Belt Rail Road tracks. Pioneers referred to all of White Oak Creek Bottom as Armstrong Crossing.

Momma and Daddy married in '31 in the depths of the Great Depression which savaged rural families. So, when the WPA told Daddy it would pay hard money for him, his mules, and his Fresno Grader to work on the Slab, he jumped on that offer quicker than a flea jumps on a skinny hound dog.

I would love to find the WPA records on the Slab to see how much money it took to build it and find out what the feds paid Daddy for his work, his mules and his Fresno.

While we thought the Slab was the best thing since "Gunsmoke," Louisiana folk beat Texans to the idea of a hard surface road across a swamp by nearly a century.

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In Cajun country, people built a shed-like structure over a road from the hills on the east of Shreveport to Red River. Protected from the elements, people said the surface of Shed Road was packed harder than one of my wife's biscuits. (We need to keep Sue's hard biscuits a secret.)

The story goes that when Louisiana mules got their first glimpse of Shed Road, after days and days of pulling cotton wagons up hills, over pig trails and across swampy bayous, they raised their collective voices, making a beautiful sound to equal the Mormons and their Tabernacle Choir. I don't really know about the mule choir. I wasn't there.

Back to the Slab. At flood stage, water over the Slab dominated Dike talk. Comments about the Slab went like this: "Jap (Daddy), you crossed the Slab today," a fellow Dikeite might say, "how bad was it?"

Daddy might answer, "My old truck nearly drowned out; water was about two feet from the top of the fence posts. It was down six inches when I drove home."

So the Slab watch went until its waters returned to the bed of White Oak Creek. Give or take 10 accounts, there must be hundreds of stories out there about the Slab.

Here are two of my favorites:

When it came time for my first cousin and little brother, Archie Collins, to discover America, Daddy took Momma and Aunt Rosie to the hospital. Somehow, he crossed the Slab with water flowing over the tops of fence posts. I had nothing whatsoever to do with the hard fact that when Aunt Rosie birthed Archie, she took 10 bucks from the attending physician to name Archie after him, the doctor.

My oldest brother, Billy Wayne, once crossed the flooded Slab carrying a suitcase over his head. He was about to divest himself of his burden filled with dirty clothes and two pounds of black powder bought for an anvil shoot when he reached a drowned out car in the middle of the Slab and gave his arms a mandatory rest period.

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I don't mind one bit admitting that, during my innocent years, the Slab scared the ever lovin' peewaddle out of me. Many times I wondered if I had the courage to walk the Slab at night. It didn't help much that I heard a panther scream on Caney Creek when I was 8.

My critical experience with the Slab came in mid-September, '54. Our football team had played Mount Pleasant and was returning to Sulphur Springs. Daddy had told me I was to get off the bus where FM 69 crossed US 67 and he would meet me.

I left the bus at the designated spot...My heart skipped three beats because there was no sign of Daddy. I struck out for home riding shank's mare.

At the Slab, I don't mind telling you I flat out gave myself a talking to. "Now, Donald Wade," I said, "walk, don't run."

I didn't hear a panther scream that night, but I heard bullfrogs bellow, frogs big enough to eat me in one bite. Well, maybe not that big.

Inside 30 minutes, I crossed the last bridge marking the north end of the Slab, and I saw headlights on the brow of Mahoney Ridge coming at me faster than a jet plane. Soon, I heard the rattle of a cotton trailer hooked to a pickup truck.

Daddy!

"Did you walk all the way from 67," Daddy asked.

"Sure did," I answered.

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The corpse of my Slab fear lay dead in White Oak Bottom.