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Wantonly, casually, we watch the water of life drain away

by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

My Table Is Spread

In 1936, farmers began digging wells into the Ogallala Aquifer on the south Texas plains. The aquifer was fairly shallow and easily accessed. Since the 1890s, ranchers -- and the few farmers who lived there then -- had been drawing water up with windmills. But the 1930s brought new technology and more water. By the 1980s, more than 225,000 acres in Swisher County, where I was born in its county seat, Tulia, were irrigated.

My uncle Mac worked his whole life for Peerless Pump, a company that sold irrigation equipment. He started out in Plainview, a town halfway between Tulia and Lubbock. He rose through the ranks and was sent to manage the dealership in Muleshoe, west of Tulia, near the New Mexico border. I was sorry when he left Plainview because the Peerless Pump office there, on Highway 287, had an irrigation pump out front that ran all day, and maybe all night. Water gushed from the pump, like some kind of agricultural fountain. I thought it was beautiful. In truth, I still do, at least as I remember it.

That's 50 years of green, irrigated fields growing cotton, wheat, grain sorghum, corn, oats, barley and soybeans. My grandfather even grew a small stand of sugarcane; a crop native to his East Texas home, just so we kids could chew the cane and savor the sweet juice.

Many of my earliest memories of Tulia involve food. I remember picking romaine lettuce from my aunt's garden and rolling the leaves into cylinders and dipping them in Kraft French dressing, the orange dressing fluorescent against the soft green of the lettuce. I remember peach cobbler with cream from cows just milked. I remember fried chicken and biscuits and how my grandfather mixed the butter and honey with his knife. None of us could ever blend the butter and honey so smoothly, though we tried. I remember my grandmother scraping all the leftovers -- from dabs of mashed potato to chicken bones to

cake crumbs -- into a pie tin. She put the tin on the back porch and called, "Here, Inky," and the dog came running. I remember the women in the kitchen making chow-chow and pitting cherries from the backyard tree.

And I remember the taste of the water. From the faucet, from the garden hose, from the irrigation pump, the water was cold and clear. It wasn't tasteless, like distilled water, but the taste was its own and not like anything else we took into our mouths. It tasted like clear and it tasted like cold and it tasted like deeps and it tasted untouched. If the water had an odor, it was the smell of whatever was in the sink or on the stove, or the smell of rubber garden hose heating in the sun, or the metal smell of an irrigation pipe or the odor of turned earth, ready for planting.

The Tulia Chamber of Commerce will tell you it rains an average of 20 inches a year there. In 2003, it rained 10.18 inches. In 2008, it rained 15 inches. In 2011, it rained 5.52 inches. Even if the annual rainfall reaches the stated "average," it takes 24 to 28 inches of rain a year to raise a cotton crop. Even in a good year, cotton requires irrigation.

But the Ogallala Aquifer is running dry. As it runs dry, rainfall amounts are decreasing.

Tule Lake, where I learned to water ski, is no longer there. I don't mean it's too low for boating. I mean, the lake is gone, disappeared, dried up.

Though the rainfall for the first four months of 2014 is below average, May was a good, wet month, 3.26 inches. So the swimming pool is open this summer. There is a Level 2 drought restriction in place, but the pool is full. The town pool is closed in Crosbyton. And in Wichita Falls, a city some 200 miles south and east of Tulia, the local government is planning to recycle wastewater from city toilets and baths and sinks as drinking water.

Since the 1970s, the drinking water for Tulia, Silverton, Lockney and Floydada has come from the Mackenzie Reservoir, a lake made by damming Tule Creek. If you drink the water in Tulia now, make sure the water is cold, icy cold. Like the liquid colonoscopy prep, Tulia water can only be choked down straight from the refrigerator. Most of us who visit just bring bottled water.

My grandparents knew the value of water. They both bathed in a single tub of water, and never every day. For most of their lives, they grew gardens, but never lawns, at their house. They raked the bare dirt by the door into neat patterns and kept it weeded and free of rocks. Water was too precious to waste on decorations.

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"Water of life" and "living water" are church phrases. Farmers don't stand in the fields speaking of the water of life. They stand, their hands shading their eyes and scan the sky, looking up for rain, hoping for rain, praying for rain.

They don't speak of the water of life, but they know that water is life. We spill it as we spill blood. Wantonly, casually, daily, we watch the life fluids drain.

So the city pool in Tulia is filled this summer, and the Ogallala Aquifer is never filling again.

The Didinga people of the Sudan sing:

Conspire together, O earth and rivers: Conspire together, O earth and rivers and forests. Be gentle and give us plenty from your teeming plenty.

My family received from the teeming plenty. It is long overdue to ask, "What is our part in the conspiring together of earth and rivers and forests?" How do we learn to be gentle that we might continue to receive plenty from the teeming plenty?

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum lives in Colorado Springs. More of her work can be found at thecatholiccatalogue.com.]

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