Fall Colors Were a Call to Action

Folks in southeastern Kentucky knew
it was time to prepare for winter.

By Lucy Hislope, Xenia, Ohio

IN MID-OCTOBER, trees on the hillsides of Owsley County in southeastern Kentucky become a blaze of red, yellow and gold.

However, when I was younger, in the 1930s, my parents and many other mountain folk did not have time to enjoy the beauty that surrounded us. These seasonal changes were an omen that winter was on its way.

Mamma and Daddy worked like beavers, preparing for the cold winter months. They gathered corn, purchased coal, slaughtered hogs and stripped tobacco. They also bought each of us children long-legged underwear and a new pair of shoes.

Corn was an essential food item for our family table, and for our livestock and chickens. In early autumn, Daddy and my brothers went to the fields and picked corn. Then they cut the stalks and bunched them together in what looked like Indian tepees. Those fodder shocks were another good source of food for our cattle, especially in the late winter, when corn tended to run out.

Their next concern was obtaining the fuel to heat our four-room frame house. During my early growing-up years, we heated with a fireplace. It had a grate so we could use wood or coal for fuel.

When I got a little older, a potbellied stove burned coal. This worked a little better than the fireplace, but it still just heated only the room where it sat. But somehow, we never froze. Daddy usually had a truckload of coal delivered in late October or early November before

bad weather set in.

After the corn was picked and the coal was delivered, it was time to slaughter the two hogs that Daddy had been fattening since spring.

The tasks of slaughtering and butchering could not be rushed into. Since we had no refrigeration, it was necessary to wait until cold weather was here to stay.

Get Ready to Work!

The big event usually came in late November, a day that kept my parents busy from dawn until after dark.

By the end of the day, the smokehouse was filled with hams, pork shoulders, bacon and other edible parts. My mother fried sausage patties, sealed them in glass canning jars and rendered a big can of lard. The next day, she would make a kettle of lye soap.

My parents believed it was a sin to waste anything. Even though their aim was to provide for the family, they somehow managed to share a mess of fresh meat with neighbors.

As soon as hog killing was over, it was what the farmers called tobacco-stripping time. We children had no part in it, though; that was men's work.

My daddy and older brothers spent long hours in the cold barn stripping leaves from the stalks and sorting them into grades. While I don't know much about tobacco grades, I know the leaves were tied into hands of about 10 to 12 leaves each.

Daddy was a happy man when his tobacco was stripped, under a tarp in the back of a big truck and on its way to the burley tobacco market at Lexington, Kentucky. He loved those tobacco sales and stayed with his crop until it was sold.

Daddy always felt rich when he returned home with that little tobacco check. After he paid off our running account at the general merchandise store and bought some necessities, we were ready for Christmas and the upcoming winter.