

February and Hot Flashes Can Freeze a Man

Written by Joe Hudson

Monday, 07 February 2011 12:16 -

February is a time of testing in North Carolina. The skies seem to stay dark, like God redecorated and ordered a gun-metal gray theme. We bundle up and listen to the wind outside shrill against the eaves, and hope there is enough salt pork and flour to see us through to the spring.

Lucky me, I married Louise, Warrior Queen of the North. My wife has recently become as hot-natured as a boiling cauldron. Icicles hang from the kitchen cabinets, the dog is frozen in place with one icy paw pointing up towards the thermostat, and she says, "Is it just me or is it hot in here?" She steps over a penguin to lower the temperature . . . again. Outside it's so cold squirrels are throwing themselves on electric fences.

I do not argue with the Queen. I go outside in 21-degree weather and walk around a bit without a coat, go back inside and feel warmer. There is cold and there is less cold. Sometimes you just need perspective.

Luckily I grew up on a farm in eastern North Carolina, where you accepted winter the way you accept your looks – with resignation. Nothing you can do about it, really.

There was no TV weather forecasting for people on the farm, just a sudden sense of doom and old people saying their bones ached while we inventoried the jars of canned beans, corn and okra. As far as meat, we were good Baptists and believed that God would provide. A family of 10 would be reduced to a group of 8 by spring and everyone would appear well fed; there were never legal inquiries.

Winter on our hog farm was intense and gave you a shot of determination. Can you survive? Yes, but only if you really wanted to.

So with your jaw set you trudge outside to do chores at six in the morning, while the air still has

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the sharp bite of the cold night and the sun has yet to rise and give you hope. My job was to take a hammer to the water troughs and break what had frozen overnight so the hogs could drink. The big swine would stand in the unheated shelters looking at me. I remember one very gentlemanly Berkshire boar hog, his eyes staring at me, icicles hanging from his snout. His eyes seem to say, "Kill me now. Please." I swung the hammer and hit the trough of ice instead, and you could just see the disappointment on his face.

My father thrived on adversity and winter was his special challenge. If he could not see your breath while you worked outside then he called the whole thing off until the temperature dropped a bit more. He would put on long johns, two pairs of pants, a heavy flannel shirt, winter coat, gloves, and a hat, and then go outside to supervise my work. He would stand bundled up and watch me clean pens, repair broken gates and slats with my hands numb from the cold and say, "Winters just don't get cold like they used to."

But today the farm in the new South is different. The farmhouse has a special room in it called the "office," complete with filing cabinets, swivel back chairs, desks with "In" and "Out" mail baskets sitting beside computers with wireless internet service. You can track pig production and the health history of a Yorkshire sow while talking to your friends on Facebook. Download an MP3 file of "Boot Scootin' Boogie" and you can listen to it while you use software to plan corn crop rotation. And while you're at it, check your email and stock portfolio (Yikes! Halliburton dropped 2 points--Sell! Sell! Sell!). If my father were here today he would sniff and turn his head away in disgust: not enough sweat involved.

Winter on the farm is no longer a test of endurance. You just crank up a green John Deere tractor the size of a city block, complete with central heat, around-sound stereo and an overhead TV, all strategically placed in a soundproof cab, and you're good to go. The dashboard controls look like they belong in a Boeing 747 and there's enough room in the cab to raise a family of four or build a sauna. You sally forth into the fields not to break ground as a farmer, oh no – these days you're a professional agriculturalist (PA) and you're about to modify a crop site.

While plowing fields that now lie next to housing developments, you talk with your wife on your Blackberry (blackberries originally grew on bushes; did you know that?) and you both decide about supper – Bojangles, or call in a pizza? Pressure cookers for canning tomatoes, okra and corn were long ago donated to poor countries. Thus cell phones and fast food have now become a farmer's necessity. The bumping sound you hear is my father turning over in his grave.

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Days of old-fashioned farming, cows with names like Clarabelle, and gentle old mule teams are a thing of the past. Farms have gone wireless, turned into corporations and embraced the 40-hour work week. There was a time on the farm when we walked ten miles to school in the snow and 20 miles back, but obesity put a stop to that.

Meanwhile this old farm boy fights bravely to save marriage and soul. I'm sitting here freezing, trying to write this column while my wife wonders if we should take the quilts off the bed as she fans her face with both hands. Menopause, like hybrid corn seed, is a mystery I intend to ask God about first thing when I see Him. But right now I'm thinking about calling a professional agriculturalist and renting his tractor for awhile. I'll watch TV, stay warm and eat pizza.