



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Generations

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September 28, 2014

Last week, I received a newspaper column published in the local paper of my hometown, located in southeastern New Mexico. The town is where I was born and where I spent most of the first two decades of my life. I have enclosed the article at the end of this essay.

The journalist who wrote the report commented on my five brothers (and myself) as being the third generation of non-natives to have settled in this remote part of America. I knew this fact, but I had not given it much thought. Upon reflection, it gave me pause. My grandparents and their fellow pioneers were the first people, other than nomadic Native Americans, to have walked, much less lived, on this part of the earth.

In 1898, the year my grandparents brought their family from Texas to this harsh land, most of America had at least been trod-on and much of the territory was settled. But not where my grandparents stacked their claim. The land was so inhospitable the Native Americans only dared venture into it during warm weather to hunt for meager game. For the winter, they retreated east into what is present day West Texas to seek solace from the deadly, flat prairie snow storms. No trees, no mountains, few hills or gulleys. Occasional sage bush. No protection from wind, snow, and ice. And very little water.

To compliment the winters, the summers were dry, almost devoid of rain. The skies were often cloudless. A near constant wind swept across brown sage brush. Hot and almost silent, a faint whistle to the ear. Why did my ancestors come to this near-deadly land?

They came because they had few choices of how to eke out a living in the almost equally inhospitable land of west Texas. Their potential path into New Mexico was sweetened by Uncle Sam's acceptance of a squatter's claim.

Squatters. My heritage and that of my son and his children, owe our lives to two people who ventured into a land of little promise, squatted, and with their squats, perhaps not so elegantly, but with braveness, proclaimed: This land is mine.

My grandparents were unwary forerunners to modern day political protest movements that spring forth in abandoned, failed urban landscapes. Granddad and grandma had no anarchist, autonomist motives. They did not squat for purposes of protest and politics. They squatted for purposes of survival and success.

The water table. This part of the southwest had one of the most abundant water aquifers in America: the Permian Sea aquifer. The prairie grass was sufficient to support cattle, sheep, horses and small wild-life, but could only support a few of these animals per acre. Of course, acreage was not all that scarce. The county in which I was born and reared is bigger than Rhode Island. Thus, drilling for water, putting up a windmill to pump up the water, then putting in a dirt water tank for the animals, was a simple chore---back breaking, but simple.

Thus, on the surface, southeastern New Mexico was a desiccated landscape, another reason the area was avoided by homesteaders and other people who were headed to the west to find a different and more hopeful existence. But not too far beneath the surface, huge deposits of permeable rock and sand held a vast ocean of fresh water.



For the land stake and squatter pioneers, such as my grandfather and grandmother, it was the opportunity of their lifetime. A chance to have their own life, to answer to no one but Mother Nature, to possess and have property rights to a piece of earth. While they had to live very close to that earth, as seen in the photo to the left, they believed, and rightly so, that they had moved to a part of America that would offer them a chance to survive, have a life of modest

security, and an opportunity to carve out their own destiny. They were in charge of their success or failure. No social security. No health care. No Department of Agriculture to put their small allotment of land into a land bank, then be paid for doing nothing.¹ They succeeded or failed on their own.

My grandparents did not have much in the way of material value in their lives. Nor did my parents, especially in their early years. In addition, they did not have many comforts or conveniences. The table below documents these thoughts. It shows the services and amenities that four generations of the Black family accumulated from the time the first generation staked their claim to this part of America.

My son Tom skeptically grinned when I told him I lived my childhood without television. If Tom tells his son and daughter that he grew up without a smartphone, his children will likely take on a similar skepticism. But then, who can blame them? My dad boasted he walked several miles to-and-from a single-house school whose teacher educated children of all grades. Trudging through the rare but deadly blizzard to learn how to write script, he came to write a poignant poem about those times. It s a poem I will recount to you in a later writing. For now, take a look at the table on the following page.

What to make of these wonderful inventions and discoveries? We humans have made amazing additions in our lives to make ourselves more comfortable. As children, my mom and dad had no electricity, indoor plumbing, or a telephone. Of course, they lived in a remote part of America, an area that had been avoided by none other than the wanderer, Cabeza de Baca. Still, many people in America in the early 1900s were also privy to only outdoor privies. I recall in my youth when mother spent a full day washing and hanging to dry the clothes of dad and her six sons. She spent even more time at the ironing board. Oh what she could have done with some daughters!

We humans are an inventive species. For that, I am thankful. Yet, we often seem to forget that two or three generations ago, our relatives were not all that secure in their old age, or physically comfortable in their youth and later years. We were without medical and old age nets.

We are now a part of a welfare society, one in which government and other institutions are setup to look after our well-being. We have many choices to make to augment our convenience and self-coddling. We are made safe from potential harms that our ancestors faced: wild animals, the near absence of doctors or dentists, or any chance whatsoever of going hungry. These scripts of life were simple and accepted perils of the trade that my grandparents took in as part of their daily existence.

¹ This is not my grandparents' earthen home, also called a dugout. It is similar to what they lived in. My father told me his family home was so small, the boys had to sleep outside in the wagon bed. Picture is courtesy of Google.

A Snapshot of Four Generations: The Accumulation of Conveniences

Generation	As Youths	As Adults
1 st : Great Grandparents Birth: 1870s		
2 nd : Parents Births: 1899, 1910		electricity, indoor plumbing, washing machine, telephone, social security, FDIC
3 rd : Me Birth: 1939	electricity, indoor plumbing, washing machine, telephone, social security	electricity, indoor plumbing, washing machine, telephone, social security, television, mobile phones, FDIC, Internet, air conditioning, Medicare, unemployment insurance, health insurance, social networks, urgent care, iPads, generic engineering
4 th : Son Birth: 1968	electricity, indoor plumbing, washing machine, telephone, social security, television, mobile phones, FDIC, unemployment insurance, health insurance	electricity, indoor plumbing, washing machine, telephone, social security, television, mobile phones, FDIC, Internet, air conditioning, Medicare, unemployment insurance, health insurance, social networks, urgent care, iPads, genetic engineering, ?

What do we lose by becoming part of this secure and serene existence? Some say we lose our independence and our ability to choose. They say we lose control over many aspects of our lives, that we have emasculated ourselves and our legacy of strength and self-sufficiency.

I sometimes find myself thinking these same thoughts. I grow weary of the urban and urbane way of life. I grow tired of having no silence around me, of having no solitude. I've lived the other way at times: taking in remoteness and silence, one of just getting away.

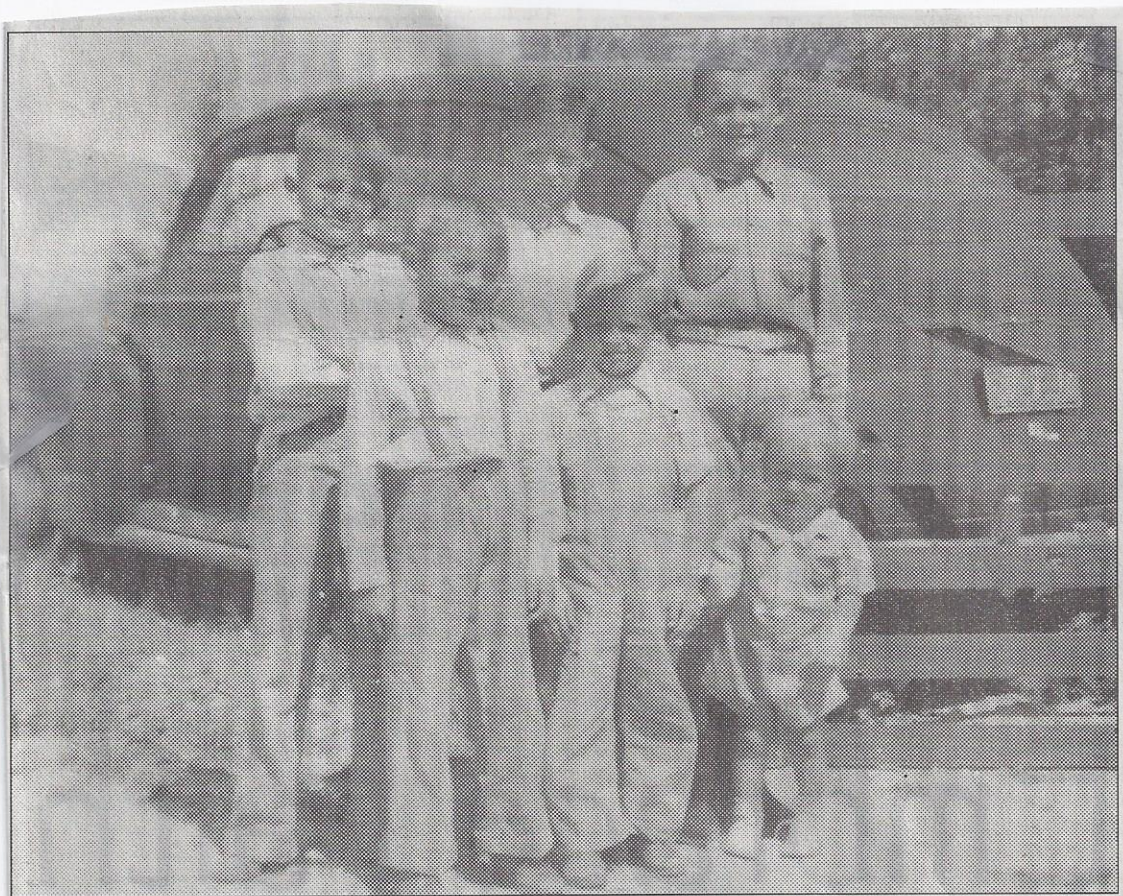
But this "other way" was not living in a dugout, infested with ants, scorpions, and tarantulas. It was not digging a well with my bare hands and some rough-hewn shovels and the steel crowbar to bring up the rock that protected the precious water. It was not the fear of leaving a dugout during a winter blizzard to become lost and quickly frozen when only a few feet from the dugout door. It was not the fear of a failed crop, or the scarcity of jackrabbits and antelope to augment an already meager meal.

My grandparents gave up much of their security when they left their homes in Texas to come to the bleak landscape of southeastern New Mexico. I like to think that what they lost in security, they gained in freedom. If only vicariously, I like to think I can travel the blue roads of America, lose myself in a protected enclave of a national park, and somehow revive the genetic stands of my grandparents.

I also know, deep down into my DNA, I do not have the wish or will to give-up the freedoms and encumbrances of a life that is only two generations removed from living in an earthen home in the middle of a barren prairie desert. I sometimes pine for those past times, ones I only know from the memories left to me by my mother and father. But what fine memories they are.

As a short preface to Jim's article: I do not have a Ph.d as Jim has stated. A doctorate that is gained in one's pursuit of knowledge and attainment is one to be lauded. Because my professional pursuits in life were geared toward non-scholastic goals, I left the world of formal academics before I had to confront the writing of a dissertation. I have a couple of graduate degrees, but they are flavored toward the non-ivy side of life.

Black brothers tough as horses they rode



SUBMITTED PHOTO

In a 1941 photo, these are the sons of Lea County's Ed Black family: back row, left to right: Ross, Eddie, David; front row, Jimmy, Tommy, and Uyless. Driving a wagon, their granddad Joel brought his wife and 9 children to the future Lea County in 1909.

In a hypnotic, old five-by-seven inch, black-and-white photograph, the sons of Jim Black stand for a picture in front of the new 1941 Ford sedan their father used in his duties as Lea County Sheriff.

Much of the decade before the photo was taken were hard times in Lea County, a rough-and-tumble era for a man with a badge trying to keep the peace and the people calm during the Depression, dust bowl weather tracking across most of the Southern Plains and a lot of out-of-work poor people packing all their belongings and drifting west into wind filled with dirt.

Sheriff Black must have had his hands full in covering the many miles of Lea County in his Ford, but taken together his six young sons look like they might have also been a handful to handle.

The youngest, Uyless, looks like he might be the one least likely to fly off the handle or run away from home looking for some real action, his right hand suggesting he might be grabbing at his older brother Tommy's arm.

However, even Uyless appears to be looking the camera right in the eye with about as much self-assurance as an 18-month-old child with spindly legs can have.

These are the brothers Black, the sons of Sheriff Jim, the grandsons of Joel David and Laura Francis Black who had moved about Texas in a wagon filled with their belongings trying to find their place for more than a decade beginning in 1898 or 1899.

It was in 1909, one year after the town of Lovington was founded, that they drove their wagon and their family across the Texas line into New Mexico and settled down.

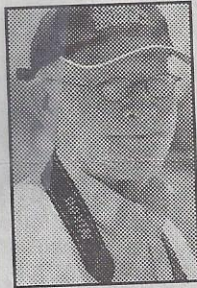
J.D. had wanted to position the family at the foot of the caprock where he had filed a squatter's claim, but the land was taken and with his nine children he settled instead just east of present Crossroads on land that was then in Chaves County.

Thus, the brothers Black in the 1941 photo were of tough pioneer stock, the third generation of their family living on land that was only three decades beyond being a raw-boned frontier.

Like the members of so many American pioneer families, all six of them grew up independent and bullheaded enough to have confidence they could blaze their own trails into whatever territory they wanted to travel.

I have had the pleasure of being around several of the brothers — Uyless, Tommy and Ross — and during this year's Lea County Fair I ran into one more of them I had not met.

Eighty-five-year-old Eddie Black came back to revisit his old stompin' grounds of Lea



Jim
Harris

*The Last
Frontier*

County, the land where he was raised, and after we met, Eddie agreed to spend a couple of hours answering some questions from me about his life.

Eddie lives in El Paso now (for the last 13

years), but during his colorful life he has lived in such places as the state of Washington (seven years) and Dallas, Texas (24 years).

And by the way, he lived in Korea for 19 months during the war on that peninsula. That's where he was awarded two bronze stars for heroism.

There is a picture of him dressed in his Army uniform that will be on the Lea County Museum's Wall of Honor when the museum's "Veterans Exhibit" opens on Sept. 12, an image with him standing in the snow with the same confident look on his face he had as a much younger man in the 1941 photo.

As for Eddie's brothers I have known, they were, and are, all talented men with their own set of skills and arts that have taken them down several different life paths.

Deceased less than a year, Ross Black I knew since 1974 when he was a coach, teacher, and administrator at New Mexico Junior College. Among his other talents, Ross served as a school superintendent and a county commissioner.

Tommy Black was an aggressive and talented athlete in public schools and in college. He also was a coach and teacher, and he still competes in Senior Olympics. I have the great pleasure of owning one of Tom's beautiful handmade sheath knives that is as beautiful as any other work of art Mary and I own.

Uyless Black, the baby in the 1941 photo, is a Ph.D. lecturer in computer science and technology and the author of more than three dozen books that range from university texts to a collection of humorous essays ("The Light Side of Little Texas") about his growing up in Lea County.

Did I say the Black brothers are talented?

Did I mention the Black brothers are tough?

Did I suggest just how successful they have been?

Are you now curious about Eddie whom I met only a few weeks ago?

Like his brother Tom, Eddie has had a love of horses and of rodeos, and he has trained some of the finest race horses in America.

But readers will have to wait for more about Eddie Black, whom I will write about in a future Last Frontier column.

I'll conclude this one by repeating that Eddie has had a few ups and downs over the years. He had a downer when he had a heart attack while he was watching the rodeo at the Lea County Fair.

They flew Eddie back to El Paso, and he is doing just fine, thank you. I don't believe he will be riding a wild bronc in next year's rodeo like his brother Tommy could do if he really wanted to, but Eddie and I will be talking again and readers will learn more about him, a man who is one of the members of Lea's First Family of Many Things, the Black family.

Jim Harris is the director of the Lea County Museum in Lovington.