

## From the Desk of Founding Dean Charles Handy

**I recently read *A Painted House* by John Grisham. The story, told through the eyes of seven-year-old Luke Chandler, takes place**

in rural Arkansas during the early 1950s. Luke's family, which consisted of his parents and paternal grandparents, were cotton farmers. The grandparents own their rural home, which is unpainted like many rural homes, but painted during the story. The Chandlers rent their cotton fields. Each year is a struggle to make ends meet.

Luke's ambition is to play baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals. His summer evenings are occupied listening to Harry Caray broadcast Cardinal contests. Although his family does have electricity, they lack many commonly accepted conveniences like indoor plumbing and television. Saturday is the family's big

day of the week, when they motor to nearby Black Oak to socialize, enjoy a drugstore treat, and watch a movie. Sunday is a day of rest with church attendance a priority.

Grisham's story reminds me of my own childhood spent in small town Coffey, Missouri. (Like other "city" folks, our house was painted.) I too listened to Cardinal games and longed to play for St. Louis. On occasion, I would turn to WHO in Des Moines and listen to the teletype transmission of Chicago Cubs games by Ronald "Dutch" Reagan.

My family were merchants whose livelihood depended on trade with area farmers. Like Luke's family, we had electricity but did lack other modern day conveniences. In winter, bath water was hand pumped from an outside well and heated over our kitchen stove. Summer was a different story; rain water from our home roof drained into large wooden barrels. The summer sun heated the water

adequately for tub bathing. Should barrel water run out or turn stale, the winter procedure was always available.

Saturday was also Coffey's big day. The farmers came to town. Trade at the three major stores was enhanced by free merchandise drawings. During the summer months, local merchants also provided free outdoor movies. There was only one projector, which gave patrons intermission time as the reels were changed. Sundays also meant church attendance in Coffey.



Grisham's tale ends as Luke and his parents travel to Flint, Michigan, where his father was to take a job in GM's Buick plant. The bottomland farmed by the Chandlers had flooded and a crop failure was once again in the offing. The move accomplished a goal of Luke's mother, who felt that leaving the uncertainty of cotton farming would afford a better future

for her son. Did the move help Luke? I can only assume it did.

The Great Depression and crop failures took their toll in my small Missouri community. My family was forced to seek greener fields. Our move was welcomed by my teacher-trained mother. As was the custom in that day, she had left the classroom after marriage. My brother and I became her major concern. She felt the move would enhance our future opportunities.

Although my brother's early accomplishments pointed to a successful life, his future was cut short by his death in the service in 1953. But the sacrifice and dedication of my father and mother allowed me to pursue a rewarding career in the field of education. They weathered very difficult times, and I will forever be in their debt. ■

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—CHARLES HANDY