



MUZZLED OXEN

a memoir by

Genevieve Grant Sadler



Genevieve Rogers Grant Sadler ("Brick")

Muzzled Oxen

*Reaping Cotton and Sowing Hope
in 1920s Arkansas*

Genevieve Grant Sadler



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PART I

Hearts Turned Back to Dixie

1. Unto the Mountain of Nebo

A WAVE OF HATRED, a burning resentment, swept through me, leaving me speechless and limp as I sat in our old Ford car parked by the drug store and looked up and down the street. How I hated it all!

This feeling had begun at the time my brother-in-law remarked dryly, when I asked him if I looked all right, “Sure, but you’ll find that Southern ladies don’t wear pants in public.” I was wearing at that time an outfit of tan riding breeches and leggings, with a tan shirt, visor cap, and gloves. To me these clothes were both comfortable and appropriate, and had served well on the long trip from California, but I changed to a green linen dress that had been crisp and new when I left home, yet was now quite wrinkled and bedraggled looking. My best hat, that I had cherished carefully in a hat bag for six weeks through as many states, I now threw away for it was bent and broken and unfit to wear.

That first timid drive, down through the town onto the main street, eyeing with a palpitating interest every face, and being in turn surveyed with either a look of indifference or a calculating stare, had ended—here. We sat under the burning heat of the sun, in a car that was hot, dusty, and overcrowded. My husband, Wayne, and his brother, Henry, sat in the front seat, and I knew by the look on their faces that they were trying hard to keep from expressing any opinion. We had been so hopeful and eager in making this trip to the Southland, and though our plans were still a little vague, we had looked forward to a place where conditions would be at least as satisfactory as those we had left behind.

The heat was excessive and my hair clung to my head. The night before, we had made our last camp on a hillside just outside of town where there was no water and little shade. Now, here in the forenoon, rumped and nervous and disappointed, and with our clothes sticking to our backs in the damp heat and the perspiration beginning to run down our faces, we just sat and looked about.

Our two little boys, Jimmy and Donald, travel-wise and weary, sat

quietly beside me, saying nothing. Donald, nearly seven, was our adopted son; his father, now dead, was a favorite brother of mine. Jimmy was about four months older than Donald. Both boys had brown hair and dark blue eyes. They were sturdy and healthy with round pink cheeks and a few freckles, and, best of all, each had a ready smile and an eager interest in all that went on.

After our long weeks of driving steadily ahead, following no daily mileage schedule, the longing to be up and going, to see what lay beyond the distant hills, was still with us. Such a feeling of subordination of one's self there had been in the eagerness to be on! The only important thing was to say, "By nightfall we shall be at the foot of that purple mountain ahead."

We had begun to feel that we would never want to stop, but would like to drive on and on, forever. After the many beautiful towns we had been through, to stop here, of all places, seemed to bring us up with a shock to the unpleasant realization that our traveling was at an end. We had become accustomed to viewing all places with the critical eyes of travelers, and what lay before us was far from attractive. This was Dardanelle.

One short dirty main street, with papers lying about. The barber busily sweeping the hair trimmings from his floor across the sidewalk and into the street where Negroes straggled by. Small stores where listless men and boys lounged in the entrances. The unpaved street was the highway for farm wagons and automobiles, and seemed to be composed of nothing but soft, deep, dry soil that sent up a cloud of dust with every passing vehicle. When it rained, as we found out later, a black sticky mud formed a mire and each car and wagon churned along through deep ruts filled with water. Nevertheless I saw women in white summer dresses and white shoes who were picking their way daintily along among the debris, obviously accepting the dirt as a matter of course. Tufts of loose gray cotton, heavy with dust, were blown against the sidewalks, and grimy bits of fluff were caught in the cracks of the screens at the store doors and in the spokes of the wheels of the heavy mule-drawn wagons that were tied to hitching posts along the street.

"Let's be going," I suggested at last. Wayne and Henry had returned to the car. They had been sauntering up and down the street trying to find someone who would remember them. Now they stood hesitating and silent, and I turned my head so they would not be able to see the shock and dull despair on my face. My nerves were quivering. I knew that if I

spoke I would break down completely. This was their old home town, and though they remembered it well, yet truly they must have thought that the years that had passed would surely have brought changes and improvements. I didn't want to hear the things I felt they might say, in attempting to apologize or explain; I wanted to spare them that. I knew it would be more than I could bear, for we were now entirely committed to this situation.

As we were about to drive farther on down the street, two elderly men came out of the bank, and recognizing Wayne and Henry, greeted them warmly and stopped and chatted eagerly, evidently glad to meet again these sons of a man who had been a lifelong friend. They were most courteous in welcoming the bewildered young daughter-in-law to their little town. They pleased Jimmy and Donald, too, with their kind words, and promised to see that we met their families. I watched the people passing by while I listened to the conversation. I was amazed to hear them speak with such evident pride in the town. Why, I simply couldn't understand. Even now, in kindest judgment, all I can say is that to them, it stood for all that can be represented in the word "home."

While I sat there, I went back in my mind over all the history of my husband's family that I could recall. Invariably the talk at meal times would veer around to stories of this or that relative in Arkansas, some of whom had the most intriguing names—Candace, Delilah, Crispinius. The continued recounting of events, with greatest accuracy as to time and place and exact kinship, amused me, bored me, and amazed me. When all the relatives had been gathered together for a Sunday dinner the same kind of talk went on and on, only then it became more stimulating and more exciting. My amazement was caused by the extreme kindness and veneration with which all their ancestors were remembered. I was amused at the exactness of even trivial details and circumstances and the real insight that was displayed in describing people and events, or in the summing up of someone's traits of character. Looking back now, it seems to me that always, day after day, year after year, the common subjects of conversation so avidly entered into were of the past, seldom of the future nor even of the present. That was what bored me and made me feel as though I were living alongside of this family, not completely with them. Any attempts I made to change the channel of thought or make teasing remarks about their ancestor worship were politely ignored, and I soon learned that among all the Southerners I met, there was a fellowship that

to walk, yet we could not really assist her as she was so much heavier than any of us. So she literally staggered on, in her French heels and tight clothes, suffering every step of the way.

Next day, after much sleep and rest, we could laugh at our experiences, but we never told the neighbors of our foolish preparations for that trip.

2. Preview

THE SKY WAS OVERCAST, the heat intense, and the air sticky and close, the day I went with Wayne to visit our farm for the first time. Jimmy and Donald were very eager, also, to see this much-talked-of place. They were weary of the quiet sameness and mild activity of our mountain days and this trip seemed like an adventure to them.

We were soon off the mountain. We stopped the car near the blacksmith shop on the main street of town, beneath a huge cottonwood tree where one of the cross-streets cut over the river bank. Here lay a river boat, a big stern-wheeler which was used to carry passengers across the river only when the water was so high that the pontoon bridge had to be taken out. This meant that the floating pontoons were disconnected and half the bridge swung down against either shore. This pontoon bridge was more than two thousand feet long, I learned. It had seventy-two pontoons and had been here for nearly thirty years.

While Wayne was talking to an old friend in the doorway of a high-pillared white house, the man's wife picked me a bouquet of fragrant yellow jasmine and honeysuckle that climbed luxuriantly over the porch and fence. I saw a limp sack that looked to me like an old jelly-bag hanging by a rope from the lower branch of a small tree on the lawn and I inquired why she had hung her jelly out-of-doors under a tree to drip. At her surprised look, I pointed toward the tree. "Why that's a 'pappy-dad,'" she said. It was a canvas sack that had once been half-filled with straw, upon which the children had swung, seating themselves astride the bundle. The stuffing in the sack was now nothing but a small wad, for the children had worn it out.

Jimmy and Donald thought that was the most amazing swing they had ever seen.

There were lawns before nearly all of the white painted houses. They were of Bermuda grass, a stiff, hardy grass that stayed green until the heavy frost killed it in the fall. Many of the homes were made beautiful by the protecting Virginia creeper. Huge cottonwood trees and sycamores, and magnolias with their glossy green leaves and milk-white blossoms, were planted along the streets and towered above the houses, while on nearly every porch was a swing-seat. The crape-myrtle bushes with their rosy blooms, and the mulberry, haw, and chinaberry trees attracted my attention also. There seemed to be so many of these along the side streets and in every yard.

After the cool breezes of the mountains, the heat in town seemed unbearable. My clothes clung, wet, to my arms and shoulders and I could feel the prickly heat popping out on my back. The leather upholstery of the car was hot in the sun. My head was damp all over and the loose hair around my face clung, while the perspiration trickled beneath my hat over my forehead. The breeze made by the moving car was a relief.

The fields we passed were mostly of cotton, long, even rows of beautiful green, but I saw some vegetable patches and some fine plantings of pole-beans and dark-leaved stalks of corn growing at the ends of the cotton rows.

The river on our left flowed muddy and deep below banks twenty feet high. Sometimes the road went along the very edge of this bank, where the soil was loose and sandy. Again it curved inland, cutting directly through the cotton fields, where the soil was black and shiny from the recent rains.

The cotton plants, with leaves like those of the thimble-berry, were of an even deep green, stretching away for miles toward the foothills, the fields broken by rough roads, the ruts filled with water.

The car sped along, Wayne negotiating a muddy stretch where the two ruts were submerged, out driving high and carefully to keep in the two ruts that looked the best and most traveled.

There were no more real houses—only Negro cabins and unpainted shacks; yet these people paid big rents, and made no demands for improvements, for they knew they wouldn't get them if they did. Some of these little houses had the protection of a cottonwood tree for shade, but most of them were bare and ugly, with a brick or stone chimney trying hard to cling to the warped wall of the house.

A few of the houses had apparently once been white-washed. I saw



Brick and Wayne, who eloped in 1912, were somewhere in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains when this photo was taken. People in the bottom row include Brick's sister Vera Grant on the far left; her mother third from left; and on the far right her brother Douglas Grant.

*Wayne, in a photo probably
taken by Brick near the sea in
Santa Cruz, circa 1912.*



*Wayne farming in 1917,
probably in Soquel,
California.*



*Brick, Wayne, Donald, and
Jimmy (clockwise from left),
probably on the farm in Soquel.*