

# Hugh C. Hulse



Summer at my grandparent's house was always fun, especially when I was too young to haul hay or do other jobs that were hard for a little boy. One time when I was staying with them for a few days, Granddad told me we needed to clear out the weeds in the pond behind the barn. A new adventure, only across the barnyard, but still a little farther than I could wander on my own. There was a pipe through the bank. When the plug was pulled out of the pipe's lower end, water ran through ditches to irrigate the garden. If the weeds got too thick, the pipe could get clogged. Granddad used a long rake to pull the weeds out, but my method was more fun. I jumped in and grabbed them by the armful. I'm not sure how old I was, but I am certain I did more playing than working. Granddad showed me the tadpoles and explained that these were all going to turn into frogs soon. He pulled one out of the water so I could see that it was already growing legs.

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Another day he took me on a walk through the barnyard gate. It was a small wooden gate anchored to a tree by hinges on one side and resting against a post on the other. The gate closed by itself; I was very impressed by that. There was a weight on a small chain with one end fastened to the gate and the other to the tree. Opening the gate raised the weight, and when you let go, the weight pulled the gate closed.

At the upper end of the barnyard, Granddad found just the right sapling, straight-grained, not too thick, and not too thin. He took his knife out of the sheath on his belt. He always had that knife with him, one he had made from an old straight razor. (My father carried it for years after his dad died, but I don't know what happened to it.) He cut the sapling and trimmed it to an appropriate length. Leaving a spot in the middle the width of my hand, he started shaving the bark on one side. He continued cutting until he had removed the wood on one side halfway through to both ends, leaving the middle as a handhold. After cutting notches on the two ends, he tied a string coated with beeswax to both notched ends. He led me into one of the outbuildings where he had set aside a straight-grained board. Taking his knife again, he split the board up to make arrows. Finally, he gave me a short lesson on archery.

When I was a bit older, I wanted a pair of cowboy boots. It seemed only right, I lived on a ranch, and I did ride horses once

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in a while. But, I had very narrow feet, and it was hard to find cowboy boots that fit me. Finally, when I was about nine or ten, my parents gave me a pair of cowboy boots, black with fancy stitching. The next time we visited my granddad's house, I showed him my boots. He looked at them and asked, "Do you have any spurs to go on them?" Well, I hadn't even thought about that, and I told him I did not. He got out of his chair by the window and, walking to a room in the back of the house, found a pair of spurs. These spurs were unlike any I had seen, having no rowels (the spiked discs seen on cowboy spurs). He explained these were cavalry spurs and were made that way so an overzealous soldier would be less likely to injure the horse. He rummaged in the hall closet until he found a piece of leather to cut into straps the right size for a little cowboy and his boots.

I wondered for years where those spurs had come from and finally pieced together what seemed to be the most likely story. Granddad had served in World War I, caring for horses and mules. He had also ridden as a messenger. I thought maybe that was where he got them, but he was in the combat engineers, not the cavalry. I doubt if they were issued to him.

After Granddad died, I got a Civil War-era cavalry saber. Dad told me that when president Warren Harding made a trip around the West, one of his stops was at Meacham, between LaGrande and Pendleton, Oregon. On July 3, 1923, thirty thousand people

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gathered to commemorate the completion of the old Oregon Trail highway, and during the two-day event, there was a mock cavalry charge down the hill. Granddad rode in that charge, and the saber was part of his uniform for that pageant. I think the spurs must have come from the same event.

My grandparents lived in a red cinder block house with a basement made up of a garage, laundry room, and spare bedroom. One day as I was playing in the bedroom, I noticed a framed certificate hanging on the wall. Closer examination revealed that “Hugh C. Hulse served with honor in the World War and was wounded in action.” That was news to me. I’d never heard about Granddad being in the army, and I wanted to hear about it now. Excited, I ran up the stairs, ready to hear stories. I hurried into the living room to find Granddad in his big chair. “Granddad, were you in the army?”

He answered quietly, “Yes, but that was a long time ago.”

That’s all he said, no stories, just a few words followed by awkward silence. I had to think fast. If he was wounded, he should have a Purple Heart. I didn’t know at the time they didn’t give a medal for being wounded until the next war. Instead, they gave the certificate I’d seen in the basement. So, I asked, “Do you have any medals?”

“No, nothing like that,” he replied.

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That's all the conversation we had about his military service. Years after his death, I found that he had written a book chronicling his experiences in the Great War. When I read it, I began to realize what that man had gone through and why he didn't want to introduce a little boy to the horrors of war.

My twelfth year brought a sadness I'd never known. I was home sick on Valentine's Day. So, I was there when my dad got a phone call. As he rushed out of the door, he told me my granddad was being taken to the hospital. A little later, mom called to see if he had left, and I asked her what was happening. She said, "I think your granddad is dead."

I wished they had told me more. Why didn't they take me aside to tell me what was happening, to talk about it? My parents weren't ones to communicate things to children, or at least to me. It's interesting to me how I feel about it now. I'm a sixty-seven-year-old man, and as I write these words, I feel like a twelve-year-old boy trying to make sense of what was going on around him. I feel it now, a sadness that has crept up on me unexpectedly and seized me with cold hands. It isn't overwhelming, but my eyes are a bit misty. Children should not be left to feel their way through the trauma that impacts them. I assumed my granddad was dead but felt awkward asking, so I listened closely. Dad was on a call to his cousin, and I heard,

“Hugh passed away today.” I’ve no memory of my being upset even though I had to confirm the news by eavesdropping. It was just how things were done in my family. Thinking about it now, my sadness turns to anger and then to compassion as I realize my parents were treading water themselves. They simply didn’t know how to think about emotions, much less explain them to a young boy.

A couple of days later, my mom asked, “Do you want to go to your granddad’s service?” I knew what service meant, but fifty-five years later, I still remember her choice of words. Why couldn’t she say funeral? Especially with children, but even with adults, we try to soften the message when speaking of death, sometimes to the point of obfuscation. No one said, “Granddad died.” They said he passed on, passed away, or just passed — they seemed to imply he had graduated — he passed.

A couple of years ago, my mother-in-law died quietly in her chair. We knew she was going to die, and our kids and grandkids had come. When we realized she had died, I brought the grandkids into the living room. I told them that their grandma, or G-ma, as she signed cards and the like, had died, but it wasn’t a sad thing. Oh, it was sad for us, and we would miss her. We would mourn and cry because of our loss, but it wasn’t sad for her. She had been in pain, but now she was with Jesus, and she was happy. I told them that what we saw in the chair wasn’t

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G-ma; it was just the box she came in. Some might think I was blunt and unfeeling to speak that way to little children, but I wish someone would have explained what was happening to me all those years ago.

I did go to Granddad's service, but I had no idea what to expect. Dad taught me that boys weren't supposed to cry, so when I felt I couldn't hold the tears, I looked up at the ceiling where the heating ducts were and thought, "Those are really interesting pipes." Anything to keep from crying, anything to hide my weakness.

Then, the time I had dreaded came. We were ushered into a line of people paying their respects, a nice way of saying we were going to look at the body. My greatest fear was that he would have turned green, but ironically this was the one part of the day that made me feel better. He seemed to be sleeping contentedly. I remember standing there and just looking at him. He looked, and I felt at peace.

I have only two other memories of that day. First was the sound of a bugler playing Taps. As the notes drifted through the drizzle of the February day, the pallbearers folded the flag and handed it to my grandmother. She collapsed, sobbing at the loss of the only man she had loved.

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The second was back at Grandma's house. Dad was standing in front of the fireplace, fingering an old knife that lay on the mantle. It was probably one that Granddad had made. Grandma said, "You and your dad skinned a lot of deer with that." For the first time in my life, I saw a tear fall from my father's eye, just one, and he shut it down quickly. I thought, Why did she say that? Looking back, I believe it was exactly what she needed to say. We all needed to grieve, my father included. God gave us tears for a reason, and to shut them down is not manly, but foolish.

This wasn't meant to delve so deeply into the feelings of my first experience with death. Perhaps that twelve-year-old boy needed to be revisited, and his adult self needed to remember how alone he felt, and how much he loved his granddad.