

## **Growing Up on a Farm**

“My father told me no one was better than me...and my mother reminded me that I was no better than anyone else.” Roger DiPaolo  
(April 2018 at his Kent [Ohio] Roosevelt Hall of Fame Induction)

It occurred to me that what Roger said about his parents’ admonition to him while growing up is exactly what my parents taught me as I was growing up. Actually, that is what my mother taught me, as my father was basically silent on giving advice. He was introverted and Mom was extroverted. Dad’s name was Frank and he was frank. His main advice was, “To be successful, do what you say your gonna do,” and if you want to be really successful, do it early.” Mom’s main advice was, “Follow the golden rule.” She would always add...”Be polite and respectful to everyone.”

My folks were hard working people (I’m a hard worker). They were honest (I’m honest). They were polite (I’m polite). They had lots of friends (I have lots of friends). They were financially cautious. (I’m financially cautious). They always went places early. (I go places early...if Ruth is ready). They went to bed early (I go to bed early). They loved each other for over fifty years. (Ruth and I have been married for over sixty years). They were farmers. (I work in our yard more hours each week than most folks and When I get a call, Ruth tells the caller that I’m in the yard ‘digging holes.’). I guess you might say that my folks’ DNA didn’t fall far from the tree. I really am a product of their genes and behavior... and proud of it.

My sisters were older (Ruth-16 years and Alice-six years) and Ruth had moved away before I was two. Alice was my second mother, selecting my clothes and teaching me social skills and music. Alice mentored me in school and basically “bossed me around.” The only time I could get the upper hand with her was when I would go to the chicken coop, retrieve a rooster, and threaten her with

throwing it at her as she was deathly afraid of chickens...especially roosters. Mostly, we had a very calm life...helping do farm work and going to school and school activities. Before I was five, I would help Mom with her household duties but at about age six I started going to the field with Dad...riding in a second seat on the tractor (with a chain over my lap rather than a seat belt), and when I would be starting to nod off, put under a tree with my bag of toys to build "farms" and eventually take a nap...one in the morning before our lunch and one in the afternoon. We farmed several farms, one two miles away, and when there Dad and I would have a picnic lunch to share. We didn't talk my about "life lessons" but rather about farming and tractors. At about age twelve, I started driving the tractor by myself, discing and plowing, at first all fun and later boring, so I would sing songs to stay awake. Since I was a red head ("gingers" in today's lexicon), I had trouble getting sun burned and freckled, so I wore straw hats, long sleeves, neck scarfs and gloves, even in the warmest weather. Uncomfortable then but probably the reason I haven't had as many problems with skin cancer as some of my ginger friends. Farming was a rather lonesome life for a small boy as our nearest neighbors were nearly a mile away, so I learned to entertain myself with toys, throwing balls against the silo and fielding ground balls, and playing with my pony and dog. My first pony was named Pal, given to me by one of my father's first employers when he worked in Cleveland, and I rode him nearly every day, exploring every square inch of our farm. When he died when I was about ten, my parents bought me another Shetland pony, who was all black, so we named him Jet. My first cousin, Bobby, would spend summers with his grandfather, my Dad's brother, who lived one mile away. Bobby had a pony too and we would meet midway between the two farms and ride all day nearly every day that weather permitted. It was not uncommon for us to be together from mid-morning till late afternoon, even packing our lunches so we didn't have to return home. Those were different times and our parents and grandparents never seemed to worry about what we were doing. One day we would explore a wooded area, the next we might have lunch by the

creek (eighteen inches of water on normal days) and “swim” in a deeper spot (three feet) around an old dead tree trunk. We only ever had one disagreement, and as I have mentioned else where, that argument involved who was the best cowboy, (Roy Rogers or Gene Autry), and we even wrestled over that one, but no blows were struck. My times with Bobby were always great but ended too soon when at age twelve he developed a brain tumor and died. That was one of several traumatic events in my early life (the others were my grandfather’s death, the deaths of my dogs, Doc and Terry, and my mother’s depressive events) and it was handled like most problems in that period...by discussing it and then never talking about it again. It seems that farmers deal with life and death frequently (the intended and unintended deaths of animals) and one learns early that “life goes on.” I had two dogs, Doc, given to me by our family physician, Doc Thomas, and, Terry who we purchased after Doc’s death. Doc was a very protective Fox Terrier and would threaten, and occasionally nip strangers. My father declared, after one incident of “nipping,” that the next time he bit someone, he would have to be put down. Around age thirteen, I was wrestling with a friend in the yard and when my buddy got on top of me, Doc bit him very hard on his calf. My father said that Doc, now about ten or eleven must be “put down.” I argued that Doc was only protecting me, but the decision about Doc’s fate had been made and announced much earlier. We took him to the Vet to be “put to sleep,” unlike other animals that were euthanized on our farm (They were shot!). I never hated my parents for doing this (My Mom wouldn’t have followed through), and could never imagine ever doing something like that myself... but this was the ways were handled back then. Shortly after Doc’s death, we purchased another Fox Terrier and I named him Terry. I don’t really remember why I selected Terry but it might of been because I always listened to “Terry and the Pirates” program on the radio. Terry lived to the age of six when he was hit by a car and his back legs were paralyzed. This time, my father decided to handle Terry’s issue in a different manner. He rigged up a harness for Terry’s hind quarters which was affixed to a platform with several caster

wheels. Terry adjusted quite well, except for tall grass and lived another six months before he became sick and we had to euthanize him. When Ruth started dating me, she still remembers the last days Terry was alive and she recalls that she thought we were all crazy for the way he was treated. I guess she didn't know about Doc's untimely demise!

As ponies became less important in my life, sports took over. I played fast pitch softball and American Legion baseball in the Summers and Football and Basketball in the Fall and Winter...for the Academy. I made All-League in the latter two sports and really loved practice and games. One of the most interesting things about my sports involvement centers on how I got to practices. We lived six miles from The Academy and getting to and from practices could be very difficult for a farm boy. Thanks to the State of Ohio, farm boys could get their driver's licenses at age fourteen if they were involved in "School Activities or Farm/Family Errands." What else was happening in my life?????? Sports, plays, church, groceries, tractor parts all fell into the appropriate categories so I got to drive as a fully licensed driver from the time I was fourteen...something that my city friends were unable to do. I was a responsible boy and can honestly say that I never misused the use of the family's car or truck (Usually, the 1946 Ford pickup truck... not too glamorous, but very utilitarian!)

Farm work was hard...cows to milk and feed, pigs to feed, manure to put in the spreader and taken to the fields, crops to plant/sow and harvest, fences and buildings to repair and maintain. Unlike some professional jobs, we could always see our accomplishments and failures...hay in the barn, grain to the elevator, increased production. The failures were usually weather related or improper observation... too much rain might require replanting, a broken planter might reveal that some sections of a field were not planted and and would need to be replanted. Weeds were always on our minds and the problem was not solved by chemicals like today... we hoed weeds from the corn and bean fields. I will never forget,

as a ten year old boy, entering the gate of a twenty acre field of foot high corn with my sister Alice and hearing her tell me that we were going to hoe the entire field! I didn't think we could do it... but we did! I believe my level of Grit can be attributed to the completion of so many jobs on the farm that at first seemed impossible. Of all my jobs, cleaning the chicken coop was the worst...that acidic smell which required a handkerchief tied over your face. A close second was redistributing loose hay in the barn on a hot day, with chaff constantly getting past your collar and making your skin feel like you had poison ivy. Then waiting for the next load to arrive. So you see...being asked to lay on my stomach, under eighteen inches of metal walkways, to scrape oil and rust from the bilges of the battleship USS Wisconsin as an eighteen year old midshipman (that others couldn't or were unwilling to do) seemed like just another barn full of manure to remove.

I am grateful that I grew up on a farm. I gained an appreciation for nature (and its power), for hard work (and how being around folks with Grit is the best way to learn Grit yourself), for having unbelievable positive role models in my parents, siblings and neighbors (and learning that negative role models can teach you things too), for having parents who instilled the importance of being a loving person is what life's all about (and their not demanding that everything our church taught had to be accepted without question...the Earth never came within seventy miles of the sun as one Sunday school teacher insisted), for having a house which promoted having an open mind (although my father was my negative role model here as he went to his grave believing that Sputnik was a Russian trick) and lastly, having parents who wanted me to be what I wanted to be (They had hoped I, as their only son, would take over operation of the farm. When we had a serious conversation about this as I was finishing college, and I told them that this was not my intent, they said that if that was my desire they would put in their wills that my oldest sister, Ruth, would get the first chance of inheriting the farm. When later, I told Dad that I would be moving to Kent, he said, "...that is not very good farm

land up there.” I said, “I’m not going there to be a farmer.” Dad said, “ You never know when you might have to fall back on farming.” Well, I didn’t exactly “fall back on farming,” but I have remained true to my roots and the land by being an avid gardener and caretaker of all things natural. Ruth telling folks that I’m digging holes when people call is correct...and during my hole digging sessions, I always think of my wonderful parents and sisters and Growing Up on a Farm.

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