

Chapter 12

“There she be. That’s our warehouse.”

John choked on a cloud of dust that rose from the caravan of buckboard wagons hauling the last of two-hundred loads of timber. George drove the lead wagon, and Thomas followed. The good-natured bantering between the brothers thrilled John’s heart and livened up their labor.

John chuckled as he recalled the year Thomas was born. After helping a neighbor, Mr. Lester Crown, clear a piece of land and cut timber for a new house, Mr. Crown had paid John with a runt mule named Nester. As Thomas grew, that mule had stayed by Thomas’s side protecting and playing with the toddler. Thomas could not say “Nester,” so the runt’s name became Nussy, and the two of them were inseparable. They had played together, Nussy had followed Thomas everywhere, and the two friends had eaten the same food, no matter what it was.

When Thomas was a strong, robust three-year-old toddler, he played chase with Nussy or rode the mule’s back. John enjoyed watching his son and the runt mule play together. He considered Nussy to be the best in-kind payment he had ever received, for when Nussy was not protecting Thomas, he was a valuable work animal.

That year, without warning, Thomas came down with yellow fever. Through Babette’s tireless care and prayers, Thomas survived. However, the entire time Thomas was ill, that runt mule pined for his little friend. He would not eat and would not play with any of the other children. Nussy was vigilant and stayed outside Thomas’ bedroom window, pining for the tot. The mule would bray a mournful sound to let Thomas know he was there, and when Thomas began to recover, he called to Nussy. It was as if the tot and the mule had their own language.

All through his illness, Babette was a vigilant mother and stayed by Thomas’s bedside. “Thomas, baby, yer muder is here,” Babette reassured her son. After ten long days, the fever broke. “Baby, drink dis water,” Babette encouraged Thomas. “Ya need to drink da water, Thomas, so ya kin get well. Baby, take dis bean soup. It make ya feel better.”

Babette boiled water and forced her sick baby to drink. She made soft red bean soup and spooned the warm liquid into him, just as she had when John had malaria.

It took him several more months before he was healthy again. Nevertheless, he was back chasing Nussy, and the mule became even more protective of his best friend.

In the evening, John and Babette sat on the front porch of their rustic home and watched George and Thomas play. John enjoyed his pipe, and Babette mended torn shirts and jeans. That faithful runt mule brayed with joy as he ran away from Thomas.

“Pa! Nussy run,” Thomas squealed in his baby talk. “Run, Nussy. I catch ya.”

Nussy instinctively knew not to kick when Thomas was chasing him. However, he would give the tot, what seemed to be, a mischievous backward glance. Then, abruptly, Nussy sat down, causing Thomas to bump into his back.

Thomas squealed, “Pa, Nussy go boom, Pa. Nussy go boom.”

Thomas wrapped his arms around the mule’s neck and squealed with delight before falling to the ground. The toddler quickly got up with a mouth full of dirt, turned, and ran, expecting Nussy to give chase. “Nussy, git me. Run, Nussy! Git me.” The mule’s sitting prank gave him the advantage of not missing a step.

John released a swirl of tobacco smoke and chuckled to himself, Smart mule. That was just what Nussy wanted.

The chase continued in the opposite direction this time. Nussy kicked up his heels and brayed as he chased his little friend, and John laughed until his sides ached. As his laughter subsided, he remembered God’s goodness and offered a prayer of thanksgiving with another swirl of smoke.

“Thank Ya, Lord, for that runt mule and for healing my boy. Thank Ya for my Babette. She’s a wonderful wife and mother.”

“You are welcome, My son,” God replied. “You, John, are a good husband, father, and friend to My Son and Me. It makes Us happy to see you and your family happy.”

A wagon wheel hit a gopher hole and sent a jolt through John’s body, interrupting his reminiscence. When he had been young, his body fought back at every pain of broken bones and crushed fingers. Now, however, it took longer for his aging body to fight back. As if in empathy, his bones and the faithful wagon creaked and groaned when they thudded over gopher holes as he traveled through Florida’s sand and switchgrass. Every assault from a gopher hole on one of the forty-four-inch, steel-rimmed wheels reminded him that years of farming timberland either strengthened or ravaged a young man’s body.

“Easy, Bidy,” he encouraged his golden mare.

That mare, now paired with Brownie, a young gelding, was a kind and patient mentor, showing Brownie how to work with, not against, the bit and bridle.

“When we git to the sawmill, Bidy, I’ll put on yer feedbags, so’s you and Brownie can eat,” he promised his companion.

John drew on his pipe again and let his mind drift with the fragrant smoke as he remembered the years when building began.

George led the three-wagon caravan hauling timber and pulled up to Leo's sawmill. When all three wagons arrived, John, George, and Thomas began to unload logs.

Sitting in the shade of a live oak tree, Leo was sharpening the teeth of his fifty-inch blade, while Jake filled the boiler with river water and loaded the belly of the wood burner with scraps of pine. Leo and Jake set up a section of a long-leaf pine log to the freshly sharpened blade, and the engine screamed with pent-up steam. With one mighty spin from his work-calloused hands, the heavy cylinder roared, and the steam engine had no option other than to spring to life.

"Stand back, George, lest ya want a mouth full of sawdust," Leo warned. "Thomas, shove another log this way."

In minutes, the gleaming saw blade sliced through a thirty-foot section, spewing long tails of sawdust into the hot, now pine-scented air. By the time the hungry sawblade gnawed through the first cut, sweat and sticky sawdust coated Leo's and Jake's short muscular arms and hairy chests.

"This last load of timber will be fer the roof trusses," Leo yelled out his promise.

"I'm thinkin' it will take 10,500 board feet for them trusses. That'd be about twenty, one-hundred-foot trees."

With the last load of timber milled into lumber, the tired men re-loaded the wagons and headed two miles to the barn's building site. As they came into the community of Gracetown, John basked in the sound of laughter from children. His five-year-old grandson, Henry, Thomas's firstborn, was leading the pack of rowdy children waving stick-swords in the air.

"There's a pirate ship!" called Henry, waving his sword. "Surround it, mates."

"Whoa, there, Capt'n," John said, playing along. "Permission to sail on."

"Permission granted, Grandpa," Henry yelled, pointing forward with his stick-sword.

John's youngest grandson, Timmy, still in diapers and on wobbly toddler legs, tried to keep up with the older children. Although he was always a wobble-and-bump-in-the-dirt behind, he was determined to play. At least he was until his older brother, Henry, invited him not-so-nicely to leave.

"Go on, Timmy! You's too little to play with us." Henry gave Timmy a push, and the toddler fell on his butt into the dirt.

The fairies, Joy and Courage, hurried to the toddler and whispered encouraging words in his ear. Then, Timmy giggled and hoisted himself out of the dirt, diaper end first, and continued following the older children.

At the building site, John and his sons, George, and Thomas, joined Leo's four sons, Maxie, Luther, Adam, and Leo, Junior. Jake Kelly came later with his two sons, Ben, and Joseph, while Leo stayed at the sawmill.

"George, git Maxie and Luther to help ya roll off that there top log," shouted John. "Thomas, can ya hop on down, and when the log hits the dirt, hitch up that mule?"

"Here it comes, Thomas. Stand back and keep them children back," George shouted.

The log hit the ground with a mighty thud that shook the men to the bone.

"Let's git 'er done, boys," shouted John.

George and Maxie tied ropes on the log, two on both the top and bottom for guide ropes. Then, Thomas hitched up Nussy to a harness fitted with a rope and pulley attached to a thirty-foot log. After the ropes were secure, Thomas coaxed the mule to pull. "Pull, Nussy! Pull! Pull, mule."

Nussy pulled and strained, digging his hooves into the dirt so that John could almost see the concentration in Nussy's squinting eyes. Thomas continued to coax the mule to pull the log, and Nussy, always eager to please Thomas, pulled harder.

Finally, as the log gave way and moved, its momentum made the task easier. Thomas instructed Nussy, "Bring it over here, Nussy. That-a-boy."

"Hold tight to them ropes, boys!" shouted John.

George, Joseph, Fred, and Adam guided the top ropes to keep the log from swinging. Maxie, Henry, Ben, and Luther guided the bottom ropes to keep it in position.

With no small timing and effort, men and beast groaned, straining their muscles, and finally lifted the first thirty-foot log to the edge of a four-foot foundation hole. The log teetered on the foundation's side while men and mule continued to maintain control with the ropes. With one more orchestrated pull, the log surrendered and fell into the foundation. Nussy let out a long bray, and the men cheered.

"That there's the first one," called John. "Only three more to go."

"Let's get 'er done, then," said George.

Hearing all the cheering and laughter, the toddler, again turned away by his older brother, came over to work with the big men.

"Git on out of the way, Timmy," John scolded his grandson while nailing long pieces of lumber to the corner posts.

"Go find yer Mama, Timmy," scolded Uncle Maxie.

Although Maxie was Leo's oldest son, Timmy loved the big burly man as much as he loved his real Uncle George.

"Git on now, Timmy," John prodded again. "It's dangerous here."

However, the three-year-old did not understand the danger. Timmy just wanted to help, and besides, it looked like such fun, and the dirt was delicious.

Jammed between a mammoth root on the side of the foundation hole and the edge, the last stubborn log stuck at a seventy-five-degree angle.

“Let’s take a break,” said Jake wiping his face. “This here log is going to take extra coaxing.”

“Git on out of the way like I told ya, Timmy,” his grandpa scolded and swung his sweaty hat in the vicinity of the toddler. “Now, git!” John turned to the others. “Ready, George? Maxie? Ben? Ready, Joseph?”

They all answered collectively, “Ready.”

“Thomas, git that mule to pullin’.”

As expected, it took extra effort and concentration from the neighbors and Nussy to pull that log to the final ninety degrees. Muscles strained, and nerves stretched to a near breaking point. While Thomas and Nussy pulled, the men holding the guide ropes attached to the log kept keen eyes and steady hands on the ropes. John and Jake stood at the hole to guide the belligerent pole into place. When the pole hit the eighty-five-degree angle, John yelled, “Thomas, unhitch Nussy and move him out of the way.”

Eight strong men, nearly spent, strained every muscle to guide the log to its final resting place. They were determined not to let a log win that fight.

“Let ‘er go!” called Jake.

The men holding on to the top guide ropes turned the ropes loose and stepped out of the way. The thirty-foot trimmed pine log slid through the earth and then dropped its one-ton weight into its place in the foundation. The ground shook when it hit its mark.

Even before they could get the pole stabilized, John and Thomas heard the wail of a child in pain.

“Timmy! Where’s Timmy?” John turned to the left and scanned the area for the tot. Then he turned to the right, searching. His heart pounded in his chest.

In wild, distraught fear, Thomas ran searching, calling his son. They did not see Timmy anywhere. “Timmy?”

Leaving the pole in the capable hands of their neighbors, John and Thomas ran in panicked circles looking for the toddler, calling as they searched. “Timmy! Where’s Timmy?”

Just before John collapsed from fear and exhaustion, he heard Babette’s voice. “He over here, John, dear. He git in da ant bed and git his little leg chewed up, but he be okay.”

John felt like adding a little red behind to Timmy’s painful ant bites. Instead, he grabbed the toddler and devoured him with kisses and hugs, repeating over and over, “Thank Ya, Lord. Thank Ya, Lord.”

In patient love, God said, “*You are surprised, John? Don’t you know by now that I look out for even the littlest of My children? Now, be at peace.*”

When John regained control of his nerves, he continued to yell instructions.

“Let’s call it a day. We’ll do better if we start the framin’ tomorrow after a good rest.”

“Rest?” laughed George trying to lighten everyone’s spirits. “I still got to go home and do chores.”

“Not me,” quipped Thomas. “I don’t got no chores,” he said, pushing George in the shoulder. Both men knew that was not true, for pioneers always had chores that needed doing.

When building resumed the next day, the pioneers began constructing the frames for the barn walls. “It’ll take all of us to build a wall frame and lift ‘er up,” said Jake. Thomas, hitch up Nussy to the wagon and bring them framin’ pieces over here. Ya all know what to do. We want a bay of four windows, twenty-four inches below the roofin’ on three sides, and a large double door on the west side. Thomas, you, and Luther make sure them corner posts is plumb. Maxie and Fred grab a beam and hammer it to the bottom of all the corner posts. George and Ben, ya git up on the ladder and nail a beam in the middle. The rest of us will attach studs and braces to the frame support.”

Then, John called on Nussy again. It took all eight men and that mule to hoist the first wall in place. Over the next two weeks, the men fashioned three more walls and hoisted them up, taking frequent breaks for safety.

“It’s beginnin’ to look like a proper buildin’,” said Jake.

“Yes, them walls is the second hardest part. Next comes them trusses,” John added.

“The lumber ain’t here yet, Pa. I’ll ride back to the sawmill to see if’n they is ready,” offered George.

“We can’t start on them trusses until the lumber arrives,” said Jake. “This would be a good time to break for the week. We’ll begin again after Sunday.”

On Sunday, the pioneers gathered at Jake Kelly’s house for worship. As usual, John, Jake, and Leo took turns reading Scripture and explaining them to the little ones. The next generation—George, Thomas, Maxie, and Fred—were now old enough to add their favorite Scriptures to the readings. The worship was one of praise, faith, thanksgiving, and of course, asking for safety for the next day. After worship, the families returned to their homes full of hope and love.

Passion was always searching for love. However, since her maturity, she realized passion and love took many forms.

The evening was quiet as babies lay sleeping, and the couples shared their sweet whispers for the future.

“All is well, Son. Let’s give them a peaceful night’s rest,” God said.

The truss lumber arrived from the sawmill on Monday afternoon, and the men worked in teams of two, constructing the trusses. In addition to the main trusses, the builders fashioned a small section atop the main roof. This small section, the capstone with its over-hanging eaves, created an opening on all four sides of the roof, venting the building. With the tall ceiling, large windows, and the vent, the building would stay cool and dry. Thanks to a pot-bellied stove in the center of the main room, the building would also stay surprisingly warm in the winter.

“Jake, where’d ya store them tin pieces that come up from ‘Jacksonville’?” asked John.

“They’s stored at my livery stable,” replied Jake. Earlier in the year, Jake had ordered sheets of interlocking tin, which had arrived from Jacksonville via riverboat.

“Thomas, when that tin gits here, git Nussy to haul them tin pieces up top,” instructed John. “Fred, ya game to nail in tin with Ben?”

“Guess we can. I ain’t never worked with tin afore,” replied Fred.

“Ya’ll git the hang of it. Just watch out for them sharp edges. They’ll sneak up on ya and cut up yer hands and legs,” George warned with a knowing chuckle.

Leaning against a truss for stability, Fred and Ben positioned a twelve-foot-long section of tin perpendicular over the truss rafters. With his hammer, Fred secured a length of tin to a rafter. Each edge of the tin took six nails, and Fred hit each nail every time with three blows of the hammer.

“Looky there! Eighteen blows and didn’t miss nary a time,” boasted Fred. “Let’s see ya best that there, Ben.”

Ben accepted the challenge, “Yer on.” Ben matched Fred blow for blow.

“Throw us up another piece,” Fred hollered down to Thomas. “We got us a competition up here.”

The good-natured competition between the friends and neighbors kept the work exciting and moving along at a quick pace. As the friends nailed the tin in place, four other men worked on the loading platform below.

“Did we git them cedar timbers from Leo at the sawmill?” Jake asked Joseph.

“Yes, sir, Pa,” replied his son.

“Let’s git them timbers on the loading platform and nail ‘em together,” instructed Jake.

They laid out fourteen, seven-foot by one-foot cedar timbers over the piling supports and nailed them together with cross timbers for added support. Two sections of cedar timbers made a seven-foot by seven-foot door.

“Where’s them wheels?” called John.

“Over here, John,” replied Jake. “Them tracks, too.”

Four heavy iron wheels and matching tracks had also come by riverboat from Jacksonville.

“Is them doors done?” yelled Jake.

“Yes, sir, Pa.”

“Did ya remember to nail in cross braces?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then, we’s ready to put on the wheels.”

Once the thick cedar doors’ construction was complete and the wheels attached, it took these six men to heft the door up into the opening and coaxed the wheels into the matching iron tracks.

“Whoa, whoa!” yelled John. “I’m losin’ my grip. Set ‘er down! Set ‘er down!”

John’s corner of the door hit the loading platform so hard that it rattled the structure, and the sound reverberated through the inside timbers.

“Ya okay, John?” asked Jake. “Did it git yer foot?”

“Nah. But my blisters got blisters, and my back says it’s done workin’.”

“Let’s call it a day,” Jake announced. Again, there were no complaints about stopping.

Earlier in the day, Jake and Leo Junior had placed eight-foot timbers across three sawhorses to make a dinner table under the canopy of a giant live oak tree. Susan, Marsha, and Babette covered this make-shift table with yards of red and white checked fabric, then began loading the table with food. There were several platters of fried chicken, just as many bowls of sweet corn topped with mountains of melting butter, biscuits and chicken gravy, enough fresh pole beans, fried okra, cornbread, and milk for the army of tired, hungry men. For dessert, there was a blackberry cobbler. For obvious reasons, Leo would have preferred a chocolate cake, and he beamed when Susan placed her chocolate cake in his hands.

“This is for you, husband,” Susan’s eyes gazed at Leo with understanding love.

“Thank ya, honey. Yer priceless,” whispered Leo.

Once everyone was seated, Jake asked for silence. He removed his sweaty hat and bowed his head. “Thank Ya, Lord, for a safe workday and for this bounty Ya set before us.”

Everyone collectively said, “Amen.” Then the reaching, eating, talking, and laughing began.

Faith, Hope, Courage, and Joy played with the little children and babies, feeding them spoons full of chocolate frosting and blackberry cobbler. It was not an easy task for Joy to contain herself, for she so delighted in the children.

Looking upon the families with pride, God said, “*We have done well, Son. However, I don’t boast for what We did. Instead, I am proud for what the members of these families have done.*”

“*Yes, Father. We have protected and provided for them. Though it was the hard work and perseverance of these brave pioneers that brought them here today, and they continue to be thankful.*”

After dinner, everyone found a comfortable spot for a short rest to let their dinner settle. Young married couples found quiet places to whisper their words of love to each other. The ladies visited and wiped little hands and lips full of chocolate icing. Some men enjoyed a relaxing pipe of tobacco while others had a third serving of blackberry cobbler or joined in a game of horseshoes. Fred and Ben compared cuts from the tin, counting to see who had the most. Their mothers were not amused. Soft conversation, the sound of clanging horseshoes, and the squeals and laughter of children filled the community. Then it was quiet, allowing for a much-needed nap.

The first to stir was Leo. As he passed, Leo kicked John's foot good-naturedly. After that, the other men roused from their resting places and followed, and the building resumed.

"Ya boys want to help work on the building?" Leo called to the ten and twelve-year-old boys still playing horseshoes.

"Yes, sir!"

"Yeah!"

"Sure do! What ya want us to be a-doin'?"

"Run over yonder to the shed and find a couple of gallons of white paint and brushes. You can start paintin' the sides as fer up as ya can reach."

The young boys, eager to be a part of the historic building, ran, pushing and shoving to see who could get a can of paint first. Those who did not get a can of paint turned their attention to paint brushes. It was a big game. The next game was to see who could avoid being the target for white splatters. It was difficult to say what most of the paint covered, the boys or the building.

In 1899, after years of arduous work, the last board nailed in place, and the last coat of paint slopped on the sides, the barn was complete, and the residents of Gracetown celebrated. When the noise subsided, Leo Bates quoted Malachi 3:10, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open ya the windows of heaven, and pour ya out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

"There she be," announced John Wilkins. "That's our storehouse."

One of the young boys covered in white paint from head to toe, shouted, "Hey, Mr. Wilkins, why don't we call it the warehouse?" And with that, the name stuck, and the barn was forever known as the warehouse.

While the pioneer builders had no idea what influence the warehouse would have in the years ahead, God knew. As years and even decades passed, the warehouse would change lives.

"To God be the glory, great things He has done," whispered Leo.

Someone quoted Psalm 116:15, “I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and call upon the Name of the Lord.”

Over the next two years, Gracetown doubled in area and population, and Leo Bates’ sawmill buzzed, turning out timbers to build more houses. “The ties that bind” continued to anchor and unify the small town.