

Coltrain, Velma: The Wind Was Howling ^[1]

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Velma Coltrain: The Wind Was Howling

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/13/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Before I first visited Velma Coltrain, she let her daughter-in-law send me a long, hand-written description of her life on a farm near the little town of Robersonville, 90 miles east of Raleigh. Mrs. Coltrain wrote her reminiscences with only her family in mind, but they reveal a writer's eye and a poet's soul. Rarely, if ever, have I seen a farm woman's life rendered so movingly. Instead of featuring excerpts from my interview with Mrs. Coltrain, as I would usually do, I decided this time, with her permission, to feature an excerpt from her written reminiscences.

This passage begins with the birth of her third child, five years after her marriage to Halford House. Today Mrs. Coltrain, now 86 years old and widowed a second time, is the adored matriarch of a large family that remains in awe of what she came through for their sakes.

In Velma Coltrain's words from her written reminiscences:



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January 1940. Frank was born during a snowstorm, in the middle of the night. Dr. Ward had been out on a call when I needed him. He had to abandon one car and walk to his office, then drove to my house without his medical bag but lucky to get there. The wind was howling and snow covering everything. The window shades in my room were blowing out into the floor. The wood heater was keeping everyone fairly warm. The colored woman on the farm was there to help. We had a hog killir. I remember a colored lady named Aunt Amy coming to take care of us day and night. She would hang my gowns by the heater so they would be toasty warm after my bath. Felt so good. We were living with Halford's parents until after Frank was born, then moved in a tenant house on the farm. During this time I was trying to be a wife, mother, cook, clean, take care of children, do laundry. Laundry was when you filled the big black wash pot with water which had to be drawn from a well ... Then you searched for enough wood to build a fire around the pot. Then you drew more water to fill the rinse tubs. The first tub was for soaping. The clothes were rinsed, wrung out by hand and hung on the clothesline. Diapers were hung three deep. (No Pampers.)

Then came the ironing. You heated the heavy irons on a wood stove and had to be careful to wipe the irons clean in case there was any smut to come off on the clothes. Halford had one pair of pants that had to be starched and ironed every I never went to town. I stayed home with the children. He bought the groceries and anything else we needed including my clothes, not much of either.

When we moved into the tenant house, Halford's sister, Ernestine, picked out a few pieces of furniture and some cooking things from the dime store. I never picked out anything during our married life. I didn't question anything, just accepted it. Halford farmed the land before the days of the tractor. He had to follow the mule and plow around and around the field getting it in shape for planting in the spring. In the summer I would get up before daybreak to help take out a barn of dry-corn. I would cook molasses pudding for dessert. I was cooking on a wood stove so had to keep wood in it. Gathered vegetables from the garden late in the day for the next day.

Before Linda was born in 1943, we had added two rooms, a pantry, two porches and a pump and sink in the kitchen. Then, wonder of wonders, we got electricity. Only two wall switches for the porches. A cord dangled from a naked bulb in the hall. We still didn't have a refrigerator, but we ordered one out of a book from Dixie Motors after World War II. Jerry was in the fourth grade. His teacher, Doris Roebuck, even announced it before the class. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Halford was drafted into service during World War II. He was given six weeks of infantry training and sent to the Pacific Theater. Received three battle stars. After the war ended there, he was sent to Japan, the first infantry group to occupy Japan. Halford and I both worked very hard on the farm. The year we worked the hardest, Halford told everyone that he was going to buy me a diamond as big as his hat. We didn't make any money at all that year. Halford's life insurance premium cost \$10. Life had been hard but I did have someone to share it with me. Now, life would be harder and no one seemed to care.

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