

# Me? An Octogenarian?

Email Distributed to Friends on December 19, 2011

I'M an octogenarian now. Today's date is December the 19th, 2011 – exactly 80 years since I was born at a log farmhouse in the Kentucky hills above Beech Grove village, population 150 then and 150 now. The “Old Sellers Place” farmhouse burned down when I was just a baby, leaving nothing but a hole in the ground where the cellar had been. I was carried away from the burning structure and then away from the Beech Grove farming community itself. My little family, effectively homeless in the depths of the Great Depression, fled to the “big city,” Evansville, Indiana, just across the wide Ohio River. That's where my father found work in a furniture factory. That's where I grew up, in a city a thousand times larger than Beech Grove. But as a boy in the 1930s and '40s, I spent lots of time in those rolling hills above Beech Grove, mostly at my grandparents' farm near the “Old Sellers Place.” This farmhouse, too, was made of logs, although it was covered with weatherboarding to give it a modern look. Modern looking, yes, but heat came from two fireplaces, buckets of water were drawn from a backyard well, coal-oil lamps provided nighttime lighting, cooking was done on a kindling-fired stove, and the outhouse stood halfway between the house and the barn.

YOU know, I always wondered why the outhouse was a two-holer. Seems excessively companionable. But never mind. The whole point of the first paragraph here was to get to that outhouse, which played a role in what I wrote 20 years ago on my 60th birthday:

*“Today is December 19, 1991, and I, Jackson, who remembers the boy Jack so vividly, turned 60 years old. Like him, on thankfully rare occasions, I am haunted by the specter of my own mortality. Fifty years ago, maybe a little less, young Jack was suddenly struck by the chilly notion that he, even he, would die. A hilltop at sunset would have been the ideal birthplace for an idea of this magnitude. Instead, it happened in an out-*

*house, a two-seater at Mama and Papa Dunn's farm near Beech Grove. With bare rump exposed to the nasty blackness of the pit below, Jack felt, deep in his soul, the icy touch of enlightenment, solid knowledge that he would die. From this two-holer between house and barn, he reached out and grasped the rational and inevitable conclusion that his life was finite, that death would come and there was no stopping it. He shivered, and he never forgot this revelation, nor would it forget him. But the time that stretched ahead, the long years between then and the end, was Jack's immediate comfort. He would not die until he was an old man of 60. Why worry? A year is a long, long time when you have lived only ten or twelve of them. Fifty years, for a child of this earth, is an eternity. I, Jackson, turned 60 today.”*

WELL, I am 80 now, a couple of decades beyond what Jack estimated for me. I look forward to still another decade or so. But who knows? My genes are not impressively promising. I know a great deal about my ancestors, and none of the 19th- and 20th-century males lived as long as I have. My father, Claudius Raymond Sellers, died at 66, and my great grandfather, Wesley Columbus Sellers, the last Sellers to farm the “Old Sellers Place,” died at 72. If I go back to the 18th century, however, I find that my sixth great grandfather, Arthur Jackson Slayton, a recognized patriot of the American Revolution, lived 80 years after his birth in 1705 Virginia. Not bad in those times. I'll probably beat him, but if Slayton had been born two hundred years later, he might still be alive today, at age 106, coddled by Medicare and HMOs, with fruit available all year long.

Jackson Sellers

