Life in the Red and Black

Father's financial records reveal a story between the lines.

One man's legacy of financial records became one woman's treasure when, through those handwritten records, I came to better know the man who was my father.

Two small notebooks contain my father's entries of credits, debits and debts, in neat order, from January 1942 until his last entry, in April 1954. He died the next month.

I was just 4 years old when the family was split up after my mother died, in 1942, so the records revealed memories I was too young to recall. My oldest sister, Margaret, has also filled in details of our life on the farm in Terre Haute, an Iowa town that no longer exists. The closest town is now Davis City.

Our parents, Roy and Hildah Butcher, were married in 1929, just before the Depression hit. Years later, Dad's sister-in-law wrote in a letter to us daughters that our parents "often came from town with only the necessities of salt and sugar. Yet, they never spent the only thin dime they had. They laughed and called it their lucky dime. They had so little material goods, but they had the most precious thing—love. (Your father) went about his work whis-tling so merrily."

The first year following America's entry into World War II was a difficult time on the 163-acre farm in Iowa's Decatur County. The struggle for our family of six is apparent as I read between the lines of the smaller notebook.

One entry, from January 1942, lists a credit from selling two fox hides for $6.50. Margaret, who was 8 years older than I, said our father did a lot of trapping.

In April of 1942, there were 60 lambs born and listed in the notebook as a credit. Margaret says Dad furnished the pasture and sheds and the sheep were bought by a man she believes was named Oren Butts. She adds that it was probably one of our more prosperous years.

In a note to me, Margaret said she and Don had twin lambs—"Sammy" and "Frieda" (what names!)—as pets that they bottle-fed. Later, when they were docking the lambs (cutting off their tails) before they were sold, she says, "We begged Dad not to do it to our twin lambs, so they were sold with long tails. I think they brought about $15 apiece. Don and I knew they were worth a lot more than that, as we fed them every day and they followed us everywhere!"

Margaret says we must have been poor, but that our parents never gave that impression. We raised all of our fruit and vegetables and never were hungry, getting chicken on Sunday and pork that our mother had canned from a winter pig butchering. Mother also made all of our clothes.

A sad entry was made in October 1942, which states simply, "Hildah died Oct. 6, 2 pm" and lists $358.81 paid to Stewart Funeral Home.

That November, an auction of all household and farm goods was completed and recorded and all debts paid. Quart jars of home-canned fruit sold for 10¢ to 11¢ each. Graceland College of Lamoni, Iowa purchased 215 bushels of oats for 52¢ a bushel. Sheep sold for $7.75 to $11. Cattle brought from $41.50 for a calf to $72.50 for a bull and $78.50 for the best cow.

A couple of months after Mother died, our father accepted a job as a government meat inspector and left his beloved farm life. He felt it best that my sisters, Margaret and Wanda, live with his sister and that Don and I live with his oldest brother and his wife on a Leon, Iowa farm. Visits were few and far between.

Three years later, Dad remarried and brought Don and me to live with him in Omaha, Nebraska. I recall Dad still had a box of Potawatomi arrowheads and tomahawks collected on our farm. The largest tomahawk was used as a doorstop for years, a faint reminder of our years on the farm.

—Retha McCarty, Gladstone, Missouri