



The family tradition surfaced in 2001 when my soon-to-be 16-year-old cousin David was dreaming of getting his driver's license. David felt unprepared, and that told him he would not pass. But Thomas Grady Wells, my grandfather, had a different plan.

Every Thanksgiving, the Wells clan made its annual trek up to the small, quaint town of Antlers, Okla., to stay with the eldest generation of our family, my grandparents, Hanna and Pappy. That year, I was not old enough to go to the bathroom on my own, let alone understand the amazing tradition that was about to begin.

Pappy took it upon himself to make sure his grandson passed that test. They walked into the backyard and there it was, my grandfather's pride and joy: his 1989 white Chevy pickup.

"Get in," Pappy directed.

David looked at him with confusion. Pappy was going to let him drive his pride and joy? David couldn't dismiss the thought of wrecking the car and never being forgiven.

"Well, are you just going to stand there or are you going to drive?" Pappy asked.

So they drove.



My grandfather's pride and joy was a white 1989 Chevy pickup. (Parker Nolan/The Red Ledger)

They drove the backroads of Antlers. They drove by the Sonic, the Dollar Tree, the old gym, the nursing home, Dead Man's lake, the rocking bridge, and finally back into the driveway of 506 Maple Leaf Drive.

David put the car in park and looked at our grandpa, and said the best way to describe the look on Pappy's face was pride. That chilly, fall day is how the Wells family tradition started.

Three years later, Pappy taught Drew how to drive behind the wheel of that same truck. Seven years later, he taught Dylan how to drive, and four years after that, he taught my brother, Grady. Through the same roads, by the same buildings, over the same bridges, in that same white Chevy, Pappy taught his grandchildren how to drive.

I remember that pickup like the back of my hand. In my earliest memory of the vehicle I sit on those Mexican blanket seats in between Pappy and Dylan, driving up to the Sonic Drive-In to get a root beer float. I will play that memory in my head forever and never forget, for if I could go back to that day, I would. Leaning on Pappy, hearing his laugh, him joking about me getting behind the wheel one day.

In September of 2014, Pappy was admitted to the hospital with what we thought was pneumonia. At the time it wasn't a big deal and we, or at least I, assumed he would be out soon. After about a month, he was transferred to Medical City in

Dallas and put into the intensive care unit. This confused me because I didn't know how bad the sickness was progressing or what it had turned into.

On Dec. 12, 2014, Pappy passed away.

A big part of my life was taken from me unlike anything else I had ever experienced.

In February 2015, I turned 15, which meant the time had come for me to start driving. It's a normal process. We turn 15, we get our learner's permits, and then our parents teach us how to drive. This was alright with me until I realized that sitting in the driver's seat of a 2014 Acadia couldn't compare to sitting in the driver's seat of that white Chevy pickup.

I am the youngest grandchild, and I feel like I didn't get enough time with Pappy. All my cousins and my brother got to take part in this tradition that I did not get to experience in the way that I should have. I wished Pappy had been here to teach me how to drive. I wish he had been here to let me drive the back roads of Antlers, by the Sonic, the Dollar Tree, the old gym, the nursing home, Dead Man's lake, the rocking bridge, and finally back into the driveway of 506 Maple Leaf Drive.

But he wasn't.

The truck was getting old, anyway. My grandma couldn't get it to start, the engine was failing, and I had given up completely on driving the old, white Chevy pickup. Then one Tuesday, something happened.

I pulled into my driveway and there it sat. The 1989 Chevy pickup, repaired and almost good as new. In that moment I knew what I needed to do. I grabbed the keys and took off. Pappy's glasses were still in the coin holder, his old gloves were under the seat along with Sonic straw wrappers. The car smelled like Pappy — a mix of his clothes, his detergent, his cologne, his everything. The smell you get when you hug him.



The author drives her grandfather's 1989 Chevy pickup. (Parker Nolan/The Red Ledger)

A feeling of nostalgia rushed over me, and I called out to Pappy, hoping he was watching me: "I wish you could have taught me how to drive, but look, I'm driving."

I could feel his presence in the seat next to me.

It was late that Tuesday and I wasn't sure where to go, but then it hit me. I drove down Lucas Road and ended up in a spot at Sonic. I pressed the red button and asked through my tears, "Can I have one root beer float, please?"

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