

DOWN HOME: Football player evokes memories

August 21, 2009

A little football player rests on a shelf of the bookcase in our bedroom.

He wears a white helmet, red jersey and white pants, although time and wear have taken their toll, and the pants look a little gray. He holds a football in his right hand. His number is "10," but you have to look carefully for the outline of the "0," since the original digit fell off years ago.

He's worn that same look of bemused determination on his face for well more than 40 years. I'm guessing more like 44 or maybe even 45.

He belonged to my sister, Martha. She got him during our childhood, when our family lived in Perryton, in the far northern reaches of the Texas Panhandle. That's why his uniform is red and white; it's the color proud Perryton Rangers have worn for generations. And if you should question, the ironed-on patch on the front of his jersey reads "Perryton."

Back then, Martha attended Jane Brooks School for the Deaf in Chickasha, Okla., almost exactly 250 miles from our home. I can't imagine how hard it was for a little girl to go to school that far away from her Mother, Daddy and big brother (and a little brother who came along later). But that was long ago, and options for a deaf child to receive a good education were scarce. So, she boarded at Jane Brooks and came home one weekend a month, holidays and summers.

Our family particularly wanted Martha to know everybody back home loved her and thought about her all the time. So, we gave her gifts to remind her of home.

And that's how she came to receive the Perryton Ranger doll. Even when she couldn't sit with us under the Friday night lights of a Texas autumn, she could hug that little football player and feel that much closer to home.

Martha obviously felt something, because she kept him with her all the rest of her 50 years. Mother and Daddy received him among some of Martha's keepsakes passed along by Billy, Martha's husband, after she died this spring.

They wondered if I wanted anything in particular from Martha's things, and although I didn't want to ask, that little Perryton Ranger was the first item that came to mind. Of course, they know me, so they instinctively knew my thoughts. They brought him to me, along with some old photos, an ID bracelet I gave to Martha years and years ago, and a child's turquoise ring—probably once mine—she kept down through the decades.

Trinkets or treasures? Well, both. An objective outsider wouldn't fork over \$5 for the entire lot of them. And yet they are pearls of great price to me. They're tangible reminders of Martha. They're relics whose worth derives from their reflection of our lives together, shared memories of a sister and brother who adored each other.

Life passes quickly, and, ironically, the ones with the harder tasks are those who remain. And yet we live in hope, blessed by memory.