Another Time
Another Place
Another Story

Gustavus Simmons

Stories from a time when life hadn't changed much in West Virginia since the Civil War, nor had the people.

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A special thanks to Ted & Donna Spitzmiller who encouraged Gus to save the stories in print to avoid them being lost to posterity.

Contents

Apology:

The stories collected here were written over a period of nearly thirty years as stand-alone stories. As a result, the reader is "informed" several times that many people in the community "could neither read ner cipher" or that older people were often called Aunt or Uncle etc. There are also some time discrepancies between them. Had the stories been written to appear together this would be unacceptable, but they are collected here as originally written.

Back cover photo by Randy Montoya.

The author wishes to acknowledge photos from the University of West Virginia archives.

The photo on page 203 is of an oil painting of the author by Mary Cravens.

Thanks are due Keran Simmons and Rob Hart, Helen Kerscher and Ted Spitzmiller for assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication.

This Book Needs No Introduction

Here are the stories with the hope some of them will cause you to chuckle or even to laugh out loud. Some still cause me to get a lump in my throat after all of these years. Prof. Elmer Johnson at Cornell who taught me English composition always said every writer has one story which he spends his entire career trying to get right: writing and rewriting it in various forms, but never succeeding to his satisfaction. I have one like that which is not in the collection. It even has a title; Homeless in Hell, but as Prof. Johnson said no matter how many times I try, I am unable to adequately convey what I feel.

In 1932 Pop was fired by the Cabin Creek Coal Company and blackballed for "talking union". Blackballed meant no other mine would hire him either. We were homeless for nearly two years after that, spending that summer squatting on the porch of another miner Pop knew on Harmon's Creek. It was a tiny cabin and they had too many kids to take us inside, but at least we were partially sheltered from the rain. Mom could use the cookstove after his wife got her kids fed and her man off to his shift in the mine.

As winter came on, and winters in West Virginia can be severe, an old man who had been bringing mom some milk each morning since I was suffering severely from some sort of dietary deficiency, said there was an abandoned farmhouse on a piece of property he owned – as he described it to Pop, not fit for man nor beast – but better than living outdoors, which we were welcome to live in. Essentially it was a barn with open cracks where the batten strips had pulled free so that snow winnowed into little triangular piles inside when the wind blew outside. This is not the story – but merely the setting for the story. Since I have failed to write it all of these years, it is reasonable to expect it will die with me.

Pop used to say to me, "Your ears are too big", which was not a comment on my physical appearance, but rather that, like the cat Tobermory in Saki's short story of the same name, I heard and repeated too much of what I overheard people say. In

writing these stories I have come to realize that my memories are aurally indexed, not visually as seems to be the case for most people. It isn't just that I remember what someone said but rather that I remember how they said it as though the sound had never died away.

Aural engrams in my brain were HiFi long before HiFi was technically feasible. A part of that is no doubt due to the fact that the descendants of the Scotch-Irish settlers on Frogs Creek where I grew up spoke with a rocker-cadence that gave even the simplest prose a metre John Greenleaf Whittier could not have bettered. You must have accidentally bumped an unoccupied rocker and heard its diminishing run down to silence. That's sort of how they spoke, what I like to call a rocker- cadence.

In the story "Thankee, thankee, thankee; Saved my life" I urge the reader to say the words out loud a few times to get a feel for how Uncle Loosh said them, even though that may well be a futile exercise. Similarly, when Uncle Ben says "Go tuh Hell" in "You should'a seen the one that got away" I can still hear his rocking cadence exactly as he sounded nearly eighty years. For the life of me I couldn't describe his appearance well enough for you to pick him out of a police lineup but his chawing tobacco colored speech is indelibly recorded for as long as I live:" Go"—rock—"tuh"-- rock—"Hell".

The photo above is not of a Wild West gang of outlaws, but of West Virginia's prohibition agents in roughly 1925. The man standing on the right is my grandfather, Gustavus James Simmons, whose name I bear. Two years later he would be murdered by a moonshiner whose still they were raiding.

Foreword

The "time" was between the wars; WWI and WWII that is. The "place" is a part of West Virginia that even today looks on road maps like the interior of Africa used to look on world maps in the age of exploration; few roads and odd place names like Unexpected, Paw Paw, Zip and in a neighboring county Zar, and of course the setting for most of these stories, Frogs Creek. Life was literally lived in a time warp. There was no electricity and no telephones – the nearest either of these came was over ten miles away on the road to Charleston.

As mentioned in several of the stories roughly a third of the adult population was illiterate, or as they put it "They could neither read ner cipher" – where cipher meant being able to count change at the store. There were essentially only two professions, coal mining and hard scrabble farming – both of which were done mostly without the benefit of machinery. Farming was done with horses, or occasionally with mules which were the mainstay for pulling coal cars in the mines. There were a few teams of oxen, used mainly for logging; one figures in one of the stories in this collection.

For all intents and purposes life hadn't changed much since the end of the Civil War, nor had the people for that matter. I remember the preacher saying shortly after WWII ended how different things were than after WWI. As he put it "The boys came home from Europe after the first World War, picked up their squirrel rifles and went back up the same holler they had been hunting in when drafted". This time was different he said: "They're changed and just don't fit in no more." The stories here

are from the time when they still did. The "story" in the title of the collection doesn't refer to any specific story, certainly not to any one told here, but to a social tradition of storytelling. Television was decades in the future, radios required batteries which cost cash money so were out of reach for most families and reading, even for those who could, was a labor – certainly not something one did for pleasure.

So, telling stories was a community pastime; men sitting around the Burnside stove at the store in bad weather or on the bench out front in good, women gathered at quilting bees, even mourners at a wake invariably told stories. Some were good story tellers, most weren't, but that didn't matter. Repetition didn't diminish the enjoyment of a story either. In fact, it was common for someone to prompt a good story to be retold. In writing the stories collected here I have tried to tell them just as I would if I were sitting on a nail keg in Ault's store and talking to the people who appear in them. Well, some I wouldn't tell to the person who figures in the story, but most I would. All of the people are long dead anyway; but as I cause one of the characters to say about his Pa and Grandpa, "Nope, they're kickin their coffins and laffin". If only the people I write about could read the stories I tell about them I'm sure that is what they would be doing too.

The man on the cover is my father, Pop, a consummate storyteller himself. None of the stories, well except for "Santa Claus' Two Left Feet", is about him. He is more colorful than any of the other characters in the collection though. Not only colorful but extraordinary in ways that are hard to believe. His education had been to finish the 8th grade in a one room school and then go to work. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor he tried to enlist but was turned away as being too old. He persisted and eventually was inducted into the Navy where he was always referred to as "Pop" since he was so much older than the men around him. The extraordinary bit though was what he did after the war. He had GI Bill coming to him so even though he had never set foot in a high school as a student and his only education had been what he had as a student in a one room

school 25 years before he decided he would use the GI Bill and go to college; something no one else in his family had ever done.

Pop had two heroes: Teddy Roosevelt and John L. Lewis. Roosevelt recruited many of his Rough Riders from ranches in the Northeastern corner of New Mexico and there were still enough of them alive in the 40's that a Rough Riders reunion was held each fall before the rodeo in Las Vegas, NM. The reunion was actually a parade, with the surviving Rough Riders riding in open convertibles. Pop had read about the reunion and Highlands University was in Las Vegas; that was all the accreditation it needed. Pop didn't apply for admission – which is lucky since he would certainly have been turned down – but simply drove to New Mexico from West Virginia and showed up in Dean Farmer's office saying he wanted to enroll for the coming semester. Hard as it is to believe, the Dean admitted him. Four years later he graduated and went on to teach at the high school level for most of the remainder of his life. That should give some idea of the character of Pop, whom you'll meet in many of the stories.

A Letter for Booker

Booker Bailey was totally illiterate. In itself, this wasn't unusual on Frog's Creek in the early 1930s, where maybe a third of the adults were illiterate - some of them could make their mark (sign their name in a barely legible scrawl) and some, like Booker, couldn't even do that. The events I want to tell you about though occurred because Booker couldn't read and are so unusual that you may find it hard to believe they really happened. But they did, just as I'll tell them.

The mail service in the remote areas of West Virginia at that time was what was called Rural Free Delivery. Those people who wanted mail service put up a mailbox on the county road in front of their place and were assigned an RFD number for the box to which mail was addressed and delivered most weekdays by a contract mailman. Since so many people couldn't "read ner cipher" as they put it - they had no need for a mailbox since they weren't going to be sending any letters and were unlikely to receive many, if any, either. Cipher meant being able to do arithmetic or count change.

The only other thing that ordinarily came in the mail was Charleston's newspaper over 20 miles away, and even the funny papers required some reading ability. Besides which the paper cost money and virtually no one had money to spare for something as frivolous as a newspaper. This was before the days of mass advertising by mail. The closest thing to mail advertising that I can remember were the Montgomery Wards and Sears &

Roebuck catalogs we received, which we occasionally helped neighbors who couldn't read place orders from, and the seed catalogs that came just before spring planting each year.

Since so many people did not have a mailbox, it was commonplace for someone wanting to write to a person who didn't have a mailbox to send it "care of" someone who did and whom they knew lived nearby. Pop used to get a few letters each year addressed to one or the other of our neighbors - with the comment c/o Earl Simmons on Frog's Creek, W.Va. - almost never with the full RFD box number since the person writing the letter was unlikely to know that. This ellipsis caused no problem for the mailman since he knew virtually everyone in the community, by name, if not by sight.

If he didn't know which mailbox to leave a letter to get it to the intended recipient, he would leave it at Lanham's country store. The next time the person to whom the letter was addressed, or a member of the family, came to the store, the storekeeper would give it to them. I know this is a long-winded lead into the story I wanted to tell, but the story wouldn't make any sense if you didn't know this background.

On this day, Booker had come to the store to buy a few essentials; a couple of plugs of Red Mule chewing tobacco for himself, a tin of snuff for his old lady, a pound of coffee, and a few other small items. Booker, like everyone else in the community, had an account at the store. Still, this time he had some cash money on him so that when Eadie, the clerk, told him how much his bill came to, he pulled two much-creased and folded dollar bills out of his pocket and laid them on the counter. When Eadie didn't reach for them, Booker understood the unspoken communication and dug around in his overalls bib pocket until he found a couple of quarters and maybe a dime or two. At that point, Eadie made change for him and handed over the items purchased. Just as he turned to leave the store, Eadie remembered that the mailman had left a letter for him and called him back to hand it to him.

As Eadie told the story later, the letter was some sort of government mailing in a legal-sized envelope with a blue border around it and a big blue and black eagle in the upper left corner

- very official-looking. From her description, it was most likely a letter from the NRA (the National Recovery Administration). The NRA was set up to administer the National Industrial Recovery Act created by the Roosevelt Administration earlier that year since they all had such an eagle prominently displayed. Why they, or anyone else for that matter, would have sent a letter to Booker I can't imagine, but someone had. Booker took the envelope from Eadie and turned it over a couple of times, looking at both sides intently, clearly puzzled by a letter addressed to him. After a couple of minutes, he said to Eadie, "My specs been bothering me a lot lately, so I left them to home. Reckon you could tell me what it says?"

I forgot to mention that Eadie was the wife of one of the Lanham boys, the family that owned and ran the store, and was a Charleston city girl. The Lanham boy had met her in town, sparked and married her, and brought her back to the Lanham family place on Frog's Creek, where she worked in the family store. He worked - when he worked - at the family sawmill. She was from town and not above pulling a joke on Booker that no local would have even considered doing. It was common knowledge that Booker ran a still and sold the white lightning he made to the miners over at Harmon's Creek. Pop always said his moonshine wasn't much good, but if all you wanted to do was to get drunk as fast as you could, it was good enough for that.

Eadie had certainly heard that Booker ran a still. She took the envelope and opened it and after she saw that it was just some junk government mail, said to Booker, "Booker, this is serious. This is a letter from one of the Deputy Sheriffs over at Kanawha County." Then, leaning across the counter in a conspiratorial manner so no one else could hear her, she pretended to read the letter to him. Saying that he - the Deputy Sheriff- had kin over at Harmon's Creek who knew Booker and always said that he—Booker—was a fair man, so he wanted to be fair with him. Well, she went on, someone had informed on Booker and told the Sheriff where Booker's still was hidden, and they were going to stake it out and arrest him the next time he went to the still. The Deputy Sheriff was telling him this in case he wanted to light out before they got there to avoid being arrested. Eadie, wanting to

destroy the evidence so that Booker couldn't show the letter to someone else who might ruin her joke, went on to say that the Deputy said it would be worth his job if it got out that he had tipped Booker off about the raid, so he asked that the letter be destroyed as soon as Booker had read it. Following these "instructions", Eadie tore the letter into small pieces and stuffed them in the pocket of her blouse.

Eadie had figured that if Booker swallowed her story, he would lie low for a day or two, and maybe be looking over his shoulder while watching for the revenuers the letter had warned him about. She had completely misjudged the mettle of her man, however. As Pop often said, Booker wasn't afraid of any creature on foot or hoof - and that included revenuers. Booker thought seriously for a moment or two and then asked Eadie if she would put a box of cartridges for his 30-30 carbine on his account. By this time, Eadie knew her joke had taken a bad turn and was desperately trying to think of some way - short of confessing that she had been pulling his leg - to undo the mischief she had done. "Well, Booker," she said, "I'd sure like to do that, but you already have almost thirty dollars on account, and you know how tight money is right now. A box of 30-30 cartridges is over three dollars, so I just can't do it". "Paul" - her husband - "was saying just the other day that we would have to get something paid toward some of these older accounts. I had planned to mention it to you when you came in today, but you had cash money for your purchases, so I didn't need to".

Booker thought a few minutes, put the plugs of Red Mule, the tin of snuff and the can of coffee back on the counter. He dug to the bottom of the bib pocket on his overalls and came up with a few more coins which he laid beside the other booty and told her to give him as many cartridges as that was worth. Eadie was trapped and couldn't think of any way out of the mess she had gotten herself into. So she took down a box of cartridges, removed a few like she was reckoning it out carefully, and gave the almost full box to Booker. He thanked her and left as quickly as he could.

A couple of days later, when Pop stopped at the store, Eadie told him what she had done after cautioning him that he

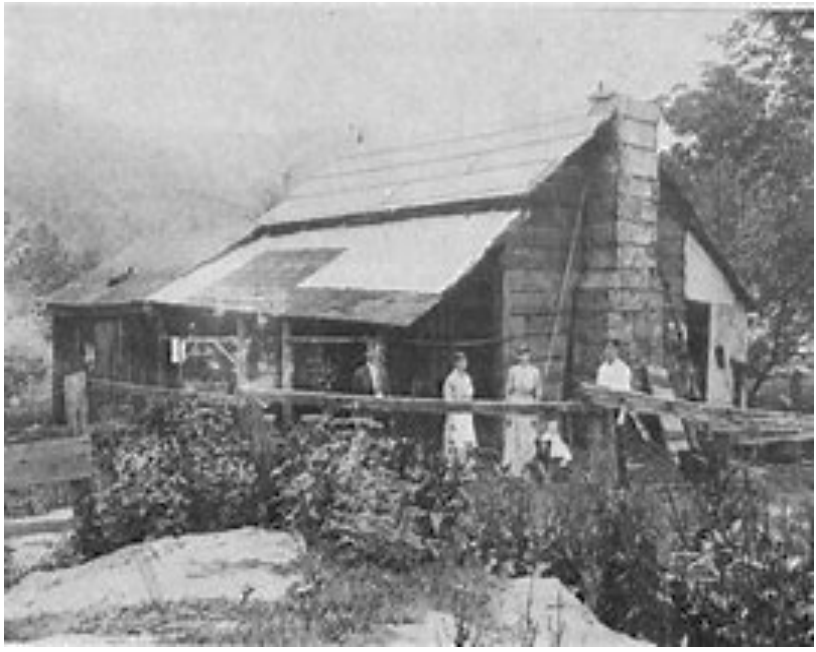
wasn't to tell a soul. Chances are that she told some other people as well since it was too good a story to keep to yourself. Besides, which, she must have been worried about the unexpected turn her joke had taken. Of course, Pop told Mom and me - after warning us that we were not to tell a soul either. But I'll bet he told someone else too. However, the story got out; eventually, a lot of people knew what Eadie had done.

After Booker left the store, he rushed home, got his carbine, and some stuff together. He then carefully worked his way up the ridge above the hollar in which the still was located until he was right above it. He then made his way part ways down the hill to a thicket of huckleberry bushes from where he could see the still and the whole other hillside and a good portion of the hollar as well. He made himself a cosy in the bushes where he could see but not be seen and settled down to wait. The letter hadn't said when the Sheriff and the revenuers were coming. Still, he assumed it wouldn't be long since Eadie had said the letter had been there a couple of days before he came in. Booker was a patient man, but with no tobacco to chew, the time must have passed intolerably slow. He would retrace his steps to the house at night by moonlight and return to his cosy before the light in the morning.

After several days had passed, he must have decided that either the revenuers had called off the raid, or else that they had been given bad information by their informant, so they didn't know where his still was after all. At any rate, he came down from the ridge in broad daylight and headed down Frog's Creek to the store to get a plug of Red Mule since he was dying for a good chaw. As luck would have it, the first person he met was my Pop who was on his way home from Harmon's Creek, where he had gone to buy a keg of horseshoe blanks and a box of horseshoe nails at Ault's general store. He used in his sideline of shoeing horses for all of the farmers thereabouts.

Booker asked Pop if he had seen any strangers in the last few days. Since Pop was in on the story, he at first said no, he couldn't recall seeing anyone out of the ordinary. But then he remembered that there had been a couple of city fellers at Ault's store who had asked him if he knew where the cutoff was to get over to Frog's Creek. He said he had told them where it was but had also told them he didn't think they could get across the mountain in their Model A. Booker was very excited by this news and wanted to know which way they had gone. Pop said they had still been in the store buying provisions when he left. Booker forgot all about his chaw and climbed up the cut on the side of the road to get back to his ridge as quickly as he could. It was several more days before anyone saw him again.

I don't know whether Booker ever figured out that he had been made the butt of a joke or not. It wouldn't have made any difference if he had since Eadie was a woman, and he couldn't have done anything about it anyway. What makes me think he might have, though, is that people who had heard the story got in the habit of asking him when they saw him if he had received any more letters and his stock answer was; "Go tuh Hell".



A Little Liquefaction

Reverend Older has been dead now for nearly fifty years, but even if he were alive I doubt that he'd recollect something he said back when I was just a boy—a remark that has already outlived both him and my Pop, and may outlive me if it tickles you the way it has me. The Reverend was pretty old even then, upwards of sixty I'd guess, and like most old men in that part of West Virginia afflicted with the miseries of old age in a coal mining community—arthritis and rheumatism, or as they were referred to thereabouts, simply as "the rheumatiz." On this particular spring Sunday, the Reverend was walking down the dirt road on Frogs Creek where we lived, probably returning from visiting a member of his congregation who was laid up and hadn't been able to come to services that morning.

Bertie, the local moonshiner, saw him coming and came out on his front porch to be sociable and say howdy. Now Bertie didn't go to church, except for weddings and funerals, but it was a small community, so the Reverend stopped for a few minutes to pass the time of the day. In the course of the conversation, he happened to mention that his rheumatiz was getting the better of him, so much so that walking was getting to be a real "trial and tribulation." Bertie, being a good-hearted soul even if he was a moonshiner—said that he'd had the rheumatiz real bad the last time he'd been let out of the State Pen at Moundsville, but that he'd remembered an old remedy his Mom had told him about and that it had cleared his miseries right away. The remedy

consisted of a wild herb, mountain tea, that has a distinct wintergreen flavor, steeped in good "shine" until all of the oils are extracted. He'd even made some little joke about it oiling up the joints from the inside out.

The long and short of it was that Bertie gave the Reverend a pint of the extract that he had laid back in the pantry with the hope that it would fix the Reverend up as good as it had him. Bertie's place was a mile or so up the creek from ours. Reverend Older had walked on almost as far as our place on his painful legs when he decided to stop and try some of Bertie's remedy. Just as he was finishing taking a swig from what was clearly a pint bottle, my Pop and I walked up on him as we were coming back from pasturing some cows across the creek. Startled, he quickly put the bottle in his coat pocket, and then—obviously fearing that we might think the worst of what we'd seen—tapped his pocket and said, "Just a little liquefaction for my rheumatiz." Whatever else was said, I've long since forgotten.

A few days later after we'd finished the evening chores, Pop and I were getting ready to go night hunting for skunk and possum, or if we were lucky, maybe even a coon. Just as we were leaving the house, Pop hauled out a bottle of Bertie's best and after taking a good snort himself offered it to me asking if I'd like "a little liquefaction to ward off the night air?" As I remember, we both had a good laugh over his funny. I don't recollect whether it happened all of a sudden or not, but the first thing you know, liquor came to be referred to in our home as "a little liquefaction". I can still hear my Pop saying, "I don't mind if I do take a little liquefaction—even if I don't have the rheumatiz" whenever someone offered him a drink, and manys the time I've caught myself about to say the same thing to someone who'd never understand what I was talking about.

A Pint In Evidence

It's a sure sign you are getting old when almost everything makes you think or remark about how things have changed in your lifetime. By that measure I must be getting old since I find myself doing that a lot these days. On the TV news just now there was an agitated, almost hysterical, coverage of what they were citing as the latest instance of police brutality. I couldn't help but think of Berty almost 70 years ago and think to myself how things have changed in that time. The current news story began a few days ago when the police invited a local TV station to send a camera crew along to cover a raid on a suspected crack house. Personally, I don't understand the legality of this practice, but I know it has become a common "public relations" strategy used by police departments all across the country. Just saying on the news that the people shown being arrested are alleged to have committed a crime doesn't seem to protect the privacy of the innocent, but apparently the courts think differently. At any rate the raid went wrong, and the TV cameras recorded the whole thing.

The police officers, dressed in black SWAT uniforms, had rushed up the walk to the front door of the target – a small house in a poor neighborhood – and yelled; "Open up, this is the police". Immediately, before anyone inside could have responded, two burly officers with a battering ram that looked like a log with handles on each side began battering in the front door. The door must have been sturdy and securely locked since it required several massive blows from the ram before the frame on the lock side of the door splintered to allow the door and a part of the frame to swing in to reveal the inside to the camera. The door opened into the living room in which there was a couch on which a couple of people were still seated as though they had been watching television. Another man was running from the room toward what was apparently a kitchen dining area. But straight across the room from the now open entry door was a

bathroom the door to which stood open. A man was standing bent over the toilet with his hand on the handle flushing it.

The policemen manning the battering ram had stepped aside the moment the door and frame had splintered, and two officers had dashed across the room yelling at the man at the toilet to get down on the floor. Instead, he pressed the flush handle once more just as the two policemen tackled him and drove him back against the tub and then onto the floor. Apparently, the drugs had all been flushed down the drain so the two officers who had tackled him and another who had run in just in time to see the last of the evidence disappear down the toilet began beating him with their nightsticks as he cowered on the floor, attempting to cover his head and face with his arms and hands. All three of them were yelling and swearing at him and the camera caught the whole thing. Later the police had tried to get the TV station to not air the footage, but they did anyway which is what caused the furor about police brutality.

In West Virginia, where we lived in the early 30's, moonshining was commonplace. It had been so all during prohibition and was even more so now that prohibition had ended, and the depression had caused most of the coal mines which had been the main source of employment to either shut down or cut way back. Moonshining was still illegal of course since the corn liquor run off in the moonshiner's stills avoided paying both state and Federal excise taxes. But now the law was enforced by "revenuers" instead of the much more aggressive Federal prohibition agents.

The dean of moonshiners on Frogs Creek where we lived was Berty Asbury. He had a loyal clientele, since as my Pop said, Berty's best was better than any bottled in bond whiskey. Berty always had been a moonshiner and as he liked to say, always would be. As a result, he had spent a good part of his adult life in the state penitentiary at Moundsville. He would get out of prison and go back to running a still and selling the moonshine he made. Since it was an open secret in the community that Berty was back in business, it would only be a matter of time before he was caught, tried, convicted again, and sent back to Moundsville. Berty and his wife, Frony, had several

daughters so, while he was in prison the agents didn't bother Frony, even though she continued selling moonshine, since she had to support herself and the girls. Frony didn't run a still of course but must have gotten moonshine from one of Berty's competitors while he was away. The regular customers still showed up at their house to get a bottle or fruit jar of whatever moonshine she had. This cycle had been repeated several times by the time of the events of this story.

In those days the law required the arresting officers to seize a pint of the illegal whiskey as evidence—always referred to as "a pint in evidence". Even if they raided a still with many gallons of whiskey on the site, they only needed to keep a pint for evidence. The rest was dumped on the ground. Pop who had worked as a deputy for the sheriff on several raids said the raiding party generally sampled the evidence pretty liberally before they dumped it – just to make sure it was moonshine. At any rate, Berty knew that no pint, no arrest. The problem was that he had to keep a stock conveniently at hand for customers who could show up literally at any hour of night or day. Since his customers came to the house, that is where he needed his stock. But keeping moonshine at the house was risky since the agents could raid at any time. On one occasion he had stashed his cache in the outhouse – exactly where I don't know.

When a customer showed up, one of the girls would go to the outhouse and come back shortly with a bottle concealed in her dress. The agents knew Berty was back in business and had even raided the house once without finding any moonshine, so they had someone watch the house from the hilltop across the creek. What they saw was that shortly after a customer showed up, one of the Asbury girls would go to the outhouse and after she returned to the house the customer would go on his way, up or down Frogs Creek. They reasoned that the stash must be in the outhouse so when they raided the next time, one agent made a beeline for the outhouse where a search found the stashed moonshine and Berty was on his way back to Moundsville.

While he was in prison that time, Berty figured out a sure-fire scheme that would allow him to keep his stash of moonshine at the house and still not risk getting caught with a pint of

evidence in his possession. I don't know whether you know what a butter churn looks like, so I'll describe one since the story hinges on the shape of a butter churn. Everyone had at least one churn in those days to churn butter from milk that had been allowed to clabber. A churn is heavy stoneware and about two feet tall and a little less than a foot in diameter at each end. The middle is larger where the butter forms, so the churn is distinctly potbellied in shape.

Berty's idea was to store his moonshine in a couple of churns on the kitchen porch. If they were raided, whoever saw the agents first would yell "Raid" and whoever could get to the porch would kick the churns over to dump the moonshine. From the smell it would be obvious what had been done, but no pint, no arrest. As I said, everyone had a churn or two in or near the kitchen, so to a casual visitor, the churns would arouse no suspicion. When Berty got out of prison that time and went back to making and selling moonshine, he put his sure-fire scheme for storing his stash into effect

Frony and the girls were carefully coached on what they were to do when they were raided next. You may think I am wandering and given that I am getting old that may be true, but I need to describe the Asbury house before going on with telling the story. This was long before electricity reached Frogs Creek. The nearest power line was over twenty miles away so there was neither air conditioning nor fans to make the hot humid West Virginia summers bearable. Like many homes, the Asbury house had been built to take best advantage of shade and breezes. A porch ran completely around the house to shade the walls from the sun when it was high and to protect the windows so they could be left open for a breeze even when it rained. Some people screened in a section of their porch where the swing was located to make it more bearable to sit out in the evening when insects abounded. The Asbury house had a porch as I just described, but no screen. The house itself was roughly square with the sitting room, dining room and kitchen on one side and two or three bedrooms and the parlor on the other. Each room had connecting doors to the ones on each side it. The only doors that I remember opening onto the porch were the front door that

opened into the sitting room and a door from the kitchen to the backyard. It is possible that there was a door from the main bedroom, but I don't know and since it doesn't figure in the story it doesn't matter whether there was or not.

At any rate, Berty was back in business and business was good. Word reached the revenue agents that Berty was at it again and they planned a raid. Given their past experience with Berty it is likely they staked out the house and watched customers come and go for some time before they actually raided the place. Frony, who was very heavy-set woman, was on the front porch in her rocker when the agents roared up in their Model A Ford and piled out to run in the house. Frony yelled "Raid" at the top of her voice and one of the girls in the back part of the house heard her and, as she had been coached to do, ran to the kitchen porch and kicked over the two churns. The agents were only steps behind the Asbury girl but could only watch helplessly as Berty's best cascaded through the cracks in the porch and over the edge into the backyard.

By now the Asbury family had gathered to delight in the agent's frustration. As I said, churns are potbellied so when they had been kicked over some of the moonshine had sloshed back as the churns rocked on their sides and a little was left in each of them. One of the agents noticed this and went into the kitchen and got a funnel and had one of the other agents carefully pour what was left in the two churns into the pint evidence bottle he had brought with him. There was just a little over a pint in all so he sealed the bottle, put it in his hip pocket, and proceeded to arrest and handcuff Berty. The agents then took Berty back through the kitchen and dining room heading for the front door in the sitting room.

Frony, who you will recall was a very heavy-set woman who normally moved very slowly, ran through the bedrooms where she grabbed a poker off of the fireplace and came into the sitting room from the adjoining parlor just as the lead agent was about to go out the front door with Berty. She swung the poker in a great arc and hit him squarely in the seat of the pants, breaking the pint bottle in his hip pocket. So far as I know no damage was done except to his dignity, but his pint in evidence had just

dribbled down his leg. After a moment's hesitation, he got out the key to the handcuffs and uncuffed Berty; saying as he did so, "We'll get you next time". To which Berty responded; "There ain't going to be no next time". But they both knew there would be.

Like I said, things sure have changed in my lifetime.

Beans Brunacini

As Sam Ervin, of Watergate fame, was fond of saying; this story takes a heap of telling. Not the story itself which is little more than a recounting of a practical joke which took place over eighty years ago, but the setting in which it occurred.

Did you ever wonder where people get their names, not the ones their parents gave them, but the ones by which everyone calls them? This story tells how Beans Brunacini got his name. Brunacini was Italian, as you might guess from his name, one of an army of emigrants from southern and eastern Europe that came to West Virginia to work in the coal mines in the 20's and were trapped by the great depression which left them unable to leave and no place to go if they could have left. Try as I may, I can't recall Pop ever calling him anything but Beans. His given name, being Italian, may well have been hard to remember or to pronounce, but Beans was neither. So, Beans it was. I wonder what the inscription is on his tombstone if he has one.

Brunacini was single which put him at a disadvantage when it came to finding work since the mine owners had an efficient program for reducing married miners to indentured servants, beholden to the company store, where the needs of their family inevitably drove them into debt. Pay was in company script spendable only at the company store where Mom was fond of saying they made up for the poor quality of the merchandise by keeping the prices high.

The sheriff, ostensibly a county employee, but who was actually paid by the mine company, evicted families from the

company shacks when told to do so by the mine operators and saw to it that the consequences of trying to leave with an unpaid balance at the store were both painful and more important, evident to the other miners.

The mine owners were suspicious of itinerant single miners like Brunacini thinking they might be union sympathizers or even worse, organizers – harking back to the mine wars aat Cabin Creek and Paint Creek a decade before – but they still occasionally hired some. However, it happened, Brunacini was a new hire, and being single moved into the boarding house run by a couple of women whose husbands had been killed in the mines.

In the first quarter of the 20th century Cabin Creek, West Virginia was a typical coal company mining town, company shacks strung out between the county road on one side and a rail spur on the other with the tipple, the mining company office, and the company store at the upper end of town. In the 20's because of the proximity of Cabin Creek to the coking ovens along the Kanawha river at Charleston, if things weren't booming, they were at least good enough for the Cabin Creek Coal Company to run two shifts a day, five days a week. The depression had closed the coking ovens and reduced mine production to less than a full shift per day so the boarding house which had "hot-bedded" every bed to two miners, on different shifts, now had a difficult time finding a miner for each bed.

The income of the two women who ran the boarding house was the difference between the income from the boarders and the rent they paid the coal company, the cost of the meals they provided their boarders and incidental expenses like laundry supplies when they boiled work clothes on Saturday and wash boarded them. The reduced work force had reduced their income to a pittance, so they were glad to have a new boarder and solicitous of his satisfaction.

The first morning when Brunacini came down to breakfast with the other miners one of the women said to him; "We like to put a piece of meat in the dinner pails, but the last meat we had was the fatback we fried up as Cincinnati chicken for your breakfast. We still have beans left over from supper last night

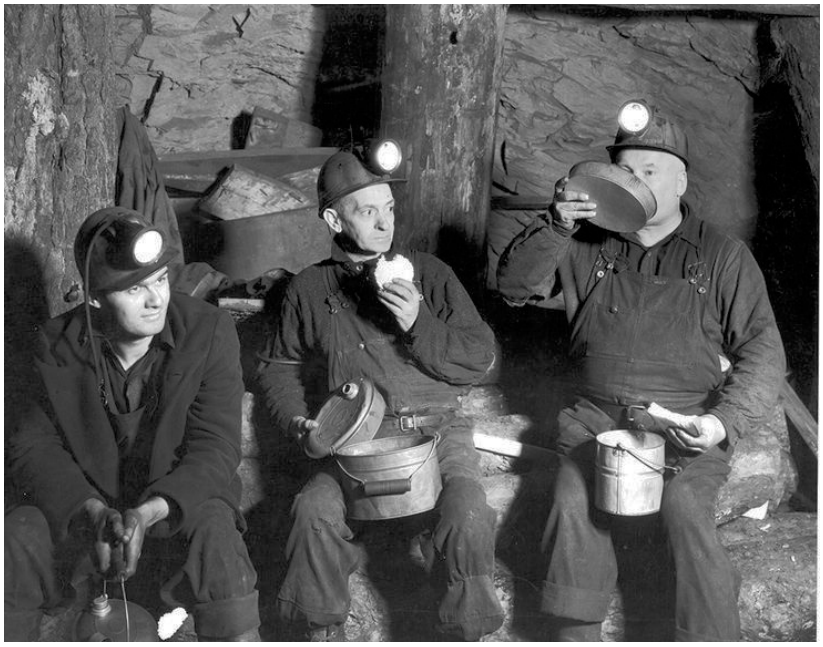
flavored with some of the fatback. Would you mind if we put in a bean sandwich?" Incidentally sandwiches were made with freshly baked biscuits – not light bread from the store which cost way too much. Beans 'lowed as how that was OK with him.

There were two pieces of personal gear every miner carried with him when he went down in the mine. The first was his carbide lamp which had two chambers and a polished reflector to reflect the light forward. The lower chamber contained carbide which releases acetylene when water drips on it. The burning jet of acetylene was his only source of light. The upper chamber contained water and an adjustable drip to regulate the acetylene production – and hence control the illumination.

The other item is more germane to this story – a miner's dinner pail. This was a cylinder roughly 8" in diameter and a foot tall divided into a larger lower section that could hold a gallon of water and an upper section that fitted into the lower and held his dinner. The gallon of water was all he had to drink during a shift of hard manual labor and for his carbide lamp. Acetylene already stinks – smells sort of like you are downwind of a refinery – so some of the miners in order to save all their water for drinking would piss in the carbide lamp to generate the acetylene. Pop said that smelled ten times worse and occasionally led to fights when two miners were working a close face together. The other miners had overheard the conversation with Brunacini and conspired to pull a practical joke on him.

Miners put their dinner pails back in a safe area, away from the coal face they were undercutting and blasting. As each of them went to answer a call of nature, they took the bean sandwiches out of their dinner pails and swapped them for something in Brunacini's pail. Pop said he could have had a fried pie, similar to what the Spanish call an empanada, or even a piece of plain cake or cornbread, but by the time they broke to eat all he had were bean sandwiches. Their joke fell flat when Brunacini just ate the sandwiches without comment and went back to work. At supper that evening the same woman who had asked about a bean sandwich that morning asked Brunicini about his dinner. He 'lowed it was OK.

She wanted to keep the new boarder happy and was concerned by such a non-committable reply. “How was the bean sandwich?” She asked. That was too much for Brunacini. “I like ‘em just fine” he said, “but I ain’t no Damn fool about ‘em!” Beans was born.



Checksum

In the hills of West Virginia where I grew up in the early '30s more than a third of the adults were totally illiterate, or as people there abouts put it; "They could neither read ner cipher", where cipher had nothing to do with cryptography, but meant simply the ability to do arithmetic. Since my Pop was a likable and easy-going man who people knew wouldn't look down on them for asking, many brought anything they received that had to be read to him to read to them-- a job I inherited when he went away to serve in the Navy during WW II. I can remember Pop saying more than once that while they might not be able to read or write, the funny thing was they seemed proud of their inability as well.

One of Pop's favorite stories was about an incident he said happened at a tent revival meeting shortly after we had moved to Frogs Creek. In his sermon the preacher had described in exquisite detail the torments that awaited sinners when they got to Hell, exercising his imagination to the fullest and leaving little for his listeners to fill in from theirs. Somewhere in the course of the sermon, he said—probably in explaining why children and the feebleminded are supposed to be exempt from the tortures of hell—that one is only liable for his sins to the extent he knows he has sinned. At which point Pop said he heard one of our neighbors who was sitting behind him praying fervently; "Oh Lord make me as dumb as an ox", which prayer Pop always said had already been answered in full, with a little bit to boot, only the man was too dumb to know it. This attitude toward learning was widespread—even beyond the hills and hollows, or hollers as everyone called them, where we lived. I still remember vividly a commencement address given by the Lieutenant Governor many years later in which he said to an audience receiving college degrees; "Book learning is a good thing, but you got to leave room in your head for the Bible."

For me, his comment has always conjured up an image of the mind as a filing cabinet almost filled to capacity, leaving the owner faced with the agonizing choice as to whether he should remember the binomial theorem or the twenty third Psalm. Whether our neighbors were proud of being illiterate or not I can't say, but if there was anything that distinguished them, it was that they were proud to a man. The most prideful of them went to elaborate lengths to conceal from outsiders the fact that they couldn't read or that they couldn't count change.

Some would memorize which coins a clerk expected in payment for a can of snuff or a plug of Red Mule chewing tobacco and then would carefully pick out and offer precisely those coins no matter what the store clerk said they owed. Most clerks had learned that when the amount offered was not what had been asked for, to quietly take the extra few coins from the customers hand, and to let them see what had been taken so that the next time they would be able to "do change." Another third could "make their mark", by which they meant they could sign their name, and reckon sums so they were able to count money.

This story, though, is about Marcus Asbury, our closest neighbor who lived just across Frogs Creek from us. Marcus was one of the men in the community who was totally illiterate. The hollows and creek bottoms in that part of West Virginia had been settled well before the Civil War by families who had migrated across the Appalachian Mountains from Virginia. Almost all of them were of Scottish descent—the McClanahans and the McCoys, the Baileys, the Lanhams etc.—who had undoubtably despised and resisted the rule of the Crown back in England and had continued that family tradition of distrust and dislike for any authority into the present.

Each family still lived mostly in the hollow their great grandparents had settled, and were clannish to an almost laughable excess, by which I mean they were openly suspicious of—and sometimes hostile to—anyone outside their family clan. Pop used to joke that on Frogs Creek, if you met someone on the road whom you didn't know, it was perfectly safe to tip your hat and say "Good morning Mr. McClanahan" with confidence that you would almost certainly be right in your

salutation. On Kelly's Creek which branched off from Frogs Creek down by the Poca river and ran up the next hollow over, it would have been equally safe to say "Good morning Mr. Bailey." Newcomers were regarded as "furriners" and looked at with askance as though their family tree might harbor a revenuer or a prohibition agent—which in fact ours did. My paternal grandfather, Pop's father, had been shot in the back and murdered near Beckley by an irate moonshiner whose still he had helped raid earlier in the day. It was difficult, if not impossible, to shake the label of being a foreigner. We certainly were regarded as such, since we had moved to Frogs Creek only a few years before the incident in which Marcus figures took place, but families who had been there for a whole generation were still not quite accepted since there were people alive who remembered them as foreigners, and so long as that memory survived, they would be.

The relevance of all of this to the story I wanted to tell you is that one of the Lanham boys who lived just up the creek from us had married a girl from in Charleston, the nearest city and roughly twenty miles away. This had happened before we moved to Frogs Creek, but as I've said that made her a foreigner and destined to be one for the rest of her life to the resident families. The Lanhams ran a little country store like the ones you occasionally see in the movies. It consisted of one large room in which was piled, stocked and arrayed all that anyone could buy without making the long trip to Charleston—a major outing that most people made only a few times each year.

This was in the heart of the Great Depression, so cash money was something most families rarely had. Cash came in only when a hog was sold, or during the sorghum season when the best sorghums could be sold in town, or more rarely when one of the menfolk managed to get a day job for a short spell. Like all country stores at that time, the Lanhams accepted eggs, honey, sorghums, butter etc. in barter for store goods, but mostly they ran an account for each family so they could buy necessities when they had no cash money in hand. In those days, American processed cheese came in wooden boxes, on the order of four-by-four inches in cross section by a foot and a half long—just the right size to serve as a file drawer for the account books in which purchases were recorded. Each account book had a family's name printed on top of it and was stored in one of the cheese boxes kept on the shelf behind the counter. Whenever a family came into some cash money, it was expected that they would come to the store and settle up their outstanding account if they could or failing that to pay something "on account."

On the day I wanted to tell you about, Marcus had come to the store to do just that. Ordinarily his wife Zelphie took care of anything having to do with money, but on this day Zelphie was either sick or over at her sister Hatties or something, so Marcus

had come himself to pay up his account. The Lanham boy's wife happened to be waiting on the counter that day. My mother had sent me over with a bottle to buy a dimes worth of kerosene for our lamps, which required her to go out back to draw it from the barrel, so she had asked me to wait until she had waited on the other customers—including Marcus.

Apparently she didn't know that Marcus was totally illiterate since as I said he didn't ordinarily go to the store When she got to him and he said that he wanted to pay up his account, she ripped a piece of paper off of the big roll of brown paper at the end of the counter that was used to wrap anything that needed wrapping and tossed it across the counter to him, along with a wooden pencil so he could check her figures. She took Marcus' account book from the cheese box and with her left thumb began flipping through the pages, calling out each subtotal for the purchases he and Zelphie had made as she came to them. At the same time, she was busy writing down the figures with her right hand on a piece of paper on her side of the counter.

Marcus who wasn't about to let a furriner, and a woman to boot, know that he couldn't cipher, gripped the pencil she had thrown to him in a baby-like grasp, almost as if he was going to stob something with the sharpened end. As she wrote down each subtotal on her paper, Marcus repeated the action as best he could on his paper in a kindergarten scrawl aggravated by the way he was gripping the pencil in his closed fist-- and upside down since that is the way he saw what she was writing from his side of the counter. As soon as she had come to the last subtotal in the account book, she whipped a line underneath her neat column of figures to add them up to get a total. Marcus laboriously drew a line over his sprawl of outsized and barely recognizable numerals, and copied, still upside down and at the top of the column, the total she calculated as she added her figures. When she finished, without looking up she said: "That comes to so many dollars and so many cents .” Marcus looked at the scrawl of upside-down numerals on his paper with great intensity and concurred; "Thas right .”

Cuz

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant argues with such conviction that logic is implicit in the mind, it is clear he believed that if two lines of reasoning, one logical and one illogical, were presented in a "blind taste test", the logical one would invariably be chosen because of its intrinsic appeal. The story I am about to tell appears to be a counterexample. The events took place nearly eighty years ago, and in spite of their Alice in Wonderland logic, remain as clear and appealing to me today as when they occurred.

The year was 1934. We had miraculously graduated from being homeless two years before, squatting on someone's porch after Pop had been fired and blackballed by the Cabin Creek Coal Company for joining a union, and from living in an abandoned derelict farmhouse the previous year, to living in a proper house in Red House, West Virginia. Pop had been hired as a State Trooper after the local elections that year, so for the first time in his and Mom's married life he was getting a regular paycheck. The position was to be short lived, but for the moment it must have appeared to them that Providence had relented in its Job-like tormenting of them. The timing of the relief could not have been better. Mom was well along in a difficult pregnancy and had developed serious complications. The doctor had told Pop that if she lost the baby that far along, he couldn't vouch for her chances either. His firm advice was that she was to take to bed and to stay there until the baby came.

As a result, she was bedfast even to the extent of being told to use the slop jar instead of going to the outhouse out back. You may wonder why I would have described Providence as having relaxed its torment of them under these circumstances, but Pop's job as a State Trooper and the salary it brought in made it possible for her to follow the doctor's advice and for him to hire a woman to do the housework. A few months earlier neither of these would have been possible. To them it must have seemed that Providence had provided for them just when they needed it most. At any rate I remember both of them being very optimistic, in spite of Mom's health, and saying repeatedly that things were starting to look up.

Red House was a small town which had been in decline from long before the depression, but to us it seemed like paradise. Like many small towns in West Virginia, it had a few Negro families who lived in a segregated area close by—in this case down by the river. Pop had hired a Negro woman from there to look after Mom and me and to do the housework. She had a boy my age, whom she brought to work with her each day. I'm embarrassed to admit that try as I may, I can't with any confidence recall his name—although as you will see I recall his dogs name with absolute certainty. Amos seems right, but I suspect that this may not have been his name at all, and that in my memory I'm simply transferring to him a familiar name from the radio minstrel program, Amos and Andy, which I heard later in the 30's. The story requires that he have a name though, so Amos it will have to be. Amos had a shiny red metal wagon in which his mother pulled him to work with her each morning.

Someone had put a large cardboard box in the wagon that completely filled the bed and stood maybe three feet tall in it. The box had three openings cut in it for windows: one on each side and one in the front. Amos always arrived in the box, good weather or bad—peering out the front window and chattering away to his mother. Besides the wagon—the likes of which I had never seen or played with before—Amos also had a dog, a black and white mongrel. Given our previous homeless status, I had never had a pet, so Amos having a dog was even more impressive to me than his having a wagon. The first day they

came I asked Amos what the dog's name was. "Boy", he said. "That's no kind of name" I said, "What's his real name?" " Boy" he said, "and he knows his name too". To prove it, he would say; "Come here Boy", and the dog would come to him, or he would say, " Sit Boy", and the dog would sit. I would say "Come here Boy" and Boy would ignore me, or I would say "Sit Boy" and he would continue standing which I considered compelling evidence that his name wasn't Boy, otherwise he would have done what I told him to do.

Amos and I began our fall-long logical tug of war on all sorts of topics that day, with him insisting that his dog had the unlikely name Boy, and me arguing that couldn't be his name since he obviously didn't know it, and if it was his name he would. Amos spoke with an exaggerated Southern drawl which I can't capture without distracting from the story I wish to tell. For example, Pop was a "Po leaseman" to Amos, pronounced as two separate words with a definite pause between them. I was Goose, not Gus, and Boy he pronounced as Bo--ee, lingering on the soft e's after Bo. Kids are good at bridging language barriers, so Amos spoke in his native tongue, and I spoke in mine, and we communicated as easily as if we were speaking the same language. Amos was not allowed by his mother to come in the house.

If the weather was good, he stayed in the yard with Boy and the wagon. If it was raining, they all moved onto the porch, where his mother told him he wasn't to make any noise because Mrs. Simmons was sleeping—whether Mom was asleep or not. Irrespective of whether it was in the yard or on the porch, Amos and I played outdoors each morning until it was time for lunch, when his mother would come out to get me and take me in to wash my hands and eat my lunch in the kitchen. She brought a piece of cornbread with her each morning for Amos' lunch, which she gave to him when she came out to get me. When his mother gave him the cornbread, Amos always climbed into the box on his wagon and sat down, which brought his face to the level of the windows.

Without being told to do so, as soon as Amos sat down in the box Boy would come and sit down alongside the wagon and they began a ritual that amazed me. Amos would take a bite from the piece of cornbread, and then put his hand with the cornbread in it out the side window. Boy would take a dainty bite—never a big one and never two. Amos would then have another bite etc. For all the time his mother worked for us, Amos always had his cornbread for lunch and so did Boy. If the weather was good, Amos and I were allowed to pull the wagon down the street as far as the county road. I say street, but it was an unpaved road. There was virtually no traffic on it; an occasional wagon pulled by horses was a normal day's traffic. Automobiles were such a rarity that if a Model T or Model A did go by, Amos and I would run out to watch it and to wave to the driver. Amos would tell me to get in the wagon and he would pull me.

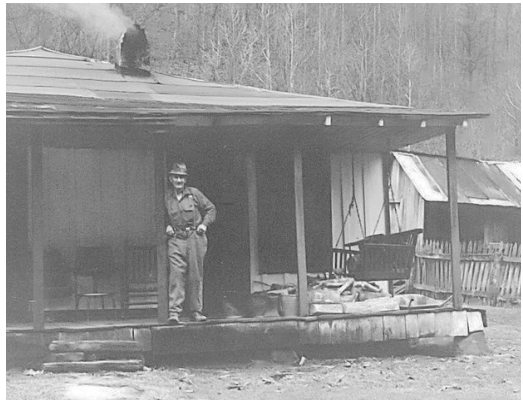
As I said the road was dirt and rough, so it was hard work for one four-year-old to pull another four-year-old. When he would get tired and stop to rest, I'd say to him "You get in and I'll pull you". But he wouldn't. He had already learned his place in the world even if I hadn't yet learned mine. I'd argue with him; but the outcome was always the same. Amos would finally say;

"OK, you can pull Boy". He'd snap his fingers for Boy to get in the wagon, and I'd pull Boy for a while, but it wasn't the same thing. On the corner where our street crossed the county road was the town library. As I later learned, it was identical to hundreds of other libraries in hundreds of other small towns in the Eastern US. They were all the gift of the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, which had built the buildings and stocked each of them with an identical collection of books. The library was square and constructed of red brick with a high set of concrete steps in front and a metal roof, which made it an imposing structure in a town of unpainted wooden houses.

The first time Amos and I reached this edge of the world for our travels, he stopped and with great earnestness announced; "Someday I'm going to burn down the library". Since having anything to do with fire was grounds for a sound whipping for me, his proposal—even the thought --was horrendous. "Why", I said. "Cuz", he replied. The word because becoming cuz in Amos' vernacular. "Why", I persisted. "Cuz", he replied, etc. This nonsensical bit of reasoning was repeated several times. Convinced finally, not by his logic certainly, but by the strength of his conviction, I eventually said with equal conviction; "I'm going to burn down the library too". "You better not", Amos said. "Why?" "Cuz". "Why?" " Cuz, They'll whup you if you do", Amos said with finality.

With this settled we'd pull the wagon back to the house. This strange bit of reasoning and my momentary conversions to a would-be arsonist were repeated time after time that fall. The illogic of it still appeals to me—perhaps because of the question whose answer will forever be " Cuz". What could have happened in Amos' short life that made him so determined to burn down the library?

Dawg-Dawg and Uncle Ross



About two miles further down Frogs Creek from where we lived, the creek emptied into the Poca River. For some reason, it didn't run into the river at a sharp angle as is usually the case, but rather it almost paralleled the river for a short distance before finally joining it so that a narrow point of bottom land, maybe fifty yards across, extended out between the creek and the river. Elms and willows and other quick growth had sprung up on the banks so that the point was pretty much enclosed on three sides. A long time before we moved to Frogs Creek someone had built a one-room slab shanty out on the point which everyone thereabout called the old Bailey place, however no one had lived in it for years and it had started to fall away as deserted places will do. Then in either 1934 or 1935, Old Man Gilmore showed up and moved into it. Let's see, it was in the summer of 1932 that my Pop was black-balled and laid off from the mines by the Cabin Creek Coal Company for "talking union."

The company sheriff had come and evicted us from the company house and thrown the few things my folks owned out into the county road. All that summer we had stayed with another miner over at Harmon's Creek with whom Pop had worked, but when finally, it became clear that he wasn't going to get another job in the mines, Pop moved us into an abandoned farmhouse on the Hovert Landers place for that fall and winter. The next spring we'd moved to Frogs Creek, and it must have

been about a year later that Old Man Gilmore showed up—so it must have been in the spring of 1935 that this story begins.

The mines over at Raymond City and Cabin Creek were laying off men nearly every shift at that time, but my Pop said Old Man Gilmore hadn't ever worked in the mines, which made him an outsider in a community where almost every able-bodied man had loaded coal or driven mules in the mines before the layoffs began. As far as I know, no one ever did find out where he'd come from—although it was clear he was country just like us. He just showed up one day and set about patching up the old Bailey place. Someone must have owned the point of land on which the shanty was located, but I doubt that he asked for, or got, permission to live there. Since the place was abandoned, nobody questioned his right to live in the shanty.

I can remember people down by the store wondering at first where he'd come from, but after a while no one seemed even to care about that. To us kids, though, he was a fascinating person. My impression then was that he was very old—even ancient—but in retrospect I can't even guess at his age. Maybe the reason I thought he was so old was that his hair and beard were white and unlike the men of my Pop's generation who were constantly scrabbling to eke out an existence, he didn't work at all which made him seem more grandfatherly than perhaps he was. The funny thing about his beard, though, was that the stubble always looked like he hadn't shaved for several days—even then I can recall wondering when it was that he shaved. The oddest thing about him, though, that we noticed right off, was that he wore gum boots—even in the summertime—and from the way they clompted as he walked, it was clear that he didn't have on shoes inside them either.

My brother and I would hike down along the creek bank to watch him as he nailed flattened tin cans over the holes in the slab walls where knots had fallen out or patched the roof with pieces of scrap. Unlike kids are apt to do nowadays, we'd never broken the windowpanes in the old Bailey place—still several were missing—so Old Man Gilmore filled the vacant spots with flattened coffee tins. We'd played in the shanty many times, and although there was a stovepipe through the roof, we knew there

was no stove. Not long after Old Man Gilmore moved in, though, we saw smoke coming from the pipe. Later we found that he'd taken an oil drum that had been left at the end of the Frogs Creek road by the state road crew and set it on several flat rocks to make a stove. Somehow, he'd cut a square hole in the side of the drum that he put the wood in through. Since the stovepipe hadn't come down inside the shanty quite far enough to reach the hole he'd cut in the end of the drum for the flue opening, he'd cut open a couple of fifty-pound lard tins that he'd gotten over at the store and rolled them up to fit the stovepipe and then wired the whole thing together with some fence wire.

Crude as it was, his improvised stove kept the place just as warm as our Burnside stove at home and the top of the drum also served as his cook stove. Once he'd gotten the place livable, Old Man Gilmore settled down to a routine that in good weather almost always found him sitting on a nail keg out by his front door and whittling. Not long after that he saw me and my brother over by the creek bank and called for us to come over. He'd whittled a couple of peach pits into little sitting monkeys with their hands over their faces which he gave to us. He asked if we knew how to make a slip whistle from the elderberry bushes that grew along the creek and when we said that we didn't, he cut a couple of long, straight joints and showed us how to do it. First, he ringed the bark carefully about two-thirds of the way up and then tapped the bark gently with the back of his knife, "so she'll slip", he said. He then slid the bark off and cut away about a third of the wood so that when the bark was slipped back you had a kind of flute that sounded a lot better than a whistle. After that, all of us boys started stopping by whenever we could, and he showed us all kinds of things that other grown-ups either didn't know or hadn't the time to show us. For example, in the deep pool below where the creek emptied into the river there were some large carp which he caught on his trot lines.

No one else around there ate carp since they weren't supposed to be any good, but he showed us the vein along the fish's side that if you cut out made the fish good eating. I never tried any—but he said it was good. But it was his whittling that was special. He saved good straight pieces of poplar which

whittled better than anything else—and with these he could make a ball in a cage all out of one piece and linked chains just like a log chain. I still have after all of these years six links of a chain he cut nearly eighty years ago and a seated monkey he carved from a peach pit. Before long all us kids were calling him Uncle Ross—although I don't think he ever told us to call him that and the grown-ups only referred to him as Old Man Gilmore. Uncle Ross never finished whittling a chain while any of us were watching.

He'd get to a point where the individual links were just becoming discernible and then quit—"to go talk to a man about a horse"—which was his way of saying that he had to go out back. Then when we'd come back next time, the links would all be separated, and the chain completed. I asked him time and time again how he did it and he'd say "Oh, there ain't nothin' to it," and several times he promised to show me how to whittle a chain for myself—but he never did. He taught all of us boys how to whittle the triggers for the dead falls which he used instead of steel traps to trap for skunk and possum and the trips for rabbit boxes and several kinds of whistles, etc., but the art of making chains and the little balls which were free to move in a cage he kept to himself, although over the years he whittled several of each for all of us.

I didn't know about magic or magicians in those days, but in retrospect it is clear that to Uncle Ross these two whittlings were like a conjuring trick—he could do it and none of us could, and like any really good trick, it could be done over and over without losing its effect. Uncle Ross' whittling knife was a beauty—larger than a regular pocketknife. He had a whetstone, but he rarely used it on his knife, but whetted the blade slowly and deliberately on an old shoe top that he kept just for that purpose. He used to say to us that most people forced the edge too much—but he'd pause every few strokes and try the edge on the back of his thumbnail until it suited him and then set to whittling. He always told us that his knife was a "real Skinner with a genuine bone handle"—and I thought then that this was the brand name like Barlow or Case—but I think now it was a description rather than a name. He didn't just whittle just for fun

but made all sorts of wooden utensils that he sold for, as he put it, cash money.

For years my Mom had a wooden apple-butter spoon he'd made from wild cherry cause it wouldn't split in the hot apple butter. Uncle Ross never worked, and unlike all the other grown-ups around, he never talked about the lack of work. Once—without meaning to be impertinent—I asked him how he made do and he said, "Oh, I trap a little, steal as much as I can, but mostly, I just do without." We kids didn't often go inside Uncle Ross' place since he was generally sitting out front on his keg anytime we showed up. Occasionally, however, a shower would force us to retreat inside, or else he'd go in to get something he'd whittled for us and we'd tag along since he never told us not to. He'd papered the inside of the shack with newspapers—"to damp the drafts," as he said. We didn't get a paper at home since my folks considered newspapers to be a waste of money, so on the rare occasions when we went to someone's house that took a paper, I would greedily read all the accumulated comic strips they had, especially the colored funnies from the Sunday papers.

Uncle Ross had papered the area behind his barrel stove with the colored funnies—so that I could read the exposed side but of course I couldn't make out the other side. I still remember that Li'l Abner was on the side I could see which meant that Buck Rogers, which I liked even better, was pasted to the wall. Each time I went into Uncle Ross' place those hidden funnies tantalized me. I even asked him once if he had read them before he pasted them up and could tell me about the hidden Buck Rogers sequence—but unbelievably he said he hadn't looked at them. You'd think that I would have forgotten such a small thing after all of these years, but even today I never think of Uncle Ross without remembering my frustration at never getting to see the other half of that set of colored funnies.

I mentioned earlier that most of the men had been laid off from loading coal at the mines—and there weren't any other jobs available. Most of the older men stayed home farming as best they could and making do around the place, but the younger men didn't seem to take to farming. They mostly hung out at the store down by the end of the red dog topped county road—although

they did spend a lot of time up at Berty's place when they had some money. Berty was a local moonshiner, and everyone said his stuff was better than bottled in bond.

Mr. Bailey who ran the store had set out some horseshoe posts alongside his store, so they played horseshoes a lot—but pocketknives were the main preoccupation. There was a game they played which awed us boys. Two of them would open the big blade on their pocketknives and then stand a few paces apart on the packed dirt in front of the store. Then they took turns flipping the opened knives into the ground as close as they could to the other man's foot. The object was to get the knife close enough to the other man's foot that he'd lose his nerve and jump out of the way. Some of them were really good at it and could stick the knife blade in the ground within a fraction of an inch of the other guy's shoe—and there were very few of the others who could stand still for that.

The Asbury boys were especially good, and they threw their knives so hard that the blade would be stuck halfway into the ground which made it even harder for someone to take. I remember once when Singing Sam, the middle one of Uncle Josh Asbury's boys, stuck his knife into Toby McClanahan's foot. Toby was pretty good at the game himself—but everyone laughed like crazy over him getting stuck in the foot even though he hadn't flinched and moved. At any rate, knives were a big topic of conversation and there was a constant comparison and swapping going on. Someone would say "Let me see that Barlow of yours," and then after a bit when he'd had a chance to test the spring and to feel the edge on the blade he'd say, "What'll you give to boot for my Stockman for your jackknife." Even if no deal could be worked out, the negotiations called for everyone to examine both knives and to offer opinions on fair boot. It seemed to me that with all the swapping, etc., that a person must surely get his own knife back eventually—and maybe they did.

There was also a lot of talk about the mines—mostly stories about outsiders, from over at Raymond City or Cabin Creek whom they'd worked with; "Do you remember that time the slate fall pinned Bob Henry in Number Two? Didn't hurt him none,

but he was one nigger who was a white man for a while." And even though they'd told the stories over and over, they'd all laugh like it was brand new. Looking back, it was curious in view of their age that there was never any talk about women. It's possible that they simply didn't talk about such things when us boys were around, but I don't think so. They never paid us much mind as far as I could tell, so it doesn't seem likely that they acted any different when we were present than when we weren't. Uncle Ross didn't go to the store much; he was too old to fit into the group that hung out there and besides he didn't have much money to spend. Once in a while, though, he would walk over to buy a plug of red mule chewing tobacco and at first when he did, he'd try and join in the conversation out front. But they never let him. They'd stop talking while he was there—and no matter what he said, no one ever laughed. After a while Uncle Ross stopped trying. It got so that when Uncle Ross got near the store one of the Asbury boys would say something for him to hear.

One thing in particular stands out in my memory because as a kid I pictured in my imagination just what they were saying. Singing Sam would say, "Old Man Gilmore eats pickled possum with the eyes in," and then they'd all laugh. It wasn't the idea of eating pickled possum that got me—but the thought of the skinned carcass with the bulging eyes still in in the pickling barrel. It was true that Uncle Ross ate the possum he caught after he'd skinned them for their pelts. Nobody else around there did—but he said possums weren't any dirtier than hogs and everybody ate hogs—and I guess he was right there. He also ate a lot of the other animals he trapped, but eating possum was the thing that stood out. When Uncle Ross had first started coming to the store, he'd shown his Skinner knife around and everyone had felt its edge. Uncle Ross would draw the blade lightly over his thumbnail and say it was smooth as silk and everyone had to agree.

Later, the only conversation I can recall being directed to him was occasionally one of the men would say, "When you gonna swap us that knife of your'n?" They only called him Old Man Gilmore when they were talking about him or for his

benefit but when they talked to him, they never called him Old Man Gilmore or Uncle Ross or anything—they just talked to him. Sometimes he'd say, "Reckon I ain't," and sometimes he wouldn't even answer—but would head on back over to his place as soon as he'd got his plug of red mule. It was in the spring of the second year that Uncle Ross had lived in the old Bailey place that dawg-dawg showed up, only the name came later.

One day when my brother and I stopped by Uncle Ross' place there was a scruffy looking hound pup, maybe four months old, lying out front by the nail 4 keg. The pup was red and black like a red bone coon hound, but I never saw a sorrier looking pup in my life. Bones showed all over its body and the hair looked like it had been rubbed off in places over the knobby bones. Uncle Ross said it had just wondered in. While we were there the pup had a fit and began yelping and howling and ran through under the shanty knocking its head on each floor joist with a loud thump as it went. Uncle Ross said it had worms real bad and he was going to have to give it some gun powder for them, else it would die. We helped him catch the pup and held it while he cut open a ten-gauge shotgun shell and poured the gunpowder in the pup's mouth and held its muzzle shut until it had swallowed most of the powder. Apparently, this unorthodox treatment cured the pup of its worms since, after a couple of more treatments, it stopped having fits and began to fill out into a decent looking dog. Uncle Ross had gotten from somewhere an old ten-gauge shotgun that had no stock and the previous winter he'd whittled and scraped a new stock out of a chunk of walnut stump. After the pup began to grow, you'd see Uncle Ross down by the creek checking on his traps or up by the rock cliffs resetting his dead falls that he set for possum, and he'd always have the shotgun over his arm and the dog wouldn't be far away from him. I don't think he ever used the gun but he always carried it when they were running the traps.

Sometime that first winter, dawg-dawg had gone off on his own to follow the trail that Uncle Ross followed each morning in running his trap line and had stepped in a steel trap someone had set down by the creek for muskrat. As you know, a muskrat when caught in a trap will gnaw its foot off to free itself. To

prevent this, the traps are chained to a sunken log so the animal will flounder into the deeper water and drown before it can free itself. Uncle Ross said that dawg-dawg had managed to drag the water-soaked log all the way back to his shanty by the chain attaching it to the trap on his foot. By the time Uncle Ross found dawg-dawg the trap had cut through the hide to the bone and the foot was pretty badly mangled. As Uncle Ross said, he put a poultice on the leg to pull out the "pizen."

He kept dawg-dawg in the house with him until spring by which time dawg-dawg's foot had healed, although he always limped on it thereafter. I guess it was having the dog live in the house with him that made dawg-dawg so special to Uncle Ross, but in any event, it got so that when we'd stop by he'd always have a new story to tell on how smart the dog was. Once he told us that it had chased down a full-grown rabbit—not a baby rabbit mind you—but a full-grown rabbit in the bottom out in front of his place and then instead of eating it had brought it home and they'd had it for supper. "Now I ask you, is that smart or ain't it." About this time he started showing people the dog's mouth too. Uncle Ross would take the pup's muzzle in both his hands and open its mouth to show you that the roof of the mouth was all black and then he'd say, "Now that's what I call a real dog—a dog's dog." After a while all of us took to calling the pup dog-dog—even Uncle Ross who called him "dawg-dawg."

After that, it got to where almost any time we'd stop by, Uncle Ross would have some new story about how smart dawg-dawg was. In the spring after dawg-dawg's leg had healed, the two of them had begun night hunting for possum and coon—in those days a prime coon skin would fetch maybe a dollar and a quarter to a dollar and a half—and Uncle Ross was always telling us how dawg-dawg never chomped down with his teeth on the animals they caught which would have put holes in the pelt and cut its value. To prove this, he'd show us the pelts tacked on the stretching boards with not a tooth hole in them.

Another time he told how dawg-dawg had jumped in front of him down by the spring on the creek bank and killed a copperhead that would have bitten him for sure if it hadn't been for dawg-dawg. Whenever any of us boys were down to the

store, we'd stand around on the edge of the group 5 of men that hung out there and listen to their joking and joshing. Occasionally we'd even work up the nerve to try and join in the conversation—generally with no success. Like if they were swapping knives, one of us might say he had a Barlow—but none of them ever asked to see or test one of our knives.

That summer, though, we found a sure way of getting accepted—by retelling the stories Uncle Ross told us about dawg-dawg. It got so that one of the Asbury boys would even ask if we had any more tall tales about that dog of Old Man Gilmore's, and just the way they'd put the question made us try and convince them that they weren't tall tales at all. It was true that Uncle Ross had shown us the stretched pelts with no tooth holes, so we'd tell them that to try and convince them that we weren't exaggerating—but they'd kid us and make it sound like we were making it all up anyway.

My Mom sent me down to the store one day to get some kerosene for our lamps and while I was standing around out front Uncle Ross came in to get a plug of red mule. He had dawg-dawg with him of course, and as they came up onto the store porch, Singing Sam looked at dawg-dawg and said, "That dawg don't look like it can skin no possum to me—no siree," and they all laughed, even though nobody had ever said dawg-dawg could skin a possum. Then when Uncle Ross came back out, Singing Sam said at him, "Say, does that dog eat pickled possum too?" and that also got a big laugh from the rest of the men. Uncle Ross didn't say anything to that but just headed back up the Frogs Creek road, so one of the Bailey boys yelled, I always heared—"like man, like dog", and a couple of them chuckled over that one, too, and then they resumed their usual banter back and forth.

Not long after that incident, dawg-dawg disappeared. Uncle Ross ran all of the trap lines—his as well as everyone else's—to see if maybe dawg-dawg had gotten in a steel trap again, although as he said, dawg-dawg had learned about traps from his previous experience and wouldn't go near one. He had all of us kids out looking too—said he'd even give us a dollar if we

found him and brought him home. But even though we looked everywhere a dog seemed likely to go, none of us found him.

For a couple of weeks after dawg-dawg disappeared, Uncle Ross walked up Frogs Creek each day stopping at every house to ask if anybody had seen dawg-dawg—if maybe he'd crawled into their mow or barn and was injured. On a couple of occasions, he insisted to my Pop, "He must be injured real bad to not come in, cause he'd drag himself home if he could." To prove his belief in dawg-dawg's homing instinct he told again each time about how that first winter, dawg-dawg had managed to drag the water-soaked log attached to the steel trap on his foot all the way back to the shanty. And that proved he'd come home if he could, didn't it? But dawg-dawg didn't show up, and after a while Uncle Ross stopped coming by the house to ask about him.

Maybe a month or so later I was down at the store when Uncle Ross came by. Singing Sam saw him coming and started telling about how they'd turpentined dawg-dawg. "We really cobbed that dawg-dawg good and then we poured the turpentine to him. Lordy—you should have seen how that dog lit out. He was running full tilt on all four and dragging his ass on the ground at the same time. I bet you, he's clean over in Putnam County by now," and they all laughed like it was a great joke. When I told my Pop what I'd heard, he said the Asbury boys were mean enough to have done what they said they did, but that if that was all they'd done to dawg-dawg he'd come back as soon as he got over it. But dawg-dawg never did come back.

After that Uncle Ross wasn't the same anymore. When any of us boys would stop by his shanty, he'd yell at us to get off his property or he'd get the law on us—which was a joke since there wasn't any law nearer than Charleston and that more than twenty miles away. He quit sitting out front and whittling, too, maybe he moved around to the back—or inside—but you couldn't see but the front side of his shanty from the road, so I don't know. Eventually he became so furtive that it was almost comical. If he met you while walking along the road, before you got too close to him, he'd either scamper up the embankment from the road into the woods or else slide down the bank into the elder

bushes and willows by the creek side and go around you through the bushes. Sometimes when he'd safely gotten past, if you looked back, you would see him climb back onto the road and go on his way.

No one saw him much after that. The kids from Frogs Creek all had to go past his shanty on the way down the creek to grade school and it got to where most of the boys would gather several throwing rocks before they got to his place and then throw them at the shanty and yell, "Old Man Gilmore eats pickled possum with the eyes in." Then they'd run on down to the end of the road although he never came out to chase them away so there wasn't really any need for them to run. This all happened years before I left home to go into the Army. While I was away in the service my Mom wrote to say that someone had found Old Man Gilmore dead on the floor of his shanty. The sheriff had come out from Charleston and said that he'd been dead for two or three weeks—apparently from natural causes.

Dirty Politics

It is not news that votes are bought and sold in West Virginia. It would be news if they weren't. Anyone who has read The Dark Side of Camelot knows that in the 1960 democratic primary in West Virginia Bobby and Teddy Kennedy were handing out cash in large amounts well in advance of the election, which their brother Jack won easily. How much of that cash trickled down to individual voters is anyone's guess? The Kennedys bought elections wholesale. But anyone who grew up in West Virginia during the depression knew about buying elections retail.

A common sentiment in those days, at least on Frog's Creek where I grew up, was; Whut's the point in voting if you don't get paid fur it. And lots of people got paid. Since times have changed so much, even in West Virginia, in the last seventy years, it is worth digressing to give the reader some insight into how voting was regarded and done in those days. The biggest surprise would be that not many women voted in West Virginia back then. Women's suffrage had come into effect with the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution a decade and a half before, but almost all of the men and many of the women viewed voting as "men's business".

My mother voted, but then she had been a nurse before she met Pop, so she had seen more of the world than most of her contemporaries on Frog's Creek where we lived. But even so, whoever got Pop's vote got hers as well, since as they often said, there was no point in them voting if they just cancelled each other out. They would talk over who they were going to vote for

in each position on the ticket—but it was always "two-for-one" so far as their voting was concerned. But the main thing the reader needs to know to appreciate this story was that most families had fixed political allegiances that spanned generations. If someone's daddy had been a Democrat, it was a matter of family pride and honor to vote the same way—and virtually everyone voted a straight ticket. Of course, that was necessary since roughly half of the adults in the community were totally illiterate so all they could do was to have someone show them where to put their X and vote a straight ticket.

The going rate for a straight ticket vote was two dollars cash and a pull of bottled in bond whiskey—a pull being what you could gulp in one large mouthful from a bottle. That may not seem like much to a modern reader, but you need to remember that the going rate for a day's manual labor—hard labor—was one dollar and found; found being the midday meal; dinner as we called it then, the evening meal being supper. So, two dollars was the equivalent of getting paid for two days labor that you didn't have to do and couldn't get anyway. Almost all of the men drank; some a little, some a lot. Since the depression was hard on and cash money almost nonexistent, for the main part they drank moonshine.

Some moonshine was pretty good, but most was as raw as paint thinner. Pop liked to say Berty's best—Berty being a moonshiner who lived just up Frog's Creek from us—was as good as any bottled in bond whiskey. But then Berty was a real pro at moonshining and took pride in the quality of the moonshine he ran off at his still. Bottled in bond whiskey was whiskey that had had the federal excise taxes paid on it which meant it had been distilled in a bonded distillery under the watchful eyes of government tax collectors. Bottled in bond whiskey was much prized, so getting a pull from a bottle of bonded whiskey was not far behind getting two dollars without having to work for it.

The polls were set up in the schoolhouse over on Kelly's Creek where all of us kids went to school; eight grades in a single room. They let out school on election day and forbid us kids to come on the school grounds while the polls were open.

The men from Charleston who were paying for votes stayed off of the school grounds too since alcohol was forbidden on the school premises. They set up a truck or car just off the school grounds where they could see the front door of the schoolhouse. The protocol was that when they had a "customer" they gave a high sign to one of the poll watchers from their party who had come to the door and then sent the voter over to be ushered in and shown how to vote. When the voter came back out, if he had voted a straight ticket as he was supposed to do, the same poll watcher who had ushered him in would signal that he was due his payoff. When he got to the truck, one of the men would shake his hand and pass to him two folded dollar bills he had palmed and the other would offer him the bottle. He was entitled to a good pull, but if he tried to take more than was considered his due, the man who had offered him the bottle would put his hand on the bottom and tilt it down to prevent him guzzling several good swigs or taking all he could hold in his mouth.

Pop often said that some of those old guys who had been chewing home grown Kentucky Burley tobacco all of their lives had cheeks like a squirrel which, if given half a chance, could easily hold half a bottle without them swallowing a drop. At any rate that is how voting was done in those days. You didn't have to switch parties to get paid. That was your due for voting a straight ticket. Redus McClanahan was a bred and born Republican, as had been his daddy and his granddaddy before him. Everyone knew Redus was a Republican; always had been and always would be.

Of course, none of the women in Redus' family voted, but he always did. Said it was his duty. The run up to the presidential election of 1936 had been as intense and bitter as was the run up to the 2004 election. Democrats thought FDR was going to be the savior of the country and Republicans thought he was going to be its ruination. It was a shocker therefore when Redus showed up at the polls in a truck the Democrats were using to haul voters to the polls and then went inside with a Democrat poll watcher.

Even more shocking was when he came back out and the poll watcher gave the signal that he had voted a straight

Democrat ticket. Redus went over and shook hands as expected to get his two dollars, got his pull of whiskey, and climbed in the Democrat's truck to get a ride back to his home up on the head of Frog's Creek. Redus' defection to the Democrats was an immediate topic of conversation, with the general consensus being he must have "sold out". That didn't make much sense since he could have gotten the same two dollars for his vote and a pull of whiskey for voting Republican, as he had done in years past.

A week or so after the election Redus came into the general store where several other men of roughly his age were sitting around the Burnside stove, chewing tobacco and jawing. More than likely the topic of Redus' defection had been one of the things they had been talking about. At any rate, one of them saw Redus come in and called out to him;" Hey, Redus; I'll bet your Pa and Grandpa are turning over in their graves over you voting Democrat". "Nope" Redus replied. "They're kicking their coffins and laffin. You see, I spit in them Democrat's bottle."

Go Goetter

In English, the letter “g” is often pronounced as “j”—as in germ or gist. The main character in this story provides the only example I know of in which “j” was replaced by “g.” Joe Goetter was a miner for the Cabin Creek Coal Company just before and at the beginning of the depression in the 30's. His folks probably never even thought about it when they named him Joe, but with the surname of Goetter, it was inevitable that his nickname would be Go, and Go it was. Everyone called him Go, including my Pop who worked with him in the mines, but as Pop said; "Never did a man have a name that fit him worse.” Go was small of stature, and sort of puny—both in spirit and in body.

In the mines where miners frequently worked a coal face in pairs, no one wanted to work with him since he either wasn't willing, or else wasn't able, to pull his share of the load. Even Pop, who was an easy going and tolerant person, always said that Go wasn't much force as a man—by which he meant he was sorely lacking in the qualities you'd expect a man to have. I can also remember him saying that about the only thing Go was good at was making babies. The Goetters had five or six kids, the youngest always being a baby less than a year old. The other kids were roughly a year apart in age, so at the time of this story the oldest girl was probably seven or eight years old.

The Goetters had lived in a Company house just down the road from us, but when the depression hit, Go was one of the first to be laid off. The Coal Company used the excuse the depression offered, not that they needed any excuse to do anything, to get rid of miners whose performance had been marginal, or whom they suspected might favor a union coming in. Some of the better workers they let stay on in the Company houses, and even threw them a day's work now and then to string them along, just in case things picked up and they had a use for them again. People like Go though they had the Company sheriff and his deputy evict.

The sheriff was nominally a state officer, but the Company hired him, paid his salary and fired him if they didn't approve of the way he was doing his job. The Goetters were evicted from the Company house in which they had been living. Their few possessions were thrown on the edge of the county road in front of the house, after which the sheriff padlocked the house to keep them from going back inside. I didn't see this myself, but I know exactly what happened to them from my own still vivid memories of us being evicted in the same way a year or so later. I can remember Mom and Pop talking about Mrs. Goetter and the kids all sitting on their stuff out by the road and crying. Before there had been a Coal Company, there had been coal mines and coal miners at Cabin Creek.

In those early days transient miners-built cabins or shacks as best they could from clapboard or even slabs from the sawmill. When the Company came and put-up Company houses, most of these miners had gladly abandoned their primitive shacks and moved their families into Company houses. Mind you these were primitive too. There was no running water, and in fact water was a perpetual problem in the camp. The creek was reddish gold in color from the copperas that leached from the slate heaps that were on fire at mines all up and down the creek. Its water was deadly poisonous and not usable for anything.

There must have been some source of water other than the water Mom caught in rain barrels, but if so, I don't remember what it was. The only facilities were an outhouse out back, or a slop jar kept under the bed for use at night or when someone was

too sick to go to the outhouse. Laundry was done by boiling the men's work clothes in a tub over a fire in the backyard and wringing them out by hand. Sheets, towels and underclothes were washed by rubbing them on a scrub board, so you can imagine what the shacks and life in them must have been like for a Company house to have been considered a big step up in the world.

At any rate there were several of these abandoned cabins falling into wrack and ruin in the hills above the coal camp, and it was into one of these that Go moved his family. He had no reason to stay on at Cabin Creek, but he also had no reason to go anywhere else. All he knew was coal mining, and there wasn't any work as a miner to be had anywhere since all of the mines were either closing or cutting back. With no place else to go, and no reason to go there, he just stayed where he was. Pop had served in the Army in Panama in the 20's, where one of his duties—among others—had been shoeing the mules that were used on the two week long patrols of the Canal.

It was his skill as a farrier that got him his first job in the mines, since the smaller coal companies still used mules to pull

the coal cars in the mines and they needed to be well shod to walk on the track ties. When the Cabin Creek Coal Company came, they had modernized and gone to electric donkeys, so Pop had switched to digging coal to keep a job. At the time Pop got out of the Army it was the practice to give a soldier the opportunity to buy his sidearm, a 45 Colt revolver, for $20, which was deducted from his mustering out pay. Pop had done this when he was discharged, and his most prized possession was his service revolver. Along with the revolver, the soldier was allowed to keep his cartridge belt and holster. The belt had leather loops completely around it to hold spare cartridges. I can remember as a little kid being fascinated by the shiny brass cartridges in Pop's belt—each almost a half inch in diameter—and of getting one of the worse whippings I ever got for violating Pop's strict instructions to never play with them. The date stamped on the barrel of his revolver, which I now have, is July 4, 1905.

When I became a few years older this date seemed significant: to me Pop and the fourth of July just seemed to go together. Because of his military experience, and because he owned a pistol, the sheriff had had Pop appointed a Deputy Sheriff by the Company. This wasn't a regular job with regular pay. Pop got paid piecework, which is to say he got paid only if he assisted in making an arrest. Mom didn't like the idea of him being a deputy to the sheriff, but the depression was hard on, and mine work was getting scarcer and scarcer.

The occasional extra money he made as a deputy was desperately needed, so Pop had agreed, and had taken part in several arrests—mostly of miners who had gotten drunk and gone berserk. On the day of the events I am relating, the sheriff drove up to our house in his Model A Ford and came to the door. When Mom went to the door, he wanted to know if Earl (Pop) was there. She said that he was, but that he was still asleep, having worked twelve hours in the mines the previous day. He asked her to go and wake him up, since they were going to have to go arrest Go Goetter. Pop came to the door with just his pants on over his long johns—in which he slept. The sheriff told him

to get dressed and to bring his gun, that they were going to have to go up to Go's cabin and arrest him.

When Pop asked what Go had done, the sheriff said he had stolen a bag of flour from the Company store. Go had shown up at the store and stood around while several other customers were waited on. The manager had even asked him if he wanted something, but Go had said no, that he was still pondering. The manager was waiting on another customer, when he saw Go grab a bag of flour and run out of the store. Go hadn't tried to hide the flour or to sneak it out or anything. He had just grabbed it and run out. In a community as small as a coal camp everyone knew everyone else, so there was no question as to who the culprit was. Pop got dressed and strapped on his revolver.

Mom was always frightened when he went with the sheriff to make an arrest, and this communicated itself to me even though I was still too small at the time to fully understand what she was afraid of. She kept telling Pop to be careful, and not to take any unnecessary chances. As Pop told the story later, the sheriff drove up the creek to where the trail took off up the side of the mountain to Go's cabin and parked his Model A. They hiked up the trail until the cabin was in sight and stopped to look the situation over. There was clearly someone at home because smoke was coming out of the chimney. The two of them watched for a while, but no one seemed to be moving around inside and there was no one visible outside either. After watching the cabin for a while, they approached closer and the sheriff told Pop that he would cover him while he went in and brought Go out. Since as Pop often said; "Hard times make hard men," he drew his revolver and went in the front door. The only persons in the cabin were Mrs. Goetter and the kids. Mrs. Goetter was making dough with the flour and just water—no lard for shortening, no baking powder nor anything else. Just water and flour dough.

As Pop said he had never seen a more pitiful looking lot of snotty nosed, emaciated kids, than he saw when he went into that cabin. Mrs. Goetter was cutting biscuits from the dough, while the youngest kids were crying and begging for pieces of the raw dough. Mrs. Goetter was giving them the little triangular

pieces that are cut out between the biscuits which they were eagerly eating. As Pop later told Mom, the girls were in ragged petticoats, two sizes to small for them, with no underclothes or shoes.

The boys had cowed at one side of the room when Pop came in, with the look of a dog who has been beaten often. After a bit when he didn't hear any commotion from inside, the sheriff yelled that he was coming in—which he did as soon as Pop yelled back that the coast was clear. The cabin consisted of only one room with no place where anyone could hide, so it was obvious Go wasn't there. The sheriff asked Mrs. Goetter where Go was, but she said that she didn't know. He then asked when Go would be back, but she didn't know that either. At this point Pop asked the sheriff to step outside with him. He told the sheriff that he couldn't arrest a man for stealing a bag of flour to feed his kids when they were starving, and that if the sheriff would drive him over to the Company store when they got back down the mountain, he would have the manager put it on his account.

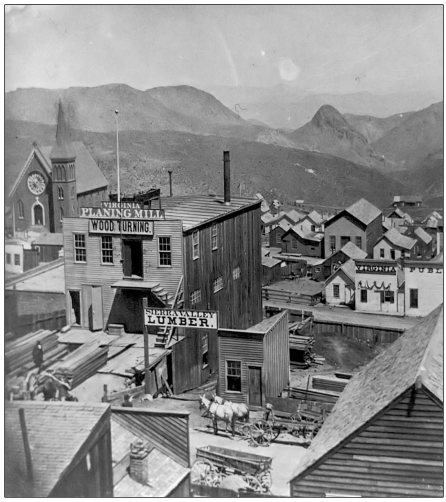
Since Go wasn't there, there wasn't any point in hanging around any longer. They hiked back down the mountain to the car and the sheriff drove Pop to the Company store as he had asked. Pop went in to see the manager and told him to put the bag of flour that Go had taken on his account; adding; "You know I'm good for it." I don't know what a bag of flour cost then—but it was probably on the order of a dollar. To get an idea of how big a sum this was to a miner at that time, let me tell you a phrase which is indelibly etched in my memory. A year or so after the incident of this story, union organizers came to the coal fields of West Virginia. One of these was a woman—most likely Irish from her colorful speech—who exists in my memory only as Madeline, the name Pop used in telling Mom about the speeches she gave at union organizing meetings.

As I mentioned earlier, many mines still used mules to pull the coal cars. Madeline's lilting and memorable trademark phrase to describe working conditions in the mines was "Intelligent young men smelling mule farts for a dollar a day." The relevant point to the story I am telling, though, is that a dollar was roughly equivalent to a day's work for an able-bodied

man back then. The following morning, a Company messenger came by our house to tell Pop to get over to the Company office right away, and to bring his Deputy Sheriff's badge with him. When Pop got there, it was obvious the sheriff had reported what had taken place the previous day. The Company official demanded that Pop surrender his badge, saying; "If that's all the guts you have Simmons, then your services aren't needed anymore." Pop couldn't say anything, since his own family was dependent on the few days of mine work the Company allowed him. He may have tried to explain his actions but knowing Pop I doubt that he did. He probably just handed in his badge and left. I do remember that when he got home and told Mom about what had happened, she told him she was glad he wasn't going to be a deputy anymore. She said that she didn't like him being a deputy to the sheriff in the first place, and besides that, they didn't need the money that much anyway—which was nonsense, since they desperately needed every penny, they could lay their hands on. I'm sure she was trying to keep Pop from feeling guilty for having let his family down by losing even a piecework job. Pop probably did feel guilty for that very reason, but he was also indignant over the injustice of what had been said to him. This is not the end of the story though.

The sheriff and another of his deputies staked out Go's cabin and arrested him when he came in a couple of days later from hiding out in the woods. They took Go into Charleston where he was put in jail and bound over for trial. The manager of the Company Store pressed charges against Go, and with the influence of the Coal Company, he was convicted of stealing and sentenced to a long stretch in jail. I don't know, and can't even imagine, what happened to Mrs. Goetter and all of those kids without Go to provide for them. I never heard Pop or Mom mention either of them again. What rankled Pop for a long time though was that the manager of the Company Store still put the sack of flour on his account, and he had to work it off in the mines in order to keep his own credit good at the store. Pop always thought it unfair that Go had been sent to jail even though the Company store had accepted payment for the flour.

Gotta Transact A Little Business



Bet you couldn't figure out in a million years what Pop meant when he said "Gotta transact a little business": but it makes a good story. HUP was a cut above the other men of his generation on Frogs Creek where we lived, although no one would have guessed it to look at him. Hup wore bib overalls, chewed tobacco and was a firm believer in the generally held notion that bathing too often was bad for your health: too often being every Saturday evening like most people did in preparation for going to church on Sunday.

Hup was Hup Asbury. I have no idea whether Hup was a nick name, his given name or a contraction of a given name although I can't imagine what name would contract to Hup. Hup it was and Hup it is. Hup was in his 30's, single and still lived at home on the old Asbury place. He, like virtually every one of his generations, had loaded coal in the mines over at Harmon's Creek before the depression shut most of them down. Now he did day labor when he could get any, trapped in the winter, worked for the sawmill when it was running and occasionally middle-manned some moonshine from Berty Asbury or one of the other less reputable moonshiners on Frogs Creek or over on Kelly's Creek.

That description fits practically every one of his generation equally well. What distinguished Hup was that he seemed to have had a natural aptitude for book learning. His peers mostly

settled for being able to make their signature in script and being able to "cipher" which meant being able to count change at the store. Hup had mastered writing in script and arithmetic. At least he could do sums and differences in his head. Whether he had mastered the multiplication tables – something only girls did in those days—or not I couldn't say. But Hup was good at straight arithmetic and delighted in showing off what he could do.

The guys standing around outside Ault's store or playing horseshoes alongside the store would add up two big numbers on a piece of paper and then challenge Hup to do the same in his head. That often led to an argument over who had the right answer – which as far as I know was always Hup. Virtually all of the men back then wore bib overalls and carried any cash money they had in the bib pocket. Given that this was the depth of the depression that generally meant a few sweaty wrinkled small bills and an assortment of change. If the person was above the salt and could cipher, they would haul out their stash and count out the correct amount to pay for a plug of Red Mule for them self or for a tin of Beechnut snuff for one of the women folks at home. If they were below the salt and couldn't cipher, there was nothing for it but to haul out the stash and show it an outstretched hand for the clerk to select the required payment. You may wonder what all of this has to do with a story about Hub, but as you will see it is essential background to the story.

Hup also carried any cash money he had in the bib pocket on his overalls, but unlike his peers who had a few grungy bills, Hup always had a roll of bills which he produced with flourish to whip off one or two as needed to pay for his purchases. Everyone knew about this idiosyncrasy and openly wondered where Hup got all of that money. Pop, who was a pretty savvy old bird, figured Hup had just cut some paper to the size of bills and rolled them to be the core of his money roll, but whatever the truth was, that was Hup.

You must be wondering when I am going to get around to telling the story I promised but first I have to digress to tell a bit about Pop and us. As I said earlier, the depression was hard on and like everyone else Pop had lost his job in the coal mines. We had a few acres we could till, a Jersey milk cow, Bossy, that

gave milk so rich it was like cream and a long chicken house in which we raised two to three hundred chickens each spring – ordering them by mail from a hatchery in Kentucky. Pop owned an ancient panel truck open on the sides and had a regular grocery run on Saturday morning in Charleston 20 miles away. His customers much preferred chickens that had been farm raised and dressed the night before, butter that had been churned from Bossy's rich milk, produce picked from the garden the day before – even wild blackberries that grew in profusion in season.

The ice man came from Charleston on Fridays, so the chickens were bedded on cracked ice and covered with burlap bags to slow the ice melting until Pop began his rounds in Charleston on Saturday morning. Hup knew Pop's schedule and would frequently stop by on Friday to ask if he could hitch a ride to town the following morning – saying "gotta transact a little business." Pop always said yes with the condition Hup meet him at Dan Pop's hardware store at a specified time for the return trip. Pop made it clear that if Hup wasn't there when he was supposed to be he would have to hitchhike or walk home. That was fine with Hup. Hup would be waiting the next morning as

we loaded the most perishable items in the truck. He was always at the pickup point on time for the ride back to Frogs Creek. Pop's customers all lived on the hills above Charleston and whatever Hup was doing was done on the downtown streets in Charleston proper. Hup never volunteered any information about what he did, and Pop never asked – figuring it was none of his business, and that that was what Hup would have said had he asked.

Pop was a blacksmith and farrier on the side, having learned to shoe mules when he was in the army in Panama in the 20's, so he often needed to purchase hardware from Dan Pop for one of his projects. Once when he had gotten to the hardware store before Hup, to purchase a few items, Dan asked him:" Who's that damn fool I see you giving a lift to all the time?" Pop said that was Hup Asbury, a neighbor on Frogs Creek and probably asked why he thought him to be a damn fool. Well, he is always coming in here asking if I can break a ten-dollar bill or pulling out a roll of bills, saying he is getting so many ones the roll doesn't fit his bib pocket anymore, and asking if he can swap ten ones for a ten-dollar bill. Done the exact same thing several times. Always a ten-dollar bill or ten ones. Damn fool! Hup showed up about then so Pop loaded his purchases in the truck and he and Hup headed home.

On the way Pop asked Hup about the strange behavior Dan had told him about. Hup didn't deny it or try to explain it away. Quite the contrary, he said he regularly worked his way along Capital street repeating the same performance at most of the merchants in downtown Charleston. Why on earth do you do that? Pop asked "Well, one of these days somebody is going to make a mistake" Hup said, "And it ain't gonna be me." After Hup had headed back up Frogs Creek to the old Asbury place Pop told Mom and me what Hup had said, laughing so much he could hardly get the story told. The next time he had to to Charleston, at supper the evening before he announced: "Gotta transact a little business tomorrow," slapping his leg and laughing as he did. First thing you knew "Gotta transact a little business" came to mean going to town. I'll bet you didn't figure that out until I told you.

Muskrat Rumble [1]

Marcus and Zelphy Asbury lived across Frogs Creek from us; maybe a half to three quarters of a mile distant. Even though they were neighbors they weren't particularly neighborly. They mostly stuck to themselves; didn't even go to church on Sunday like most people. Our main contact with them was when Zelphy needed to "borrow" something. Usually she would come over herself, although she occasionally sent Joey, a school age boy of unknown lineage – to me at least – who lived with them and didn't go to school. Zelphy would say to Mom, I was fixing to bake a cake and found I was out of sugar. Reckon I could borrow a couple cups? Other times it was lard, or flour or eggs. Always "borrow", which didn't mean it was going to be replaced or returned though.

There was an odd and fluid collection of people at Marcus and Zelphy's place. Periodically Zelphy's sister, Hattie, would move in with her illegitimate son and whoever she was living with at the moment. Typically, they would stay several months, sometimes as much as a year, before Hattie found a new pardner and moved out – only to repeat the cycle when they ran into financial trouble too. Hattie's current pardner was a ne'er do well, Ford. Whether Ford was his first name, his family name or a nickname I can't say. He was simply Ford. Not surprisingly Ford didn't work. That in itself wasn't unusual since the depression was hard on and lots of people were out of work, but unlike most everyone else, Ford made no effort to find work. That didn't mean he had no need for cash money, simply that he had none and virtually no prospects of getting more. In fact, that

was what had caused Hattie and Ford to move in with Marcus and Zelphy in the first place.

Marcus had some steel traps he wasn't using and suggested to Ford that he could probably trap some of the muskrat that lived along Frogs Creek and sell the pelts down at Aults store. Aults would only give him half of what he could get in the spring, but at least it would be cash money now.

Since it is unlikely that anyone reading this will have trapped or night hunted animals for their pelts a short digression is necessary if the rest of the story is to make sense. Cash money was hard to come by in rural West Virginia during the 30's. The mines were mostly closed which in a chain effect pretty much closed down the timber industry and everything coal related like the miles of coking ovens along the Kanawha river.

The stores had adapted by partially going to a barter system – you could trade sorghums or honey for necessities or even eggs if you would vouch they hadn't been taken from under a setting hen. But there were things like shoes from Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward that required cash. So virtually everyone trapped or hunted for fur bearing animals: possum, skunks, muskrats and rarely a racoon or a mink. The pelts were stretched on bullet shaped boards and hung to dry from the rafters in the barn until the representative of George I. Fox, the New York furrier, came through in the spring to buy them. Everyone knew roughly the grading system Fox used to decide what to pay for a pelt. A prime possum with a heavy inner coat and long outer coat could fetch as much as $2.50, a skunk with no or little white stripe $1.50 but the most valuable by far were muskrat pelts. Since they lived in and around the creek, in winter they developed dense luxurious pelts that rivaled mink in color and feel. Even a run of the mill muskrat pelt was worth $3.00 or more, and the best could bring twice that much.

It was considered bad form to place traps on someone else's property without their permission. We trapped our bank of Frogs Creek and the Lanham's next up the creek above us. The Lanham's owned a store and the sawmill so probably figured it wasn't worth their while to trap and had given Pop permission for us to trap their creek bank. The bank opposite the Lanhams

was trapped by Delbert, an ex-con living with Berty and Frony Asbury. Berty was the local moonshiner who had met Delbert during his last stint for moon shining at the state penitentiary in Moundsville. They had gotten along well and Berty had invited Delbert to come stay with him and Frony when he got out – which he had. We would occasionally see Delbert as we ran our traplines on opposite banks of the creek.

It isn't easy to trap a muskrat. You use spring steel traps, but there isn't any bait that will tempt them, and they will carefully avoid any strange object you place in their territory. Some animals, like rabbits, are just naturally curious and easily enticed into a box trap. Not a muskrat. They will give a wide berth for an entire winter to something they regard with suspicion. So how do you trap muskrat then?

The bottom lands on each side of the creek were maybe four or five feet above the creek – soft silt soil. Except for crawdads which they caught in the creek itself, they foraged for food on the bottom lands and then returned to the creek where they dug their burrows in the banks. Just like a dog will walk the same trail over and over, muskrats slide down the bank to the creek at the same spot until they develop slides as well defined as a children's slide in a park. Their wet fur slicks it down even more. Each slide marks a family den.

To trap muskrat, you place the steel trap just under the water at the end of a slide and eventually one will trip the trap. If you are trapping dry land animals you simply attach the chain on the trap to a tree or something else the animal can't move and they will be there, caught by their foot in the trap, when you run the trapline in the morning. Even such formidable game animals as wolves will fight to free themselves from the trap until the trap jaws cut to the bone but will still be in the trap when you return. Not a muskrat. As soon as they realize they can't free themselves from the trap they will gnaw off their foot to free themselves. To trap muskrat, you fasten the trap chain to a water-soaked log or chunk of wood and submerge it in the creek. That way when the muskrat struggles to free itself the log moves deeper and pulls the muskrat in to drown before it can cut itself free. The point is that to set and service muskrat traps you have to walk on the

soft, muddy edge of the creek and into the creek itself being careful to not damage the muskrat's slides or burrows. That requires you wear high top gum boots so you can mostly stay in the edge of the creek and leave as little sign you have been there as possible.

Joey had just come over to our place, so excited he was having trouble telling us what had happened. Apparently that morning Delbert had come storming up their drive yelling, Ford! Ford! Ford! at the top of his voice. When he got near the steps he yelled: "Ford, get your sorry ass out here before I have to come in there and drag it out". After a few minutes the door partially opened, and Ford peered out. When he saw that Delbert was still in the yard and not on the porch, he stepped out but stayed close to the door. Delbert was really mad about something, but Ford didn't ask what it was.

As soon as Ford was outside Delbert yelled: "You ran my trap line you son of a bitch and took a muskrat from one of my traps". "I didn't do any such thing", Ford said. "I don't even know where your traps are located". Delbert moved closer to the steps and yelled; "You're a God damn liar as well as a thief. The sole marks in the mud where you robbed my trap are identical to the ones where you cleared yours". Delbert took a nasty looking knife from his pocket and snapped a blade open. "If you run my trapline again he yelled, I'll cut you like a hog."

Joey had been telling these events in a very excited voice but stopped after repeating Delbert's threat. Pop finally asked; "What happened then?"

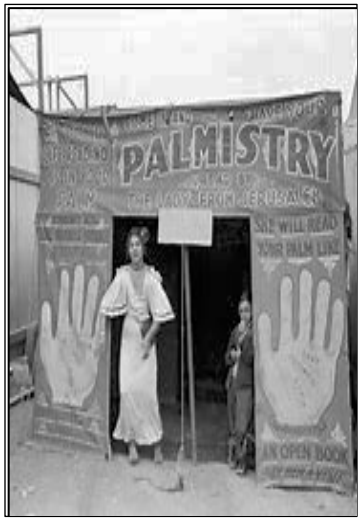
Eighty years later I can still hear Joey's anticlimactic: "Ford shet the door."

[1]Footnoting a short story is about like telling a joke that has to be explained to be appreciated. But just as there are jokes so funny, they justify having to be explained there are stories that warrant footnotes. This is one of those.

The first footnote explains the title – rumble meaning both "to discover the true facts about someone or something secret and often illegal" or "to take part in a physical fight". Ford certainly thought he was stealing Delbert's muskrat in secret. At the very least he didn't expect to get caught. The physical fight doesn't take place but is promised in no uncertain terms. This footnote though is required since no contemporary reader has been able to even guess at the meaning of the vernacular expression "cut you like a hog", universally understood and used in West Virginia nearly a century ago. Delbert snapped out the spay blade on his stockman's knife, a curiously shaped blade used to castrate hogs and cattle, referred to as "cutting". If someone said they had been cutting hogs, they had been castrating male pigs destined to be butchered for meat that fall. So what Delbert was saying to Ford was: "If you mess with me again, I'm going to cut your balls off". Ford understood exactly what Delbert was saying, as did we. Whether he would have followed through on his threat or not is questionable, but he was an ex-con with a temper – and a wicked looking knife he was prone to draw.

Cambridge Dictionary Plus+
1. rumble verb (DISCOVER) to discover facts about someone or something secret, often illegal
2. rumble verb (FIGHT)

Not A Ghost Story



In the hills of West Virginia fox hunting was popular during the depression. This wasn't the kind of fox hunting done in England and in Virginia as seen in the movies. Fox hounds were judged by their voice and their ability to track the fox. A really good tracker with a deep bark that could be heard for long distances was as prized a possession as a good horse. On the night of a hunt, several men would gather just before dark. Those fortunate enough to own a fox hound brought their hound with them. Of course, everyone brought a bottle or a fruit jar of Berty's best – to ward off the night air. They then would climb to the top of a ridge in which it was known that foxes had dens in the nearby hollers and build up a sizable bonfire, release the hounds and settle down for the hunt.

The hounds knew what was expected of them and would set off to pick up the scent of a fox. They would give voice occasionally as they caught a scent, but if it was a cold trail a few barks would announce they had found it but that it was cold. Each man knew the voice of his hound, so there would be a running commentary: "Ole Blue is on to one" or, "I think my Speed just picked up the scent."

To while away the time until the hounds picked up a hot scent, and to ward off the night air, a jar of shine would get passed around pretty often. If you have never heard a pack of fox hounds on a hot trail, you can't imagine what it is like to hear them when they are in hot pursuit and in full voice. The hounds have a pecking order they establish for themselves –

almost as if they elected a leader. One of the other hounds might pick up the scent first, but in just a moment you would hear the leader barking with his distinctive voice joined in chorus by all of the others. It is barking, but everyone referred to it as singing; "I want you to listen thet Blue sing." The object is not to catch or kill the fox, but to have the hounds chase him.

The fun is in listening to the chase and figuring out what is going on by the sounds coming from the pack. Foxes are very clever animals so when being chased many will run in a stream to hide their scent or run up a tree trunk that has partially fallen over and then jump as far away from the tree as they can at the highest point on the trunk to break his trail and confuse the hounds. It may take the hounds a long time to pick up the trail again when it is broken in this way.

Almost all foxes will double back on their trail to confuse the hounds if the pack is not too close behind them. The barks become quite different when the pack has lost a hot trail and are trying to unravel it. The men who have been listening to the chase know by the sound what is happening and will be trying to figure it out too. One will say, "Ole Blue knows that trick of running up a tree and jumping off, he'll be back on the trail in just a bit." Or "I'll bet thet fox doubled back so they are retracing his trail." When the full chorus picks up again, the jar gets passed around in celebration and everyone gets back to the fire to listen to the music of the hounds again.

Occasionally the hounds would follow a trail so far from where the hunters were that their voices would start to get indistinct. When that happened, one of the men—usually the one who owned the lead hound—would break open his shotgun and remove the shells. He would then blow across the open end of the barrel like an organ pipe. The resulting mournful sound carries for very long distances, and each hound recognizes the sound of his master's call. They would then break off that trail and come back to try and pick up another hot scent nearer by. That is fox hunting West Virginia style, and it is the setting for the story I wanted to tell. As you may have gathered, fox hunting was a sport reserved for men, not to be shared with boys.

It was a big surprise therefore when I was maybe ten years old, and my dad asked if I wanted to go fox hunting that Saturday night with him and several of the neighbor men. Naturally I was thrilled at the prospect and could scarcely wait for the evening of the hunt. From Pop's description of previous hunts, I knew what to expect, but the reality of being there, and of being allowed to join in a man's fun – except for the fruit jar of Berty's best passing right by me – eclipsed anything I had expected.

For several hours the hunt went as I have described, but as the night wore on the men pulled up closer to the fire that had burned down to mostly a bed of red-hot coals and began talking as much as listening to the hounds. At first it was mainly reminiscing about experiences they had had in the mines before the depression closed most of them and they had all been laid off. Then one of the men – probably with an eye to frightening me – asked the others: "You guys believe in ghosts"? Most everyone back then believed in ghosts or professed to. I knew Pop didn't, but he didn't say anything, nor did a couple of the other men. The older women in the community delighted in telling ghost stories, not just to us kids, but among themselves at quilting bees, pie suppers etc. but men didn't usually tell ghost stories.

The stories were almost all strikingly similar and uninteresting to both the teller and to the audience; lights that appeared at night in the cemetery after someone had been recently buried, or a Bible that kept being found open to a favorite verse of someone who had died. I had heard all of these many times as had everyone else in the community, but a couple of the men halfheartedly repeated these old chestnuts anyway.

Looking back, I am sure it was the combined effect of several jars of Berty's best, plus the late night around a dying fire and the possibility of scaring a boy that prompted the men to tell ghost stories. There were a couple of stories that didn't fit this hackneyed description that everyone had heard, but which got repeated anyway. Doc. Glass had been on a late-night call and was driving home in his buggy when suddenly his gray mare

reared in the air as they were passing by the Milam family cemetery and refused to go on.

The story always went into great detail about how that mare was Doc. Glass's favorite since she was so steady and would ford a swollen creek or plow through deep snow so nothing would spook her. When he couldn't get her to go forward, he had gotten out of the buggy and taken her by the head and tried to lead her past the cemetery, but she wouldn't budge. According to the story each time he tried to get her to go forward she would rear back with eyes bulging and nostrils flared. Finally in desperation, since there was no other way home, he had taken off his jacket and tied it over her head and led her forward blindfolded until well past the cemetery.

According to the story she had been skittery and kept looking back all the way home. More than likely she had seen or smelled a copperhead snake which are common in West Virginia, but to most people it was a convincing proof she had seen a ghost. The other story that had some novelty to it, but which everyone had heard, was about a family named Lanham. Apparently old man Lanham had been mean to his wife – which meant he really had to be mean for it to be noticed in a community where women were still regarded as chattel. She had died several years before him, but when he died, he was buried next to her in the family plot.

The story was that when anyone put flowers on his grave, the next day they would be scattered far and wide. Most people accepted that this was the doing of his wife's ghost. After these stories had all been told there was a long silence.

Finally, Redus McClanahan spoke up. "I don't believe in ghosts," he said, "but I have a story about something that happened to me that I can't explain." Redus was middle aged and had spent the first part of his life on Frogs Creek until he was drafted in WWI. He had lived in Charleston, the nearest city, for a time after he came back from the service but eventually moved back to Frogs Creek. Here is Redus' story as he told it. Some of you may remember my Ma and my Pa. Before the War they had a farm with some good bottom land down by where Frogs Creek empties into the Poca river. At the time there

was a two-story house on it that they had built by themselves not long after they got married. The upstairs was divided into two big rooms, one for my sisters and one for my brothers and me. The stairs came up between the two rooms so you could turn either way at the head of the stairs to go into one of the bedrooms.

I grew up in that house and have lots of memories of it yet. Not long after I was shipped overseas in WWI Pa died. In those days word traveled slowly so he had long since been buried by the time I got word in France that he had died. I went in to see my sergeant to see if I could get a hardship discharge since Ma was all by herself on the farm, but it was no go. After a year Ma decided she couldn't manage the farm by herself, so she sold the livestock to a neighbor who agreed to look after the house until I got home from the Army and moved into town where my sister Betty lived with her husband. Not long afterward Ma died too—from a heart attack the doctors said. From a broken heart Betty says.

At any rate, it was another full year before I got discharged and came home. I wasn't sure what I would do but thought I might pick up where I left off and run the farm. So, after visiting my sister for a few days I came back here. The house had been locked up all of that time, but except for things being dusty, everything was just as Ma had left it. It was fall of the year so I brought in some wood from the woodshed and built a small fire to take off the chill and drive out the damp and began going through things deciding what I would keep and what I would throw out. It took longer than I expected, so it was late by the time I decided to turn in. The natural thing to do was to go upstairs and sleep in the same bed I had slept in for eighteen years before I was drafted. I was so tired I fell immediately into a sound sleep. As a matter of fact, I hadn't slept that soundly since I went away to the service – something about being home and in my own bed I guess.

Sometime during the night, I was awakened, or so I thought, by Ma yelling; "Come on sleepyhead, get out of that bed." I need to tell you that this was a ritual Ma repeated every school day morning I can remember. The bed was warm and comfortable,

and I always liked getting just a little more sleep. My brothers would get up and go down to breakfast and I would still be in the bed. Ma would come to foot of the stairs and yell a couple of times for me to get up and then she would say, "If you don't get out of that bed, I am coming up there with a pitcher of cold water and pour it on you."

Once when even, that didn't get me up, she had come up with a little water in a glass and poured it on my face. After that it was a standing joke; "OK. I am coming up there with a pitcher of cold water," and I would finally get up. I am sure you have all had the experience where you dream you are awake but somewhere in the back of your mind you know you aren't. Well, that is what happened to me. I thought I was awake and could hear Ma yelling at me from the foot of the stairs, but just as some part of you knows that it is a dream, some part of me knew that Ma was dead and couldn't be yelling at me to get up, so I didn't. Sure, enough in a few minutes, just as she always had, she was yelling again; "OK sleepyhead, get out of that bed." Some part of me knew it was a dream, so I still didn't wake up or get up. Then she yelled, "OK, I'm coming up there with a pitcher of cold water." I had always gotten up when she yelled this, so I woke up for real this time. The room was filled with smoke, and I could hear fire downstairs. The door was hot to the touch, so I didn't dare open it. I quickly tied the sheets on two of the beds together and fastened one end to a bed I pushed over by the window and climbed down to the ground.

By the time I was on the ground, flames were coming out the window I had just climbed out of, and in short order the house was totally engulfed in flames. I was lucky to get out of there alive. Now this isn't a ghost story, but I will never understand why I heard those familiar calls from Ma to get up that saved my life. I can still hear them, and they were as real as us sitting here talking. What I can tell you for sure though is that I wouldn't be here today if she hadn't woke me up when she did.

Reverend Older And (The) Lucifer

In a recent TV program on Americana, the commentator used the expression "outhouse humor" in describing some funny stories that have made their way into American folklore, which made me think of the Reverend Older and his meeting with Lucifer. You'll understand my choice of words in a moment if I can stop laughing long enough to tell you the story. I figure I can tell it since the Reverend has been dead for many years now. If he got to where he thought he was going he has been forgiven so it won't matter if I tattle on him after all of these years, and if he didn't, he has more burning matters on his mind, so it won't matter in that case either.

In rural West Virginia in the early thirties no one had indoor plumbing, so most everyone had an outhouse or privy out back. A few of the more backward families still used the woods just like their grandparents had, but even then, and there this was looked down on. In the summer flies were attracted in swarms to the outhouses which spread all sorts of diseases since few houses had screens to keep them out. My Mom had been a nurse before she married Pop, so she knew the importance of keeping flies away from the kitchen and the food. Even so a flyswatter was always at hand in the dining room to get the occasional intruder who had gotten in as one of us went in or out or had found a crack or a tear in the screens. I can still hear her saying

to me as clearly as if she were standing here; “Don’t stand there holding that door open. You’re letting in flies.”

The school system was trying to combat the problem by having the traveling nurse who taught hygiene once a week as her main duty in the schools tell the kids how dirty flies were and how they spread disease. She had a huge drawing of a fly’s head enlarged to the size of a basketball that she always showed us to prove just what monsters’ flies were. The state also gave her five-pound bags of unslaked lime to give to the students with instructions they were to take them home and have their parents spread it over the waste in the outhouse pit where it was supposed to kill the maggots the flies had laid. Most people were suspicious of “thet stuff” since it came from the “guvament” and either threw it out or else just dumped the bag down the outhouse without spreading it, so it did no good at all. The nurse also urged the kids to get their parents to make a cover for each of the seat holes in the outhouse to prevent flies from getting to the waste in the pit – which is where this story begins. Sam Older was a classmate of mine at the one room school we attended over on Kelly’s Creek.

The Reverend and his family lived on Frog’s Creek where we lived, so Sam and I walked the two miles to school together most days. Sam was convinced by the nurses’ exhortations about the evils of flies – of course he was softened up to be easily convinced about the evils of most anything by his father’s daily exhortations about the evils all around us; dancing, girls wearing lipstick or silk hose etc. – and had persuaded his father to fashion board covers for the seat holes in their outhouse. They were hinged at the back with pieces of leather his dad had cut from an old shoe, so you simply tilted the cover back against the back wall before you sat down.

You may think I am digressing, but these details are essential to appreciate the story I want to tell you. One Sunday, the Reverend had preached an especially fiery sermon, laying into the Devil, or Lucifer as the Reverend liked to call him when he really got wound up, with all he had. It added a special touch to his sermons he felt to call the devil by his first name. Since television didn’t exist yet, radios required batteries that cost cash

money which no one had, and most of his audience couldn't read, the preacher's Sunday sermon was entertainment for the whole week – and the Reverend Older took his responsibilities seriously.

That Sunday, he had done about as well as one could do, and sensing that he had a rapt audience had gone on longer than was his usual. Afterwards, it was expected that he jaw a bit with the members of the congregation as they drifted off toward home to prepare Sunday dinners. The net result was that it was well past midday before the Reverend, Mrs. Older and Sam got back to their home on Frogs Creek. The Reverend had to go real bad by that time and had been puckering like mad for the last quarter mile and almost ran to the outhouse. He ran in, flipped up the seat cover and plopped his butt down in almost one motion. Now I need to tell you a bit of chemistry and a bit of physics. The chemistry is that wastes – human or animal – generate methane, or marsh gas, as they decompose.

Environmentalists have even devised "cookers" to capture the methane from decomposing waste to use as fuel. The physics is that methane is lighter than air so given a chance will rise and disperse. This was in the summer so the decomposition was accelerated, and the methane had been trapped by the seat covers in the box you sit on before the Reverend raised the lid on one of the holes and by his butt when he sat down before it could escape.

Mrs. Older considered smoking a sinful habit – only slightly less so than drinking – so in deference to her feelings the Reverend didn't smoke in the house. But he did like to have a pipe now and then, which he did where she wouldn't see him. It had been a long morning, and in the seclusion of the outhouse he decided to have a pipe while attending to the business at hand. He filled his pipe and struck a strike anywhere match which were universally called Lucifers in those days and lit his pipe. He then leaned forward a bit on the seat and dropped the still burning Lucifer down the hole—with pyrotechnic results. The accumulated methane/air mixture ignited.

It wasn't really an explosion although Sam said it made a tremendous "whump." The Reverend who never used strong

language yelled out at the top of his voice "Gawd Almighty" and came tearing out of the outhouse with his Sunday-go-to-meeting pants down around his ankles and swatting at his butt with both hands. He wasn't badly hurt but the flash of flame had burned all of the hair off of his privates and turned the part of his butt that was exposed through the seat hole bright red. Sam said his dad had a perfect red circle on his butt like he had sat on a hot stove lid.

One of the main social activities of the ladies in the community in those days were quilting bees, where they would all gather to quilt and talk – more talking than quilting as I recall. At any rate Mrs. Older instantly became the favorite raconteur at the quilting bees where she would always conclude the story by saying that if it had been his other cheeks instead of the ones it was, the Reverend's face would have been as red as it ought to have been for taking the Lord's name in vain like that.

Santa Claus' Two Left Feet

Christmas 1933 was a Christmas of wonders; just how much so I wouldn't appreciate until many years later, although as you will see it was wondrous at the time as well. To fully appreciate the story, it is essential to understand the setting in which the events took place, so I ask the reader's indulgence while I tell it. By 1933 the depression had hit the coal camps in West Virginia very hard. The smaller mines had all closed and laid off their employees, and the big coal companies were taking advantage of the situation to squeeze everything they could out of the desperate miners.

Pop had worked for the Cabin Creek Coal Company before the hard times came and was still getting a day's work now and then. The Company allowed some of the miner's families, including us, to go on living in the Company houses, running up rent bills they couldn't pay, which essentially made them indentured servants to the Company. A miner was only paid for the coal he loaded, not for the slate and rock he had to clear and load to get to the coal, nor for the time he had to spend undercutting the coal face, drilling and setting the dynamite charges used to break out the coal or in setting timbers to shore up the roof of the chamber in which the coal face he was working was located. The net result was, as I heard Pop say many times, "A man could work himself to death and still starve," if the foreman assigned him to areas that had a disproportionate amount of cleanup and preparation involved. As you might imagine, such assignments were not made accidentally. The Company used them as a means of disciplining miners they

judged to be troublemakers, or whom they suspected might be inclined to favor a union and of setting an example to intimidate the other miners into staying in line.

The Company, which at one time had provided the dynamite or blasting powder the miners used, had even gone so far as to require the miners to provide their own, arguing that if the men had to pay for it themselves, they wouldn't be so wasteful. The men, desperate for work, grumbled, but went along with this. I'll mention this again later, but one of the earliest commandments I can remember was that I was not to mess with the dynamite Pop kept stored under the house sealed in a twenty-pound carbide can. Wages were not paid in cash money, but in Company script which could only be spent at the Company store—whereas Mom said; " They made up for the low quality by keeping the prices high." If a miner had to have regular money, he had to appear in front of a Company official and explain why he needed to convert some script. The Company made it clear that this was behavior that wouldn't be forgotten, even if the excuse was a medical emergency that required the miner to take a member of his family into Charleston where the nearest non-Coal Company physician was located. Once when I got sick and required competent medical attention, I can recall hearing Mom and Pop agonizing over whether Pop should go in and ask to convert script or not, since that might get him labeled as a troublemaker, and cut off the little work he was getting.

My condition worsened, and he did finally go in. The consequences I don't recall since I was very young then, but the events of the summer of 1934 suggest that this may have been the beginning of the end for Pop with the Company. The conversations between Mom and Pop when they were weighing the serious step of his going in I do recall however, because their anxiety communicated itself to me—even though I didn't appreciate the full extent of their fears until years later.

Since the Company house figures large in this story, I need to describe it. The houses were all identical, crowded cheek by jowl on a narrow strip of land between the county road and the railroad spur line to the mine tipple. They were roughly twenty-four feet square, divided internally into four equal sized rooms,

and set on log pilings about two feet above the ground. At our house there was an area at one corner which had been dug out to give a little more headroom where Pop stored his can of carbide (for his carbide lamp) and the carbide can containing his dynamite, which I mentioned earlier. This area was just the right height for a little boy to play in, which I happily did for hours at a time. The roof was covered with galvanized tin that sloped up steeply from all four sides to come to a peak in the center. There was no insulation in either the walls or roof—even though this was in West Virginia where sub-zero winter days were common.

There was a single galvanized flue pipe that came out of the central peak of the roof and branched inside to connect to a cook stove in one room and to a potbellied cast iron Burnside stove in another. In winter the Burnside stove was kept glowing red hot from the time we got up in the morning until we went to bed at night, but even so it was bitterly cold only a few feet away from the stove. Pop used to say you could blister one side and freeze the other at the same time in that house. In good times, the miners had bought coal for their household use from the Company at a reduced price. Now, that none of them had any cash money they were allowed to gather scrap coal from the slate heap that poured down the mountain side and from along the train tracks going to the tipple where the mine coal cars were dumped into railroad gondolas for transport.

As the depression got worse, and the need for fuel more desperate, several men were fired for passing coal to the slate heap where it could be scavenged, or for making sure some nice lumps fell off of the gondolas as they pulled out of the tipple. Everything; clothes, bedding, houses—and to my recollection, even people—was some shade of gray from the coal dust that was everywhere. Mom captured rainwater from the roof in a rain barrel to use for laundering our clothes, and I can still remember how she had to run out in the rain to dump the first runoff which was always too black to use. I loved for it to rain as much as she hated it. The sound of rain on the tin roof, with nothing on the inside to mute it, was hypnotic. I could, and did, fall asleep almost instantly to the sound. Even today, almost eighty years later, I like the sound of rain on a tin roof. Psychologists say that

smells are the most deeply ingrained memories we have, but the sound of rain on a bare tin roof is certainly one of the strongest and most pleasurable memories I have.

Unfortunately, the roofing nails had all pulled enough over the years for most of them to leak like a sieve. Anytime it rained, Mom would have to set out all of her pots and pans, fruit jars, and even the slop jar to catch the water. Pop used to say that it was a lucky thing the floor had just as many holes in it as the roof did, since the water could run out as fast as it ran in.

Christmas for me was centered around Santa Claus. Mom and Pop had always made sure that Christmas morning included candy, some oranges—which were even more unusual and precious than candy—and at least one small toy. These all "came" from Santa Claus. In those days, the Japanese made cheap wind-up toys from tin which were what I liked best; a toy dog that could walk, or a car that propelled itself across the floor while turning end over end from time to time. One year, there was a bank that consisted of a bear who, if you put a coin in his mouth, would put the coin into a tree stump—for which Pop gave me three new pennies so I could save them over and over again.

I had the faith of Job in the Easter bunny, in Santa Claus and in Pop, named in the reverse order of the strength of my faith. At the time I was an only child and too young to have started school, so in previous years there had been nothing to seriously shake my belief in magic. That year, though, I had for the first time come into significant contact with older children who had done what older children always do to younger children. They tried to destroy my faith in such things. Most families in the coal camps didn't teach their children about Santa Claus, and if the kids got anything at all for Christmas, which most of them didn't, it was simply given to them by their parents. In spite of their efforts, they hadn't succeeded, but they had caused me to become critical where I hadn't been before.

Later Mom told me that as Christmas approached that year, I asked endless questions revealing this: how Santa could get to all the homes he had to visit on a single night, how reindeer could fly, how he could get down our tiny chimney and even if

he did, how he could get through the Burnside stove into the house etc. It is a terrible thing when one's faith wavers at any age, but it is especially terrible when you are only four years old. Somehow Mom either answered or deflected my questions, so that I still believed, or at least believed that I believed, in magic as Christmas 1933 approached.

The following Christmas, we were to be homeless, and magic would have vanished from life forever, but going into that Christmas, I still believed that I was right and that the other kids were wrong. What I didn't know, and couldn't have understood even if I had known, was how desperate things were for Mom and Pop that year. They were deeply in debt to the Coal Company for back rent on the Company house, and Pop had run up as much on account for groceries at the Company store as they would allow. The occasional days of mine work had gotten fewer and further between and he had been unable to find any day labor even by going as far afield as Harmon's creek or Putnam ten or twelve miles away, so that they couldn't keep up with either debt. There were days when the only foodstuffs in the house were lard and flour, from which Mom would make biscuits, and lard gravy—by browning some flour in lard in a frying pan and then thinning it with water to make a gravy. The unbelievable thing is that at the time I thought this was tasty.

The point though is that there was no way they could afford anything for that Christmas—not even a piece of candy nor a ten-cent toy. I assume that they must have talked about what this was going to do to my belief in Santa Claus, since Mom had observed the assault, I was undergoing from outside. I can only guess at this, since neither of them ever told me what they talked about in the days leading up to that Christmas.

The week before Christmas, Mom bundled me up, since winter had come and snow was expected, and Pop and I climbed the hill behind the coal camp to find a Christmas tree. I kept pointing out trees that I thought were just right, but he always found some flaw with them; some were too thin, others were lopsided, still others had a bare spot as he would point out, etc. He made a big production out of this. Finally, we found just the right tree, only it was the top part of a tree much too big to get

in the house. Pop went all around the tree pointing out how symmetrical and thick this tree was. It was even greener than the others since it was bigger and had had better sunlight as a result. To cut our Christmas tree, he had to climb up inside the branches and top the larger tree to get it. Since he was inside the tree and couldn't see as well as I could from the ground, there was much consultation with me as to where he should make the cut, which required me to go around and around the tree and to go even further up the hill to get a better view.

When all of these fine points had been settled, and he began to cut the top out of tree, there was much yelling of "Timber" and instructions to "Watch out, here she comes" etc. Finally, we had "the" Christmas tree which Pop proudly carried home and set up in the room where the Burnside stove was located. One of Mom's most precious possessions was a small box of handblown glass ornaments from Czechoslovakia which had been given to her by Pop's mother, my grandma. Each Christmas these were carefully taken out of their tissue paper and put on the tree last.

First, she cut strips of paper from the colored pages in the Sears catalog, and with some flour paste we made paper chains and festooned the tree with these. There was also a package of tinfoil icicles which were carefully placed on the tree one by one with great deliberation to get the best effect. These steps were always reversed after Christmas, with the glass ornaments being carefully re-wrapped in tissue and returned to their box in the dresser drawer and each strand of the icicles carefully picked off of the branches to be folded over a piece of cardboard and put away for the next Christmas.

When finally, the tree was decorated, there was only the almost unbearable wait for Christmas day to come. In our home presents weren't put under the tree before Christmas as people do now—those only appeared magically after I had fallen asleep on Christmas eve. In the meantime, there was the tree to be admired, and ornaments to be moved to better display places etc. I was strictly forbidden to touch one of the glass ornaments, but I could, and did, suggest where they would show to better advantage. Mom would patiently listen, and usually move them to where I suggested. No home in the coal camps had

electricity—nor running water for that matter—so Christmas tree lights were something we didn't know of, nor could anyone have afforded such a thing even had they known of them.

On Christmas eve, the snow that had been threatening all week finally came. Mom and Pop always tolerantly put up with me trying to stay awake to see Santa Claus when he came. That year I kept going to the window to look out at the heavily falling snow and worrying about whether Santa Claus would be able to get through in such weather. Mom and Pop reassured me that he would, no matter how many times I posed the same question. Finally, just as on the previous Christmas, I fell asleep and was carried to my bed in the other room.

On most mornings I was told to stay in bed until Pop or Mom had a chance to fire up the Burnside stove, but on Christmas morning I was up before anyone else. Even if it had been as cold as the North Pole, nothing could have kept me in bed on that day. I ran into the other room, and there under the tree was a marvelous present; a wooden steam shovel at least three feet long and almost that tall with the shovel raised. The shovel arm was articulated, so that by moving two levers you could extend it and raise or lower it. The bucket which was maybe four inches by four inches in size had wooden teeth at the front edge for digging into the dirt, and a bottom flap which could be released by pulling another lever that had a cord attached that went over two sewing thread spools on the side of the arm to the catch for the flap on the bucket. The whole thing was on wooden wheels, and the roof was made so that I could sit on it and operate the various pulls, levers and cranks. It even had window openings so that it looked just like the real steam shovels I had seen working on the county road. It was made of raw wood, but it was a marvelous creation. The only metal in it were nails that served as axles for the moving parts. Everything else was wood.

It was too big for me to carry so I alternated between pushing it toward Mom's and Pop's bedroom to show them, and then in my impatience, leaving it behind to run into their bedroom to yell for them to come see what Santa Claus had left. It seemed to me that they took an unusually long time in waking up, but when they finally did get up and get the sleep out of their eyes

they were just as excited by the steam shovel as I was. Mom tried, without any success, to get me to go back to bed until they could get a fire going and take the chill off of the room, but there was no way that I was going to go back 4 to bed. Finally, she dressed me in my outdoor clothes—I had been in my pajamas up until then—and let me play with the steam shovel while Pop built a fire. I kept finding features on the shovel that I had overlooked at first and excitedly pointing them out to Pop. There was a lever on the side that pulled a block up against the wheels to lock them so the shovel wouldn't roll while you were digging. There was also a pin that went down through the roof to lock the boom in position. By pulling this pin up you could swing the boom from side to side, and when you had it where you wanted it, by pushing the pin back down, you could lock it firmly in place. There wasn't anything I could pick up with the shovel in the house, but I could easily imagine all of the digging I could do in the dry dirt under the house when I took it outdoors later.

In the meantime, I contented myself with moving all of the movable parts over and over again and pointing out all of the things it could do to Mom and Pop. There was no candy, or oranges or store-bought toy that year, but in my excitement over the wonders of the steam shovel, I never noticed.

What I didn't know was that the best part of Christmas was yet to come. Mom undoubtably made biscuits with something for breakfast, but I wouldn't have noticed then, nor remembered later. What I do remember though is that later that morning when I went outdoors, with Pop carrying the steam shovel to put it under the house where I could try it out, I discovered the nearest thing to a miracle I expect to experience in my lifetime.

When I looked up at the roof, which was covered with nearly a foot of new snow that had fallen the previous evening, there was a trail of Santa's boot prints going from the edge of the roof all the way up to the eight-inch diameter flue at the peak. The boot marks were as big as you would expect for Santa Claus and as clear as could be. At my insistence, Pop held me up as high as he could so I could get a better look. Even the imprint of the soles of Santa's boots were perfectly preserved in the snow. This

was even more marvelous than the steam shovel, which I totally forgot in my new excitement.

I ran into the house and pulled Mom outside to see what I had found. I then ran to the two neighbor houses where the older kids lived who had been telling me all that year that there was no Santa Claus to tell them. I tried desperately to get them to come and see for themselves the incontrovertible proof I had that Santa Claus had been there. They of course had received nothing for Christmas, and knew better, so nothing I could do would persuade them to come. At the time it was beyond my comprehension that they wouldn't even look at the evidence, but they wouldn't. Later that day, the snow slid off of the roof, and the evidence vanished in a pile of snow around the house, but I knew. I had seen it with my own eyes.

It was only years later, after Pop was gone, that Mom told me the details of what had gone into that Christmas. Pop had gone by the sawmill a month or so before Christmas and talked them out of some cutoffs from poplar boards from which he had made the steam shovel. Poplar is a straight grain soft wood, ideal for whittling. Each night after I had gone to bed, he would get out the wood and whittle parts for the steam shovel. He had only the most meager of tools; a pocketknife, a breast drill, a hammer and saw, and his cobblers' tools with which he repaired our shoes, so it was a long slow process to cut all of the many parts needed. There were several dozen in all—pulleys, wheels, levers, boom arms, buckets etc. Patiently he had whittled all of these and fitted them together. A neighbor woman who had no children had let him keep the parts at her place while the project was in progress and finally the completed shovel until after I had gone to sleep on Christmas eve so that an inquisitive four-year-old wouldn't accidentally find Christmas too soon.

Like any kid with a new toy, I played the marvelous steam shovel to death. Every day that 5 winter and spring I shoveled away at the softer dirt under the house, making noises all the while which I thought appropriate to accompany a steam shovel at work. The first thing to go were the wheels which simply couldn't stand up to the weight of a four-year-old. Pop repaired them as many times as was possible, but eventually there was no

solid wood left into which the nail-axles could be pounded, and this wasn't possible anymore. The bucket and boom were the next to go since they couldn't withstand the force a four-year-old could exert with the mechanical advantage of the levers that operated them.

Slowly and inexorably the working life of the wonderful steam shovel came to an end. I still played with the skeleton of what had been so grand, but it required a greater and greater stretch of the imagination to do so. The following summer when Pop was blackballed from the mines for joining a union, and the Company sheriff and his deputy came and threw our few belongings out on the side of the county road, what was left of the marvelous steam shovel was left behind. Now that I appreciate what it meant, I would give anything to have it back—working or not.

Mom later told me that when the new snow fell on Christmas eve, Pop had had the inspiration of leaving Santa's boot prints on the roof. Pop wore size 12 shoes, so his Artics (four buckle overshoes) were huge. He had cut a long willow pole from down by the creek, and firmly wired his left boot to the end of it. He then stood on the upended rain barrel—which had been turned upside down for the winter to keep it from freezing and splitting—and with Mom steadying him to keep him from losing his balance had carefully made the boot prints one at a time. By stretching just as far as he could reach, he was able to place the last track right by the flue. It had stopped snowing by the time he did this, so the tracks remained just as they had been made until the next morning. After he finished making the tracks, he and Mom moved the rainbarrel back to its usual place at the corner of the house and used a broom to scatter snow and cover all traces of where they had walked etc.

As I remembered the events of that morning, I had been the first to spot the tracks on the roof and to point them out to Pop, but Mom told me that Pop had been afraid the heat from the Burnside stove might warm the roof and cause the snow to slide off before I spotted them, so he had prompted me to look up and see them when we went outdoors. She also said that they were both afraid that I would notice that they were all left footprints,

since I was already (according to her) showing signs of the critical bent of mind that would later cause me to become a scientist. I, of course, did not notice this anomaly: what I saw was just what they had wanted me to see—a complete vindication of the blind faith of a four-year-old.

Never mind that by the following year circumstances that Mom and Pop could neither control nor conceal would destroy magic and faith forever; for that Christmas it had been preserved. There is a sequel to this story which I can't resist telling. Fourteen years later when I had, in an inexplicable error of judgement on the part of the military, been assigned to a drill team in the Army Air Corps—an assignment for which my only qualification was my six foot stature—and made one of the frequent errors that I made in close order drill that fouled up the whole team, the drill sergeant would put his nose about two inches from mine and scream at the top of his lungs: "Simmons, you have two left feet.” The correct response delivered with an impassive face was a loud and clear "Yes Sir", but inwardly I couldn't help grinning and thinking to myself; "And so does Santa Claus.”

Skunked

Sports commentators are fond of saying that one team "skunked" another when the second team was held scoreless in a game. Even Webster's defines the term to mean; "To defeat utterly, so that he (the opponent) makes no score." I never hear it used, though, without smiling to myself and thinking that the person using it doesn't even begin to know the true meaning of the term. If you will bear with me, I'll tell you why. In the hills of West Virginia where I grew up in the early 30's moonshining was an accepted way of life. As soon as I was old enough to wander through the woods, as boys will do, my Pop told me in no uncertain terms that if I came across a still, I was to leave it alone since it was someone else's property.

On the two occasions when I did find a still, I pretty much followed his advice—at least to the extent that I didn't disturb anything. Having a boy's normal curiosity, I did go close enough to look both of them over, but other than that, I left them alone. Even if Pop hadn't cautioned me, I would have known better than to disturb them. Both were concealed far back in remote hollows—called hollers thereabouts—and covered over with fresh-cut tree branches so you wouldn't notice them until you were right on top of them. For reasons I will explain later, stills were usually moved between runs, so finding one was a momentary thing—like seeing a bobcat. If you returned to the same spot in a couple of weeks, chances were the still would be

gone. People who don't know any better use the term's bootlegger and moonshiner interchangeably, but they describe two entirely different classes of people. Moonshining, even though it is a Federal crime, was regarded as an honorable, if risky, profession.

Respected members of the community knew who the local moonshiners were and kept quiet about it. As a kid growing up, I knew who all of the moonshiners were for miles around: no one tried to conceal such information from me. Moonshiners make liquor, usually corn liquor, by fermenting sour mash and distilling off the liquor which they usually sell themselves. They are in the business of making liquor and the fact that this happens to be against the law is incidental. The practice dates back to pioneer days when the Appalachian mountains were first being settled. Making moonshine was a way of converting a low value and bulky crop, corn, which was infeasible to get to market back East to a high value commodity that was both compact and easy to transport. Many families in West Virginia had a tradition of moonshining that was unbroken to those times.

Bootleggers on the other hand are in the business of selling liquor under circumstances that are against the law, either because they are selling it where public sales are prohibited by law, as was the case in West Virginia both before and after prohibition, or because they are selling to minors, or because the government hasn't collected its revenue on the liquor they are selling. The liquor they sell could well have been, and often was, produced in a government-bonded distillery but had been smuggled into the state to avoid paying state taxes. Bootleggers were regarded with contempt—especially so since more often than not they were town people, while moonshiners were hill people who had the sympathy of virtually everyone I knew in their unequal struggle with the revenuers and with local law enforcement.

This story is about Berty Asbury, one of those moonshiners. As you will see, Berty was a good man, and an even better moonshiner. Frony and Berty lived less than a mile further up Frog's Creek from where we did. They had the reputation of making the best moonshine to be had anywhere. As Pop said,

Berty's best was better than any "bottled in bond." Some moonshiners took little pride in what they did and cut corners in any way they could. One of the essential parts to a still is the condenser in which the alcohol vapors that are driven off when the mash is heated in the still are condensed back to a liquid—the liquor or moonshine. In a high quality still, the condenser consists of a coil of copper tubing inside a barrel into which cold water can be channeled to cool the coil. One end of the tubing is connected to the neck of the still, and the condensed moonshine is collected as it runs out of the other. Getting the copper tubing for the condenser was a risky business, since one of the ways the revenuers identified likely moonshiners was to watch plumbing and hardware stores in town to see who bought tubing.

Dan Pop who ran the hardware store in Charleston, about twenty miles from Frog's Creek, used to joke with my dad and say that it sure was strange how many of our neighbors who didn't have indoor plumbing, and probably didn't even have an outhouse, bought so much copper tubing. Of course, they both knew what it was being used for, which is why the joke was funny.

The other thing revenuers did was to watch for persons buying several hundred-pound sacks of sugar at a time. Almost every family laid in a sack of sugar for the winter but buying more than one at a time was generally a tip off that a person was running a still. Pop told me about a couple of unscrupulous local moonshiners who avoided the first problem by using the radiator from a Model A Ford as their condenser. As Pop said, with all of that solder, you would probably die of lead poisoning before you could get cirrhosis of the liver if you drank the 'shine' they produced. There was another trick—even more dangerous to the consumer—that could be, and was, used by some moonshiners.

After all of the available alcohol had been driven off from the mash in the first run in the still, it was possible to treat the mash with lye and get a short second run. The liquor that came off in the second run was decidedly inferior to the first, and if one wasn't extremely careful with the distillation temperature, could be caustic or even poisonous. Moonshiners who used this trick frequently cut the second run with some of the good stuff

from the first run, or else they flavored the moonshine with herbs, such as mountain tea, to cover up the raw taste. Berty cut no such corners. His still had a genuine copper coil condenser, and he was as careful as a German brew master with the preparation of his sour mash and the distillation of the moonshine.

To give you an idea of how good he was at his profession, during World War II when sugar rationing put most of the other moonshiners out of business for the duration, Berty continued to produce the same high quality of moonshine as he had before the war. Lots of people thought he must be getting sugar on the black market, but he wasn't. He knew that if the kernels of corn were soaked in water and allowed to sprout, that by the time the shoots were an inch or so in size enzymes in the corn would have converted much of the starch to sugar. He then dried the sprouted corn on window screens laid out in the sun, ground it in a grist mill and made his sour mash with little or no extra sugar needed. He was the only person around who knew this trick, but it kept him in business throughout the war. It isn't necessary for the reader to know this much about the practice of moonshining, but this is my way of setting the stage for the story I want to tell and of introducing Berty in his native habitat.

Berty had spent a good part of his adult life in the State penitentiary at Moundsville. He would be arrested for moonshining and be away for three or four years. As soon as he was released, he would return to moonshining until he was caught again. This cycle had repeated itself three or four times. I have no idea of how long a term he was sentenced to each time he was caught and convicted, but I am sure he was model prisoner while he was in the pen, and if they had time off for good behavior, he probably got it. In those days neither the criminals nor the prisons were the inhuman entities they seem to have become now, so it was possible for a good man to go in, serve his time and come out, still a good man. This was what had happened to Berty.

Berty and Frony were as big hearted as it is possible to be. They had three or four girls of their own, but when the oldest Sisson girl, Sissy, got in a family way and was kicked out of the

house by her father, they took her in. After the baby came, she stayed on to help Frony with the other kids, and after a time, if you didn't know better, you would have thought she was just another one of their daughters. They were just that sort of people. In the same way Delbert had become a part of their family. It was just hearsay, but the story was that Berty had met Delbert in the pen, and when he got out, he came to stay with them.

At any rate Berty and Delbert were both out of the pen at the time the story I want to tell you took place. Berty had gone back to moonshining, only now he had Delbert to help him. I implied but didn't say so outright earlier that a still needs to be located where there is a supply of good water. Many of the hollows had a small stream in them, and some had good springs where water had followed faults in the rock down from higher up the mountain. Moonshiners were always on the lookout for such sites, since they needed to move the still often enough that a visible trail wouldn't get tromped down that could be followed by someone else.

From years of experience, Berty knew where the best and most remote sites were. He was determined to not go back to the pen this time, so he and Delbert had taken special care in locating their still where it wasn't likely to be found. Even so, there was always the chance that someone would stumble across it and—unlikely as such a thing might be—tell the revenuers about it. If that happened, they would stake out the still and catch Berty and Delbert when they showed up to run the moonshine. As a result, they were very cautious about how they approached their still.

Several miles on up Frog's Creek from Berty's place, lived a family by the name of McCoy. Old man McCoy didn't work, and as far as anyone knew, never had. They didn't farm either. He hunted and trapped full time and spent most of his time in the woods running his trap lines and snaring game. The few times I ran into him in the woods, he gave me the creeps. Not that he did or said anything, but just because he was so odd. The only source of cash money the family had was the animal pelts he skinned, stretched and let dry to sell to the George I. Fox man

who came from New York every spring to buy pelts. Most families, ours included, trapped muskrat and mink, and night hunted for possum, skunk and coon, and sold the pelts to get a little extra cash money, but for the McCoys, it was their only source of income. This alone would have set them off from the rest of the community, but there were other even bigger differences. They had nothing to do with anyone else in the community, and no one had anything to do with them. They didn't go to church, and the state had never been able to get them to send their kids to school. There was really no way the kids could have gotten to school if they had wanted to send them, since they lived so remotely from everything, but they didn't want too anyway.

On those occasion when McCoy walked down the Creek to the store to trade eggs or animal pelts for store goods, if people were talking when he came in the store, they stopped. He had a skulking manner about him, which, while it may have been useful in hunting, made people uneasy. As a result, people avoided him. In fact, I never heard anyone carry on a conversation with him. He told the storekeeper what he wanted in as few words as necessary, and the only exchange had to do with what the store would allow for the eggs or pelts he had brought. My impression was that he preferred it this way. He would get whatever he had come for, and without so much as a Howdy-Do to anyone who happened to be in the store, would set out to hike back up the Creek to his place.

Pop had told me that the revenuers had a standing offer of $50 cash to anyone who led them to an operational still. Given that this was at a time when the going rate for a day's labor was a dollar and found, such a large sum seems unlikely, but whatever the amount, they probably were willing to pay for information. McCoy was ornery enough, and resentful enough, that had he found a still he might well have informed to the revenuers, even if there was no reward. But he was also shiftless enough that he wouldn't have gone out of his way to find one if there wasn't a reward. The rumor was that it was he who had tipped off the Feds the last time Berty had been caught and sent

up to Moundsville. Whether this was true or not, since I had heard the rumor, Berty had probably heard it too.

At any rate Berty and Delbert were being very cautious about leading anyone to their still. There was a hollow behind Berty's house which the two of them would sneak up until they reached the top of the ridge from which they could drop down into anyone of a dozen hollows suitable to their needs. I don't know the details of the route they took, or even which hollow they were headed for, but I am sure that it involved cutting back on their tracks a few times to make sure no one was following them. At least on this night they had backtracked down the hollow they had just gone up. Like most of the hollows in that part of West Virginia, this one had steep rock outcroppings, cliffs, on each side. This is coal mining country, so the rock was shale which lies in layers, and weathers away easily. The two of them had stopped at the base of a rock cliff and were hunkering down listening to see if anyone was following. After a few minutes they heard a twig break in the hollow below. A short time later another one snapped, as though someone was walking as quietly as they could, but even so stepping on a dry stick now and then.

As Berty later told it, both he and Delbert heard the twigs break, so they knew that someone—or an animal—was coming up the hollow. In a little bit they saw McCoy in the moonlight following the route they had taken only a few minutes earlier. They waited until he was almost abreast of them, and then the two of them jumped out and grabbed him. There wasn't any fight or anything—just some yelling and then nothing. After all there were two of them and only one of him, but then McCoy wasn't really the sort to put up a fight.

Now they had the problem of what to do with him. Apparently their first thought was to tie him to a tree. They had some gunny sacks (burlap bags) with which to cover the mash barrels to keep animals and things from falling into the mash, and some clothesline which they had planned to use to secure the sacks on the barrels. They used the clothesline to tie McCoy’s hands behind him with his arms around a sizable oak tree. By this time, they had had time to think about what his

being there had to mean. Luckily, as I said earlier, Berty was a good man, or McCoy would have been in serious trouble—especially if Berty had heard the rumor that it was McCoy who was responsible for him going to the pen the time before. Good man or not, Berty was mad as hell at this point. He started in giving McCoy a piece of his mind and telling him what he thought of any lowlife who would inform on a neighbor. He apparently said something to the effect that only a low-down polecat would do such a thing.

Whatever he said, the term polecat came up and inspiration was instantly born. Berty always said it was Delbert's idea, but Delbert always gave the credit to Berty. Polecat as you know is just another name for a skunk. The rock cliffs around them were filled with burrows in the shale, some of which were occupied by skunks. Others were home to possum, raccoons, and rabbits, but it was a skunk that Berty and Delbert needed to put their plan into action. Pop and I used to night hunt with our dog, Speed, all through those hollows catching possum, skunk and sometimes a raccoon for their pelts.

Oftentimes when Speed would run an animal to ground in one of the shallow burrows in the shale, we would twitch them out. This is what Berty and Delbert had in mind. Since I doubt that the reader is familiar with the expression, I'll explain what is involved in twitching an animal out of its den. You cut a long slender branch with a fork at the end and trim off all of the side branches except for the fork which you cut to leave a Y with roughly an inch left on each leg of the Y. To twitch an animal, you insert the branch into the den until you touch the animal with the Y end, at which point you twirl the branch round and round winding up hair and hide until you have a secure grip on him. Then, holding the twitch, you pull the animal out. The longer the hair on the animal the easier this is to do. A possum has long hair, and lots of it, so it is easy to get a twitch on them. I have even twitched rabbits from their den, but with their short hair this isn't easy to do; besides which their hair 'slips' or pulls out easily so it is easy to lose a twitch on a rabbit. A skunk, though, has reasonably long hair, so they should be about as easy

to twitch as a possum—which is what Berty and Delbert planned to do.

It isn't hard to tell which burrows are homes for skunks by the smell, but without a dog to tell you whether the occupant is home, it isn't easy to tell if he is in. Berty and Delbert each cut and trimmed themselves a branch and fell to with enthusiasm, sniffing burrows for the tell-tale odor of a skunk and then trying with their branches to make contact. After several fruitless tries Delbert found a live one. He poked a skunk in the backside with his branch, and the skunk did what skunks do when provoked, and sprayed his scent in self-defense. Berty came running with a gunny sack which they used to partially plug the entrance to control the billowing cloud of skunk scent, while Delbert twirled his branch to get a good twitch on the skunk. As soon as he had wound up a ball of fur and hide until he couldn't turn it anymore, he yelled for Berty to get ready, he was going to pull him out.

The plan was for Berty to snatch the skunk off the ground by his tail just as Delbert pulled him out, since it was universally believed that a skunk can't squirt his scent—which everyone referred to as pissing—if his feet are off the ground. As Berty said later, things were getting pretty rank by that point so it probably didn't make much difference whether he could or couldn't anyway, but Delbert hauled and Berty snatched, and they had their skunk. Immediately Berty began having a difficult time keeping the skunk from curling up and getting at his hand with its teeth. A skunk is very similar to a cat in many respects, especially so with respect to the teeth which are almost the same for both animals. Berty was yelling for Delbert to help, which he did by whacking the skunk a good one in the nose with the butt end of his branch each time it curled up toward Berty's hand. Animals are said to be mad when they get rabies, and skunks are well known carriers of rabies, but this one was certainly mad irrespective of whether it was rabid or not.

The inspiration that had prompted all of this was that if McCoy was a low-down polecat, he might as well smell like one. With a skunk that was getting madder each time it got whacked in the nose they went over to the tree where McCoy was tied and held the skunk up against the bib of his overalls.

Whether being snatched up by the tail had prevented the skunk from squirting in the interim didn't matter now. He had a good purchase for his feet in McCoy's overalls, and he let go upwards right into McCoy's face—and along Berty's arm as well. Each time he squirted, the effort caused him to kick himself free and he would swing away from McCoy. But each time he swung back he grabbed onto the bib of McCoy's overalls with his feet and squirted again. After all, the only thing on the skunk's mind was getting away from these lunatics who were holding him upside down by his tail and whacking him on the nose with the butt end of a branch.

By this time all three of them were covered with skunk scent, but McCoy had certainly gotten the better of it since his face was only a foot or so from the business end of the skunk each time it let go. Berty finally dropped the skunk, and it took off up the side of the hollow—as Berty said, "like it's tail was on fire." Now that the fun was over, Berty and Delbert figured it was more pressing to do something about their condition than to worry about what they were going to do with McCoy. As Delbert said, he couldn't get loose, so he wasn't going to go anywhere, and besides if he did get loose, he couldn't hide, smelling the way he did. As I gather, the two of them were sort of hysterical at this point over what they had done, so anything either of them said sent both of them into gales of laughter. Skunk odor is an alcohol, n-butyl mercaptan, and as everyone in that part of the country knew, the best way to get it off was with alcohol—never mind the old wife's tales about tomato juice.

Luckily, if alcohol was what needed, the need had come to the right place. Berty kept most of his stock of moonshine hidden away from the house, just in case he and Frony were raided, so he and Delbert set out for the nearest stash. They probably used a little of the moonshine on their exteriors, but I suspect that most of it was applied internally. After a time, they didn't mind the odor half so much. They just lay there on the hillside, laughing uncontrollably and drinking up the profits from the last run. Eventually they figured they had better go back and untie McCoy. Even in their state, they said he still smelled ten times worse than they did.

As Berty used to say when he told the story, he had never seen anyone so pissed in his life as McCoy was. At which he would double up with laughter over the double meaning of what he had just said. If McCoy had been much of a man, there would surely have been a shooting as a result of the episode. Either Berty and Delbert would have had to shoot McCoy, or else he would have shot one or both of them. But McCoy wasn't that much of a man. He must have known, or at least suspected, that the story was being told all over the county and that people were laughing at him behind his back, but he didn't do anything about it.

If the rumor was true that he had turned Berty in to the revenuers the time before, then he had given better than he got, but Berty hadn't ended up being the laughingstock of the whole county. For a time, people expected a blood feud to result, but when nothing happened, it eventually became just a good story which I thought you would enjoy. Now that you know the West Virginia meaning of the term "skunked", I'd be willing to bet that you—like me—will think of this story and smile to yourself every time you hear anyone say that someone has been skunked.

Snakes Don't Die Til The Sun Goes Down

The events of this story all took place over seventy years ago, but they're as vivid to me today as if they'd happened only yesterday. In 1939 I was ten going on twenty and everyone said that I was big for my age—which was mostly why the whole thing happened. My Pop worked in the coal mines whenever there was any work, but like everyone else during the depression in West Virginia, he did whatever odd jobs he could get to make an extra dollar or so. He was luckier than most of the other men, though, since he'd been a blacksmith in the Army where he'd learned to shoe horses and had shod mules for the mines before they closed down.

On Frogs Creek where we lived, everyone had at least one horse for gardening and hauling and most everyone had a field team as well. Several men around there could shoe horses—but most people brought their horses to Pop for, as he said, "a quarter-master shoeing." On the day this story begins, he and I had been hauling the millet and lespedeza hay from the new ground field on the hilltop and forking it up into the big stack by the barn. In one of the windrows, we'd uncovered a couple of copperheads that Pop had killed with his pitchfork and hung over the fence, saying—as he always did when he killed a snake—"snakes don't die 'til the sun goes down."

We'd just finished stacking a load of hay and gone back for another when Mr. Asbury's youngest boy, Tad, showed up with a dollar and their mare who'd broken a shoe that needed to be fixed. Pop told Tad to go on home and to tell Uncle Sam—which was what everyone called his dad—that he'd send me over with the mare as soon as he got her shod. We finished stacking the load we were working on before going in to start up the forge and fit the shoe. After he had finished with the mare and was putting away the hoof rasp and the nippers for cutting the horseshoe nails, Pop told me to hurry back after I took the mare home because we had another load of hay yet to stack and he needed me to tromp down the top while he forked it up.

The Asburys were one of the few families left who still raised wheat—part of it down on the creek bottoms where a horse could pull a mowing machine and part of it on the hillside where it had to be cut by hand with a cradle. When wheat is ready to be cut any delay can lose the crop, so each year at this time Uncle Sam hired several men at a dollar a day plus found to help get in his wheat. As soon as I showed up with his mare, Uncle Sam came in from the bottom field and started hitching her to the short sickle bar mower that he used for wheat. I was about to leave for home when all of a sudden, he looked me over and said, "You're pretty big for your age—reckon you'd like to make fifty cents a day shocking wheat for the men cradlin' on the hillside." No one had ever offered to hire me for day labor before, so I ran all the way home to ask Pop if I could take the job. He said yes, so long as I did a day's work for a day's pay.

The next morning, I was over at Mr. Asbury's before any of the hired men showed up and had one full row of shocks up before they began the day's cutting. In shocking wheat, you pick up an armful with your left arm, take a handful of wheat in your right hand and pull it tight around the wheat at the top end where the heads are and then tuck the straw under with your thumb to hold the shock together. By noon my thumb felt like it was raw and sweat was stinging in the scratches from wheat beards inside my shirt. But I had gained on the cradlers. The wheat higher up the hill had more weeds and briers in it than it did lower down. This slowed the cradling since the wheat would sometimes

refuse to free itself from the cradle at the end of the stroke. When this happened, the mower had to break his rhythm and free the cut by hand. Even so, by the end of that afternoon the amount of wheat to be shocked had increased over what had been there in the morning. Next morning my thumb was swollen and painful and I ached even worse than I did after thinning our corn fields in the spring.

Wheat can't be shocked until the dew is off otherwise it will mildew, but I began working just as soon as the sun had burnt off the dew—and except for a glass of buttermilk, worked on through lunch time. When I began, I would think of all the things I would do with a dollar, or maybe even a dollar and a half. But by now I simply set little goals to keep myself going: "Don't stop until I get to the end of this row," "Keep going until I reach those berry bushes," "or that big rock," over and over. I wanted to quit, but I knew that Pop would never let me do that. The men cradling worked on past quitting time and finished off the field since this was Saturday and they wanted to be paid off. When finally forced by darkness to quit for the day, I still had another fifty-yard strip at the top of the hill to shock. Mom and Pop talked that evening about whether I could work for hire on Sunday or not. They finally decided that I'd given my word to do a job—and that the wheat couldn't wait.

So next morning I went back to the now empty hillside and began the painful process all over again. This time with no one to try to catch up with nor to notice how slowly I moved, the job went slower and slower. The same rough weeds and briars that had slowed the cradling now rasped my sore thumb and raked my left arm and neck. It was past noon when I finished the last shock. The Asburys had come back from morning church services and gone in to Sunday dinner—we called the noon meal dinner and the evening meal supper. I was too sweaty and dirty to go inside, so I sat on the well porch until Mr. Asbury came out.

Then I rushed over and told him I was finished. He walked around the corner and looked up at the hillside now covered with rows of wheat shocks. "You done pretty good for a boy" he said, "but you ain't no man yet." I didn't know what to say to that, so

I just stood there waiting. "Well, what you waitin for boy." "My pay," I said. "I only pay good money for a man's work, boy—and you ain't `no man yet. Not by a long shot." "But you promised," I said. "You said you could do a day's work," he said, and with that he went back inside the kitchen and slammed the screen door.

I'd stopped crying by the time I got home, but when I started telling Mom and Pop what had happened, I started all over again. At first, they said I must have misunderstood Mr. Asbury offering me fifty cents a day in the first place—but finally they sort of sided with Uncle Sam and said I shouldn't have sassed him like I did, when I hadn't sassed him at all. Since it was Sunday, we had to go to church services that evening.

Reverend Older had only been in the community for about a year. He'd come there from Beckly to replace Reverend Bailey who my Pop said was a regular Bible pounder—whatever that meant. Pop also said that Reverend Older was a Hellfire and Brimstone preacher—just what we needed on Frogs Creek. I couldn't tell any difference between the two of them myself since they both seemed certain that everyone was a mortal sinner headed straight for Hell—especially Reverend Older who sounded the same when talking as when preaching.

Uncle Sam and his family were there for the evening services and didn't even seem to notice me. Mom and Pop didn't speak to Uncle Sam—much as I'd hoped they'd ask him for my pay. Nothing that the Reverend said registered on me that evening. I was bitter at being cheated—but worse than that, I was hurt by Mom's and Pop's refusal, silent though it was, to take my part. For the next couple of days, I alternated between hating Mr. Asbury and hoping that he would somehow change his mind and give me my pay. As it became clear that everyone except me considered the matter closed, I decided to get even in the only way I could think of; I'd undo all the work I'd labored so hard to do. Pop and I frequently went night hunting for skunk and possum which we skinned and then hung the pelts in the barn loft until the George I. Fox man came in the spring to buy furs.

On Tuesday at supper, I said that I thought I'd take old Speed, our dog, out for a few hours that night. After we finished milking and feeding the stock, I went to the shed to get Pop's carbide lamp that he used in the mines. I still had to go back to the house to get my jacket and I knew that Mom and Pop could surely see what I had in mind and were going to stop me, but all they said was not to stay out too late since tomorrow was a workday. Speed and I went up the holler toward the cliffs where we often found possum—but as soon as we got to the ridge top, I circled around and headed up the creek. We came out on the county road where it fronted Uncle Sam's place.

After looking around to make sure no one was coming, I doused the light and climbed through the barbwire fence and up the hill to Uncle Sam's wheat field. It was a dark night, but the shocks were visible in the faint light. I set to work, with my heart pounding so that I could hear it, ripping open the shocks I'd worked so hard to put up and scattering the wheat. I must have finished three or four full rows when I heard something down below, from the direction of Uncle Sam's house. Without waiting to see what it was, I ran to the darker brush at the top of the hill and then circled back to the ridge that came down behind our barn. I didn't feel much like hunting after that—so I sat with old Speed up by the cliffs until the moon came up full.

We went home then, stopping by the shed to put the carbide light back where it belonged. The next day, Pop and I worked at clearing the upper end of the new ground to extend the hay field. At first, I'll admit I expected something awful to happen, but nothing did and by evening I was beginning to feel almost like normal. Next morning, though, when I came in from the barn for breakfast, Pop was waiting. "Did you tear up Mr. Asbury's wheat shocks"—not Uncle Sam's as he would usually have said, but Mr. Asbury's. I can still even today after all of these years feel the horrible quivering weakness that I felt then. "Well," he said. Finally, I managed to say "Yes, sir." My Pop, who almost never raised his voice, practically thundered at me, "You're going to apologize to Mr. Asbury and ask his forgiveness, and then you're going to reshock all of his wheat." For a long time, I couldn't say anything—much as I wanted to. Finally, I managed to choke out

with a throat and tongue that felt crushed and aching, "I can't Pop, I can't." "You will, and you'll do it at the meeting tonight, too." "No Pop don't make me do that—whip me as much as you like, "but don't make me do that." "This is no whipping matter," he said, "you've wronged Mr. Asbury and you're going to make it right and ask his forgiveness at the meeting."

All that day I prayed to be dead, to be taken away, for the whole thing to have never happened—but evening finally came just like any other day. We did the chores early and walked over to the church about a mile away. Thursday meetings were different than on Sundays. Mrs. Older and the women all spent their time in the main church planning box suppers or pie sales—or if one of the congregation was sick, arranging for someone from the church to call on them. The men gathered in the meeting house which was the Sunday school on Sundays—but since we kids weren't allowed to go in there on Thursdays, I never really knew what they did in there. The kids played outside if the weather was good—or if it wasn't, we played games in the church where the women were.

This evening, though, I just sat on the side stoop—hoping that somehow a miracle would happen, and I would be saved. After a bit Reverend Older came out and said "Boy, your dad says you have something to say to us." I didn't move at first, so he came over and took me by the shoulder and walked me around the corner and into the meeting house. As I entered the room, I suddenly felt squeezed in a space too small to breathe in—too small to be in. Mr. Asbury was sort of grinning at me like he already knew what was going to happen. Everyone was waiting—including me. Pop finally said "Well," and when I still didn't say anything he started to get up. At this point, in a voice which sounded to me as though it came from outside the space I was being squeezed in, I blurted out all at one time: "I tore up Mr. Asbury's wheat shocks. I'm sorry. I'll fix them." I turned to get out of there—but Pop said, "Haven't you forgotten something?" My mind had gone blank—I honestly didn't know what he wanted. "We're waiting," he said, and Reverend Older chimed in with, "Well boy." Then suddenly I knew what was expected. It was like when Pop had confronted me in the kitchen

that morning all over again—my throat had suddenly swollen and started to ache and there was a pain in my chest like you feel when you've had the wind knocked out of you. My mouth was so dry that I couldn't swallow—even though I tried to. I had to try several times before I could make any sound and then several more before I choked out in a rasping voice the horrible words: "Forgive me Mr. Asbury."

I had heard the preacher talk of forgiveness many times—how to ask forgiveness was like having a weight lifted from your shoulders. But it wasn't anything like that. Even later after I'd left home and gone into the Army, I would still occasionally relive those moments up to my choked plea for forgiveness, and the feeling was always the same. The next day I had to go over and reshock all of the wheat I'd scattered. Reshocking was a lot harder than the shocking had been in the first place since I had to use a rake to gather the scattered wheat, which then had to be sorted handful by handful to get the heads all on the same end before it could be gathered in an armful for tying into a shock. What made it worse was that Mr. Asbury came out and watched me work. Every little bit he'd make me undo shocks that he thought weren't tight enough or were lopsided. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity it was all redone. His only comment was, "Maybe that'll learn you not to get uppity with your elders". Pop never said anything more about the matter, nor did I ever bring it up again. I imagine he'd forgotten the whole episode, and I wanted to.

This has all been in the past for many years now. In fact, it has been years since I've even thought of Mr. Asbury or his wheat, or that awful moment in the meeting house. What brought it all back was a letter from Allie, my closest friend back on Frogs Creek, who wrote among several other things, that Uncle Sam, who by now must have been well over ninety, had recently passed away. And suddenly, when I read that, I had a feeling like when you've been running hard and have a catch in your breath so that you can't breathe deep without it hurting—and then all of a sudden, it's gone and you can breathe again.

Spring Planting

Uncle Grover was about ninety years old. Whether he was over ninety or under ninety no one knew, especially not Grover who was illiterate. He wasn't really my uncle, but as was common back then older members of the community were called uncle or aunt by everyone, even by other adults, out of respect for their age. He did remember the Civil War though and knew where the Union Army and the Confederates had shelled each other from facing ridges over on Kelly's Creek. There was no question his memory was right about that since most every spring Mr. Bailey who lived across the creek from the school on Kelly's Creek turned up a cannon ball or two when he plowed his field on the ridge behind his house. Mr. Bailey kept the cannon balls, about two and a half inches in diameter, stacked in a pyramid on the corner of his hearth. The funny thing was the pyramid was always missing a few balls to come out even. Mr, Bailey said he was going to stop saving them when the pyramid was finished, but although he kept finding cannon balls the pyramid was always missing one or two at the top.

But getting back to the battle, Grover's description of it was "They fit from dawn to dark and then they went home to supper." That much he would tell even us kids. Apparently, the opposing forces shelled each other all day with neither advancing on the other and then both retired from the field under

cover of darkness. Grover's memories were like that. He had lived through some of the most important times in American history, but he remembered nothing of importance, only minute things that had seemed important to him as a boy. His main memory of the War was that first the Confederates and then the Union soldiers had raided their spring house and smoke house and taken all of their food – including his mother's churn filled with clabbered milk she was going to churn to make butter. He always concluded the story by saying his mother said she hoped it gave them the worst case of the trots they had ever had in their life. Serve 'em right she said.

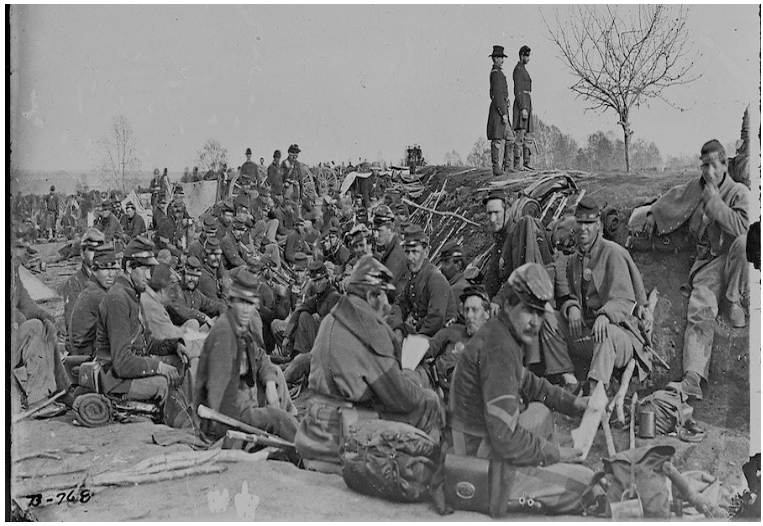
The story I wanted to tell though is probably tied to that day's engagement. Grover's family had come across the Appalachian mountains from Virginia ten or fifteen years before the Civil War. His granddad had a farm in Virginia, but it wasn't big enough to split into two farms. Since the farm would go to his dad's older brother, Robert, his dad had come to West Virginia with Grover's mother shortly after they got married where word was a man could patent a good farm in the Kanawha valley. That might have been true at one time, but by the time Grover's folks came all of the good land along the Kanawha had been taken so they had to go several miles up the Poca river that fed into the Kanawha before they found a homestead they could claim. Even so, they had found a good farm with an expanse of bottom land down by the creek and a hillside with fine timber on it and settled down to raising crops and young'uns. These were pretty much alike in many respects. You couldn't get along without either one. You put in a new one every year and, God willing, you only lost one out of every four or five. Grover was the oldest boy. He had had an older brother who died from the croup – probably whooping cough – when Grover was only a few years old, and an assortment of younger brothers and sisters, all of whom were now dead.

The Civil War began in the spring of 1861. That first year the war had seemed a long way off and word of it came only by way of the merchants who had to bring goods either up the Ohio and Kanawha rivers or over the mountains from Virginia. By the next spring though the news was more immediate. Grover's dad

had learned that his brother, Robert, had enlisted in the Confederate Army the previous fall. Probably since he was a landowner in Virginia where the sentiment was solidly Confederate. That spring Grover's dad plowed and did his spring planting as he always had. Grover said they had a team of dapple grays that were his dad's pride and joy who could pull the big bottom plow to turn a furrow a full foot deep in the fertile bottom land. If the river didn't rise and flood the fields after they were planted and the summer rains came on schedule, the yield from those bottoms was better than anything ever seen back in Virginia. By early summer, the word was out that the Union was conscripting men for military service.

At the time most people lived their entire lives within a few miles of where they were born. Grover's dad was an exception since he had come all the way from Virginia, but even so the thought of serving with strangers from all the way up north was both frightening and unwelcome. As was common at the time, Squire Riordan from over near what is now Nitro raised up a militia of local boys. Today that would be unthinkable, but back then it was common for someone prominent in a community – usually a large landowner – to raise up a militia who would then serve together under his command. The attraction of course was that you would be serving with men you either knew, or who came from the same locality you did and who were just like you therefore, and you could look out for each other. Grover's dad decided that his best bet would be to join Riordan's militia. Besides which, Squire Riordan had said they would lick those Rebs by spring and everyone would be home in time for spring planting. I will now take up the story in Uncle Grover's words.

Pap talked it over with Ma saying he would be a lot better off with local boys who wouldn't cut and run if the going got tough – besides which the crops were all in and he would be home in time for spring planting. He said Ma and me could get in the hay and corn that fall—and the season for the river to flood was already over so there was going to be a good crop. Ma of course didn't want him to go but given the alternative of Pap maybe having to serve with men from Pennsylvania or New York, she agreed this was the best thing to do.



It took some time for the militia to be raised so Pap had lots of time to think about it. I can remember him sitting at the table after supper saying that if he met Robert on the battlefield, he reckoned he would have to shoot him. He always closed the thought by saying; "I sure would hate to have to do thet."

In late summer Pap took his squirrel rifle, Ginger – the better riding one of the dapple grays—and some provisions and left with Riordan's militia to ride north to join the Union forces. Ma and me managed to get in the crop, which as Pap had predicted, was a good one. Ma had dried and pickled lots of stuff from the garden and we had plenty of smoked meat in the smoke house and fruit and roots in the root cellar so that first winter with Pap gone was not too bad. Pap and Ma had built a really good cabin and barn so both us and the cow and horse weathered the winter real well. Neither Pap nor Ma could read ner write, so the only news we got was when someone came up the Poca with word from Squire Riordan's wife who got letters from her husband.

Squire Riordan had been made a Captain and the militia was serving well. Spring came and of course Pap didn't. Not that spring nor the next spring either. Ma and I tried to plow the bottom land that spring to get in a crop but couldn't do it. The one horse we had wasn't really able to pull the big bottom plow

and neither Ma nor me could hold the blade in the ground. It would furrow for a few feet and then break out to the surface. That may have been due to us trying to plow with only one horse hooked by a single tree to the plow instead of to a team with a doubletree to even out the load. Or it may have been we just weren't strong enough to hold the blade into its cut. She tried to have me hold one handle of the plow and her hold the other, but that was even worse. She was desperate of course since we had to have hay for the cow and the horse for the coming winter. In times past, there would have been men in the community who could have helped, but now most of them were away to the war.

Finally, she gave up and we planted corn and beans on the bottom land using just hoes and spades, but hay couldn't be planted without plowing. The pigs and the horse could eat the corn and we could eat the beans, but a milk cow has to have hay. Ma had me cut armloads of pigweed down by the creek to dry in the barn loft in hopes the cow could eat those, but the leaves dried and became brittle and crumbled away. We would shock the cornstalks for fodder after the corn was harvested, but that is mostly roughage and nowhere near enough to get through the coming winter anyway.

As summer came on, she looked at the little stock of hay left over from the previous winter and realized Millie would never get through the winter with what we had. When I had taken Millie to bull over at old man Baileys that spring, he – sensing an opportunity to take advantage of our situation – had told me to tell my ma that if she ever wanted to get rid of that milk cow he would take her off of her hands. Millie was a jersey and well known for the amount and richness of the milk she gave – which Ma said we had to have for my younger brothers and sisters. Over and over that spring and summer Ma toted up what we had against what we would need, and it always came up short—way short. She even figured we could grind some of the corn in the grist mill we used to make corn meal to supplement Millies feed, but even so it looked like there was no way to get her through the coming winter – plus which we needed to butcher a couple of hogs if we were to have meat and lard.

There was always the chance Pap would get home before fall, but Ma said we couldn't depend on that, so we would have to make do as best we could on our own. There was no way we could butcher the hogs ourselves, but Ma thought maybe she could find someone to go shares with us on the meat for doing the butchering – but she didn't have any idea of who that might be. That was the situation as we went into summer that first year Pap was gone. Ma already didn't see any way to make it through the coming winter, but she had no choice but to keep trying.

Then a Confederate foraging party had come through and taken what was left in the smokehouse and in the spring house. They also caught a bunch of the chickens and took all of the eggs—even the ones hens were sitting on. But they were range chickens who only came in to roost and lay so they missed a lot too. We were lucky Millie was grazing in the upper pasture or they would probably have butchered her on the spot.

Things really looked desperate about then. This was just before the battle over on Kelly's Creek I mentioned at the outset. Uncle Grover had told these facts about his family many times, but the story I wanted to tell didn't begin this way. He would usually ask some older person if they remembered his sister Eula. Since everyone had heard the story several times before, most would say; Wasn't she the one that married a guy from over around Poca? If they did, Grover would say; That's the one. But he would retell the story whether prompted in this way or not. My Pop used to say it was weighing on Grover's mind for some reason which was why he kept repeating it.

Well, it was a few days after the battle over on Kelly's Creek that Buddy showed up at our place. He was a young man, maybe twenty or so, but dressed like a scarecrow. The pants he had on were so short the tops were well above his shoes and his shirt was so tight he couldn't button it. He knocked on the door one morning and wanted to know if Ma had any work she wanted done. She told him she didn't have any money to pay him, but he said he would be glad to work for his keep. The corn needed hoeing so she told him if he did a fair days work she would fix supper for him. He went after that corn like it was his own corn field and hardly stopped for the dinner, she had me take to him in the field. By evening he had done more than Ma and I could have in several days. Ma fixed supper for him, even apologizing for not having any meat to offer him and asked if he had any place to sleep that night. He didn't so she said he could bed down in the barn.

The next morning, he wanted to know if he could finish the job he had started in exchange for supper again so Ma said yes. As he was about to head out to work in his scarecrow outfit, Ma

asked him if the too tight clothes he was wearing weren't bothering him in the heat. He allowed that they were, so she found one of Pap's work outfits. It was too large for him, but not as bad as what he was wearing. Again, he went at the corn like it was his own cornfield and by evening had finished off hoeing and weeding it. Ma said to me she had never seen a man work that hard before. She figured he was a deserter who had chucked his uniform and stolen some clothes off of someone's clothesline. She also said she figured he had picked our homestead after laying up in the woods for a day or so and watching to see if there were any menfolk about. Also, we lived quite a ways from the nearest neighbor—well out of sight of any other house. Since she had come from Virginia, Ma figured he was probably a Reb by his manner, but he could have been a Yankee for all we knew. About all he ever said was that his name was Buddy and that he was raised on a farm. That was obvious since only a farm boy would do farm work the way he did.

After supper, he wanted to know if there was anything else that needed done. There was of course since Pap had been gone for a year, but Ma told him again she didn't have any money to pay him. Buddy said that was OK he would be glad to work for his keep. So, we settled into a routine that summer; Buddy ate with us in the kitchen at daybreak then worked hard all day—harder than I had ever seen Pap work, or anyone else for that matter. He ate a dinner at midday that Ma fixed and one of my brothers or me took to him wherever he was working. He washed up at the spring just before dark and then ate supper with us and went back to his bed in the barn. Ma boiled his work clothes along with my brothers and my clothes on Saturday and patched and darned them when they needed it just as she did ours. Buddy didn't talk much and Ma didn't pry. Ma told us that if he wanted to tell us about himself, he would. He didn't, and he didn't. Sometime before fall harvest time, Buddy figured out for himself that we weren't set to get through the winter. He asked Ma about hay for the cow and horse and the empty smokehouse. She told him what had happened so the next day he made the rounds of the nearest neighbors. That night he told Ma he had made arrangements to take in crops for a couple of

them on shares – he would do the work for a share of the hay and produce. Ma protested since that sounded like charity to her, but Buddy insisted.

After that he was really working two jobs – keeping up our place and working at the neighbors during harvest. My oldest brother and I would take the sled Pap had made which only needed one horse and go get the hay Buddy was earning on shares. We weren't big enough to fork it up into the haymow, but we would fork it off by the barn. At night Buddy would fork it up to us to move to the back of the mow and tromp down. It was dark in the mow at night, but the hay smelled sweet and we had fun doing the work. Day by day and bit by bit, the barn filled up. The best thing Buddy got, and I still remember it like it was yesterday, was a couple of jugs of sorghum molasses for helping a family down on the river bring in their cane for grinding in the sorghum mill. We hadn't had anything sweet in months so those were the sweetest molasses I ever tasted.

By now it was starting to get nippy at night, light frost was forming on the grass and the trees were starting to drop their leaves. Ma tried to get Buddy to move into the cabin with us where it was warm, saying he could have the attic room, but he wouldn't do it. Said he was alright in the barn. Pap had made a tack room that was well sealed since rodents will chew up a harness in a single night to get the salt where the horses have sweated, and a good harness is one of the most valuable things a 4 farmer owns. He had chinked all of the cracks solid with clay and fitted the door so even a mouse couldn't get in he said. That was where Buddy had his bed and Ma had given him a couple of quilts she had made so he said it was good enough for him. When the first hard frost came Buddy said it was time to butcher two of the hogs. Ma was surprised that he knew how to butcher, but he did. For several days we were all busy with the butchering. Ma rendered lard from the fat off the intestines and she and my sisters put down scrapple, headcheese, souse and blood pudding from all of the parts. The cracklings from rendering the lard were a great treat for us kids since the only meat we had had since the Rebs had stolen everything was an occasional rooster, but Ma kept most of them to put in cornbread

during the coming winter. The bacon, the hams and the shoulders were all hung in the smoke house.

Buddy cut green hickory on the hillside for the smoke which my brothers and I tended for days in the smoke pit until the meat was smoked almost black. For the first time in a long time there was meat in the smokehouse and in the spring house, plenty of food in the root cellar and corn and hay for the coming winter – plus all the shocks of fodder for roughage. The crops were all in, ours and the neighbors, so Ma figured Buddy would be moving on. He didn't. For a week or so he cut firewood on the hill side which my brothers and I sledded down to the house in preparation for the snows to come.

Winter in those days could be terrible. I can remember snows that came up to the horse's belly. In the worst of the winter life was pretty much a matter of keeping the house warm, tending to the animals, and the endless chores bringing in wood, getting water for us and the animals and Ma and my sisters fixing food and quilting when the light was good. Pap had started to fence the farm years before. Fences back then were all rail fences – poles put together sort of like if you interlock the fingers on your two hands. He had finished the lower pasture where the rails zigzagged their way around the sides but had never had the time to run the fence up the hill to join the cliffs at the top. He had always planned to finish that so Millie couldn't wander off from the upper pasture which she preferred in the spring and summer, and so he could pasture the horses up there as well.

As it was, the horses had to be kept in the fenced lower pasture year around since horses will wander off. A cow will always come home at milking time—fence or no fence—but a horse won't. On a hill side you can't make long runs of rail fence like you can on the flat since the rails will work their way down hill and the fence will fall down. What you have to do is build a stone pilaster every third or fourth run of rail to support the fence. That makes building fence on a hill side a lot slower and much harder work than building on the flat. Buddy set to building the fence that winter. Pap had used mostly oak saplings for rails, but Buddy said that while oak was strong and hard, it

would dry rot a lot faster than hickory. He was right too, since up until recently some of the fence he built was still standing up there in the woods.

On days when the ground was thawed, he pried stones free to build pilasters and on days the ground was frozen he cut and trimmed hickory saplings that my brothers and I drug over to the fence line. Even in the worst weather he would work all day placing the rails in place between the pilasters. Ma had found Pap's sheepskin coat for Buddy as winter came on and he would often come in at supper so covered with snow you couldn't tell whether the fleece part was inside or outside. He still slept in the barn, but now lingered in the evenings after supper to sit by the fire and thaw out from the day's work. Sometime during that winter, he finished the first run of fence up the hillside and began the other one, but the work went slower as the weather got worse. Even so he continued to build his way up the hill and the work speeded up again as the spring thaws came.

We hadn't had word of Pap since the previous fall since no one came up the Poca in winter. As spring approached the fence neared completion, but still had a stretch to go to reach the rock cliffs at the top of the hill Each day Buddy was anxiously checking the soil on the bottom land to see when it could be plowed. If the ground is too wet, the curl turned by the plow will dry out like a brick and can't be broken up to plant. If you wait until the ground is too dry, the plow won't turn the smooth curls of earth that mark a good plowing. Before any of the neighbors plowed their fields, Buddy decided he could start ours and began plowing from almost before it was daylight in the morning until it was almost dark at night. He harrowed and planted in the same rush he had plowed. As soon as he had the spring planting in he resumed work on the fence at the top of the hill. Ma and us kids were getting the garden started and all of the other chores associated with winter's end, so except for one of us taking Buddy his dinner at midday, we only saw him at breakfast and supper.

One evening he didn't come in for supper, so Ma told me to go tell him supper was ready. Buddy was nowhere to be found. Ma hallooed for him over and over out back, but there was no

answer so she got out the lantern and told me to go check on the hillside where he had been building fence, saying he might have hurt himself. But she couldn't figure out why he hadn't answered her halloos even if he was hurt and down. But Buddy was nowhere to be found. The fence had been completed though and ended neatly in a pilaster built into the cliff. When I came back, Ma took the lantern and went to the barn to check. There in the tack room where he had slept for the past year were the quilts Ma had given him, all neatly folded with Pap's sheepskin jacket on top of them. He had clearly lit out. Us kids all wanted to know where Buddy had gone, but Ma only said he must have gone home to do his spring planting now that ours was done. That was about all she ever said.

You may wonder where Eula comes into this story. Well, by summer Ma was clearly carrying. There was no way she could have concealed the fact from us kids, and she made no effort to do so. By late summer she was near term and had me go ask a woman that had midwifed for most of us when we were born to come see her. She and Ma huddled in the bedroom for a long time after which she told Ma when she thought the baby was due. She said Ma was doing fine so since the weather was good, she should send me to fetch her when the time came – but that if she began to have any problems as the time got closer, she could come and stay with us until the baby came. Eula was born early that fall at just about the same time word came up the river from Mrs. Riordan that Pap had been shot and was in a field hospital, but that he was OK and would survive.

The militia was moving south in pursuit of part of Lee's army so it would be sometime before Captain Riordan would have further word about Pap. The next word we had came quite roundabout from someone in the same hospital as Pap. It told us Pap had lost an arm and would be discharged and sent home as soon as he recovered from his wound. Ma worried that winter since no further word came from or about Pap, but she always reassured herself by saying No news is good news. By then lots of families had lost family members in the war and at least Pap was alive and would be coming home.

It was late spring when Pa finally got home. I have to mention an odd thing about Grover's reminiscences of those years at this point. When Uncle Grover talked about his father from his viewpoint as a boy, he always referred to him as Pap, but when he talked about him from his viewpoint as a grown man, he always referred to him as Pa. I am sure the switch was entirely unconscious on Grover's part, but he never failed to make 6 the switch in how he referred to his father.

Pa didn't have Ginger nor his rifle with him when he came home, and he never said how or where he lost them. Pa was a very different man than the one who had gone away to war two and a half years before. Pa had been a big man, now he seemed small. He had lost a lot of weight of course – and his left arm – but he seemed shriveled in some way. Even later when he had put some of his weight back on, he still seemed small. Ma used to say Pa had lost a lot more than his arm in the war. He never talked about the war or what he had experienced – except to occasionally curse the butchers the Union employed as surgeons.

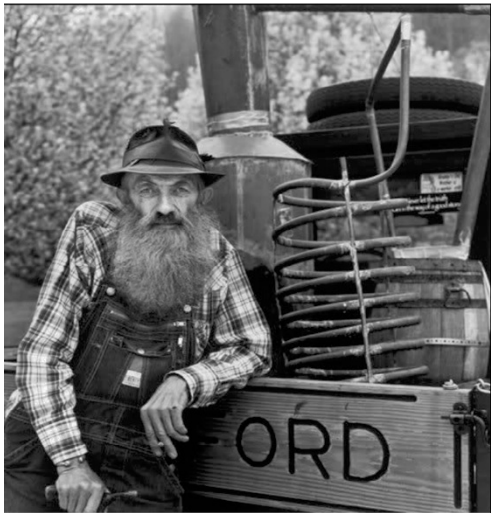
His left arm had been amputated above the elbow and he complained bitterly that he had pleaded with them to amputate below the elbow so he would still be able to crook it and do something useful with the stump. But they had amputated it a few inches above the elbow in spite of his plea. I had grown a lot over the preceding year and a half and had watched how Buddy plowed with only one horse, so I had managed to plow and get in the spring planting, which was just as well, since with the one arm Pa was never able to handle a plow again. He sometimes went with my brothers and me to the fields, but with one hand he couldn't even undo the harness buckles or hitch the horses to the plow.

I had expected that there would be Hell to pay when Pa found a new baby girl waiting for him on his return. There wasn't. To the best of my knowledge nothing was ever said at all. Maybe he and Ma talked in private out of us kids hearing, but I don't think they did. Since Pa couldn't do farm work anymore, most of that fell to my brothers and me. Luckily, we were getting big enough to take over the chores on the farm and

Pa stayed around the house more and more. Ma had to do his shoes for him and help him with all sorts of things—just like a kid. He did whatever he could though and was just as good at handling his end of a two-man crosscut saw in cutting timber or firewood as he ever was.

But there was an awful lot he couldn't do either. You remember that sour apple tree on our place that a storm split, and one half of the trunk lay on the ground, still alive and producing apples for years that Ma used to make jelly with? Uncle Grover did that a lot, asking his audience if they remembered something he did and which they certainly couldn't, and then going on with his story anyway. Well Pa liked to sit out there on that sour apple tree trunk which was just the right height to sit on and watch Eula running and playing in the orchard by the hour. On a warm summer evening she would chase fireflies until it was getting dark, and Pa would just sit there watching her. Not smoking or anything, just sitting there. He doted on her something awful. Eula always was Pa's favorite – and she weren't even his own flesh and blood. It was this line that Uncle Grover came to time and again with obvious anguish after all of those years: "Eula always was Pa's favorite – and she weren't even his own flesh and blood."

Thankee, Thankee, Thankee; Saved My Life



This is one of those stories that almost has to be told, not written, but I'll do my best. Uncle Loosh – and the difficulty in telling the story is already present in the second word of the story –was a drunk. A confirmed, total, dedicated drunk. I could give him another name, but the story wouldn't be the same, nor would it feel right, if I called him anything other than Uncle Loosh. Loosh is pronounced like you started out to say loose and then changed your mind and tacked on an h at the end. To get the sound right you have to end up with your mouth configured like you where shushing someone by saying shhh. Try it and you will see.

This is all about Uncle Loosh when he was drunk – which was as often as he could manage it. I don't know whether he was really anyone's uncle but to everyone on Frog's creek where we lived he was Uncle Loosh. This was in the early 30's and times were hard, very hard. To my knowledge Uncle Loosh didn't work. At least he didn't work in the coal mines like Pop or farm like many of the other people on Frogs creek. He probably trapped a little for pelts to sell to the George I. Fox man who came every spring to buy pelts from all of the people who had accumulated them over the winter; us included. That was one of the few sources of cash money back then and there. He may have picked up a day's pay now and then helping someone butcher hogs or put up a building. I don't know that he did, but I do know

he didn't work regular. He lived by himself in a derelict cabin on the hillside above where Frogs creek and Kelly's creek came together to run into the Poca river. Sometimes we wouldn't see Uncle Loosh for a week or so. That just meant he was broke. The minute he got his hands on some money he was off to Berties to get some moonshine—as much as Berty would give him for whatever money he had.

Berty was the local moonshiner and lived about a mile further up Frogs creek from us. I need to tell you something about Bertie's moonshine. He took great pride in what he did so the moonshine he distilled was near to perfect. I've heard that the best you can get is 180 proof in alcohol that is exposed to the air. It absorbs moisture from the air just like quicklime, so I'll bet Bertie's best was close to that; none of that namby pamby 80 or 100 proof bottled in bond whiskey. It didn't take many swigs to get you to where you were going. People often joke about keeping a bottle of liquor "just in case they get snake bit." The universally accepted treatment for snake bite in that part of West Virginia was to cut an x on the fang punctures and turn a bottle of turpentine up on the cuts to "draw out the pizen." Well, I am sure Bertie's best would have beat turpentine flat out.

You probably think I am getting sidetracked from the story I set out to tell, but all of this is necessary to appreciate the story. Uncle Loosh couldn't wait after a long dry spell, so he would have several snorts just as soon as he got his pint and then head back down Frogs creek. There are all kinds of drunks; some are aggressive and want to pick a fight as soon as they are liquored up, some are maudlin, crying, drunks and some just pass out. Uncle Loosh was a happy drunk. When he was happy, which meant when he was drunk, he sang "She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes" just as loud as he could. If he wasn't too drunk, he sang a few more lines of the song, but later he simply repeated that one line over and over. His gait when drunk was something a circus acrobat would envy. He would put a foot forward, wave it about in the air as though he were searching for a solid place to put it down and then when you thought he had to fall, put the foot down, singing all the while. Then he would repeat the same procedure with the other foot.

He never fell, or at least I never saw him fall, but it sure looked like he was about to with every step he took. It was this ability to remain upright against all the laws of nature that would have made a circus acrobat green with envy.

All that singing and foot waving took a lot out of a man, so he had to stop frequently to take a nip from his bottle. Since Berty lived about a mile up the creek from us, Uncle Loosh was always down to just the one line of She'll be coming around the mountain by the time he got to our place. We could hear him coming long before we could see him. Pop's name was Earl, so just before he got to our place Uncle Loosh would start hollering as loud as he could; Earl, Earl. Then he'd sing a chorus or two and then holler, Earl, Earl again.

I must digress for a moment if the rest of the story is to make any sense to you. Back when a road was first put in on Frogs creek the work was all done by hand, pick and shovel, or using a drag scoop pulled by oxen, so it stayed away from the rock that had been exposed by the creek and meandered up the hill; going wherever the going was the easiest. This was called the old road and dated back to Civil War times. Later when steam shovels were used to build roads, a new road was put in that followed the creek more closely and simply cut through the rock outcroppings along the creek. The two roads came together on our property just below the house. Above us Frogs creek had bottom land bordering the creek so there was only the one road, new and old being the same. We had a cow and a horse, Old May, so Pop had put up a barb wire fence along the road to keep them from wandering onto the road and installed a draw gate across the old road so we could get in and out with a sled or wagon. A draw gate is not a gate at all but a movable section of barb wire fencing. Instead of connecting the barb wire to the posts on each side of the road you connect the wire to only one of the posts and on the other end connect it to a pole as tall as a post. You attach a loop of wire at the top and the bottom of the post on that side of the road so that by putting the pole in the lower loop and drawing the barbed wire tight you can put the other loop over the top to form an unbroken fence. To open the draw gate, you simply reverse these steps, swing the loop of wire

at the top up and off of the pole and lay the gate back on the side of the road.

At any rate this is what we had across the old road where it branched off from the new road and went up the hill. Uncle Loosh had always walked home on the old road, which went closer to his cabin than the new road, although I suspect that fact was immaterial to him. He had always walked home along the old road and like many creatures, the instinct was to follow the path he had always followed. The draw gate that Pop had put across the old road though was an insurmountable obstacle for him in his drunken state. He might have tried it once and gotten tangled in the barbed wire—I don't know that he did – but at any rate he wasn't about to try it again. The repeated calls of Earl, Earl were a summons for Pop to meet him at the draw gate and help him get through.

The first time this happened, Pop went down to meet him and opened the draw gate for him, but Uncle Loosh would have no part of it. "I don't want to put you out" he said. I am sure Pop assured him it was no imposition, but Uncle Loosh wouldn't hear of Pop opening the draw gate for him. In his mind, opening the draw gate was putting Pop out. Instead, he lay down in the road parallel to the draw gate and asked Pop to roll him under the fence. On the other side he staggered back to his feet and said: "Thankee, thankee, thankee; saved my life." He then went on his way singing She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes. Why opening the draw gate was putting Pop out while rolling him under the fence wasn't is beyond understanding? But to Uncle Loosh it made perfect sense. There is no way I can convey in writing the lilting way he said "Thankee, thankee, thankee; saved my life." You'll just have to say it out loud a few times to get the true feel of it.

For all the years we lived on Frogs creek this ritual was repeated without variation every time Uncle Loosh got drunk. A couple of times Pop said he might put in a turnstile beside the draw gate so Uncle Loosh could get through on his own, but he never did. Maybe he thought Uncle Loosh either couldn't or wouldn't use the turnstile, but more likely he simply enjoyed the

ritual of rolling Uncle Loosh under the fence and being thanked with; “Thankee, thankee, thankee; saved my life.”

The Bomber

The summer of 1944 in West Virginia was, even today, the hottest and driest in my recollection. From where I sat that summer afternoon on Uncle Josh's front porch, I could see the heat shimmering over the red dog topped county road and rising from the weed fields beyond. In years past, the bottom land down by the creek would have had a crop of corn laid by then—but Uncle Josh's boy, Little Josh, was off in the Army Air Force somewhere in Europe, as was Uncle Grover's oldest, John, and almost everyone else of their generation.

Uncle Josh hadn't touched the fields since Little Josh left. He said it didn't seem right to—but I'd heard my Pop say that Uncle Josh always had been dutiless and that it had nothing to do with Little Josh's being in the Army. I'd walked over earlier to see if there was anything Uncle Josh and Aunt Tillie wanted done—there was even the chance that he'd give me something for doing some work around the place—but he'd 'lowed as how there wasn't nothing needed done.

They weren't my real Aunt and Uncle of course, it was just that everyone thereabout, my Pop included, called them Aunt and Uncle. Dreading the walk home with the sunbaked red dog burning my bare feet, I'd settled down by one corner of the porch to wait for the evening shade to set. Uncle Josh and Aunt Tillie hadn't moved from their places on the porch since I'd arrived. She was sitting on the top stoop with her back against the best

of the three remaining porch roof supports and Uncle Josh was settled in his hickory-caned straight chair that he bragged he'd made special just to fit his "arse."

They must have had a letter that morning from Little Josh cause Josh had asked me if they taught us anything in school about "them bummers." But he lost interest before I could tell him about the wooden models, we were making in school shop to help air-raid wardens learn to recognize real bombers—so my answer petered out into silence before I even finished. Aunt Tillie had glanced over at me when I started to answer Josh but had turned back even before I stopped. Josh had a big chaw of home-grown tobacco in his cheek which he was working on intently. Every few minutes he'd lean back on the back two legs of his chair and let fly a gob of tobacco juice into the front yard and then settle forward in the chair again to concentrate on his chewing. The railing of the porch was spattered with spray from Josh's spitting and, since it hadn't rained in over a month, the baked earth of the front yard showed his range pretty well. Once in a while when he really wanted to show off, Josh would work his chaw an unusually long time so as to fill his mouth with tobacco juice, after which he'd rear back as far as he dared in the chair and then rock forward for maximum range and try to hit the bottom of one of Aunt Tillie's wash tubs hanging on the fence. She'd look up when he hit a tub and say "Josh" in an irritated way, except when she said it it sounded more like "Jorsh."

The rough-cut pine plank porch had weathered to a deep flat grey—almost the same color as the paper wasp nests in the porch roof that Aunt Tillie was always jawing at Josh to burn out, but which he never did. A foot or so in front of Josh a knot had fallen out of a plank and left a hole an inch or two across through which you could see the powder-dry dust under the porch. Josh started to rear back once again to spit, when he spotted the knothole and stopped. He leaned forward so as to center his mouth over the hole, and after a few tentative movements to get in the best position, he spit with just his lips moving and let the gob of juice fall through the knothole and

onto the dust below. The moisture quickly soaked into the ground in a widening damp spot.

I hadn't noticed them before but several of the big black wood ants that lived in the foundation logs found the spot almost as soon as it formed and began to run in nervous little sorties into the center where it was still sticky wet and then back out again. Josh had seen the ants, too, and was milking his chaw again for a good spit. But this time instead of rearing back he leaned forward over the knothole and carefully positioned his head before letting his mouth go slack so the tobacco juice could fall free. In spite of his care his aim wasn't as good as it had been the first time and some of the juice slapped the edge of the knothole to make a brown spot on the porch. But the main part of his spittle fell through the knothole and onto the damp spot below where it engulfed a half-dozen or so of the big black ants, who struggled fiercely to free themselves.

At this sight, Uncle Josh reared back in his chair, slapped his leg, and said, "Just like them bummers—just like them bummers." Aunt Tillie hadn't seen what had happened but, when Uncle Josh said that, she looked over at him for just a moment and then went back to staring out across the county road. Josh let his chair rock back onto all four and sort of said to himself this time, "Just like them bummers." I stayed for another hour or so until the shade set well on the county road before heading home. In all this time, although Josh kept working his chaw, he never repeated the performance with the knothole but just spit over the railing off and on again. He didn't even try once for a wash tub.


CHEW
MAIL POUCH
TOBACCO
TREAT YOURSELF TO THE BEST

The Devil And Uncle T

Most people give the Devil his due when it comes to major catastrophes and disasters, but when I was young, he was credited with all sorts of devilments as well. Little things that defied reason and confounded the victim. Some were pretty big, like having a prize heifer you had intended to breed to a neighbors registered bull get with calf when you hadn't taken her to bull and she hadn't been out of the pasture. Some were small, like having the mornings milk which you had put in the spring house to cool, go blink instead which was clearly impossible. Everyone knew that couldn't happen, but sometimes it did. Superstitious folk might have blamed that on the thunder in that morning's thunderstorm, but sensible people knew it was just another example of the Devil tormenting them.

In those days he did a lot of that sort of thing, things that defied reason that is. Mathematics has always been a subject full of results that defy reason, results that don't seem quite right, even when proven. The Greeks were the first to encounter this when Hippasus showed that the ratio of the side of a square to its diagonal couldn't be exactly represented as the ratio of any two whole numbers. The Pythagoreans believed every number could be represented by such a ratio so this result defied reason. I don't know whether they thought the Devil was responsible, but they certainly considered the result to be heresy since his fellow Pythagoreans cast Hippasus over the side of the ship to drown for his discovery.

There were other examples scattered over the centuries, things such as the impossibility of trisecting an angle etc. but it wasn't until the first part of the twentieth century that one area of mathematics produced so many examples of things that defied reason that it became common to speak of the Devil of topology. For the benefit of the reader who is unfamiliar with topology it is a subject in which right and left gloves are indistinguishable, in which a three-dimensional bottle can have only one side, the inside being the outside, which is the only side, and in which a loop of paper can have only one side when any darn fool can plainly see that a piece of paper has two sides to it. In fact, in topology almost anything that is obvious is sure to have a counterexample showing it isn't true in general and many of the things you can prove are true are so counterintuitive they defy belief. Clearly the work of the same sort of Devil who made the morning milk go blink by noon.

Odd as it may seem, it is the Devil of topology that tormented Uncle T in the Hills of West Virginia in the early part of the twentieth century at the same time he was tormenting all of those topologists in Europe. Uncle T Booker was an unlikely target for the Devil of topology's attention since he was totally illiterate, as were most of the men of his generation in that part of West Virginia. Uncle T was a deeply religious man, which may explain why the Devil singled him out. Uncle T and his wife, Aunt Bess, had bought a large Bible with lots of full-page colored illustrations from a traveling Bible salesman years before from which Uncle T liked to "read" a passage before the evening meal. Uncle T had a good memory and had memorized many verses from the Bible from the preacher reading them in church. He would take down the Bible, open it in the middle, and trace out the words with the forefinger of his right hand just as he had seen the preacher do, and recite a verse before the evening meal. I am not sure whether he was consciously pretending to read the passage or if he didn't really know what reading involved.

Once, as a kid, when we were at their house at suppertime, I spotted what he was doing when he opened the Bible in the middle and then read a portion of Genesis – and almost got in

serious trouble when I later pointed out what I had spotted to my parents. Now I believe that Uncle T thought that he was actually reading from the Bible and that everyone did what he was doing. The words were in there somewhere and the ritual of tracing your finger on the page and reciting a text was reading. This is borne out by his often-repeated statement that the only thing he could read was the Bible.

At any rate, this is the man the Devil of topology targeted. The first torment happened before I can remember but was told with great delight by Aunt Bess at the quilting bees held at the church where all of the women gathered to quilt on charity quilts. If the weather was bad, us kids were allowed to stay inside so long as we were quiet where we could overhear the stories being told by the women as they quilted. If Aunt Bess didn't volunteer to tell the story of Uncle T's long johns, one of the other women was sure to ask her to tell it again. In the 20's Uncle T had become a prohibition agent raiding stills and arresting moonshiners over around Beckly. It was dangerous but exciting work and brought in a little cash money at a time when cash was hard to come by.

One winter day he and three other agents were on their way to raid a still they had heard about over on Winding Gulf, near the town of Hot Coal. To get there it was necessary for them to cross a stream that was running about two or three feet deep. There was snow on the ground and ice along the edges of the creek (or crick as Aunt Bess called it) so they decided to strip down to keep their clothes and boots dry. In those days all men wore long johns – working in them all day and sleeping in them at night. Long johns as the name suggests are full length, covering the wearers arms and legs as well as their body and have a button up flap in the seat to make it possible to go to the toilet without taking them off. Uncle T had a funny notion about long johns, saying it didn't seem right somehow for a grown man to take a shit with his pants on, so he was the only person I knew who bought two-piece long johns that allowed him to slide the bottoms down with his pants when he had to go.

At any rate, the other three men stripped down completely, but Uncle T simply removed his shoes and socks and his pants

and long john bottoms, and they all forded the icy creek to the other bank. You can imagine how cold they were by the time they got out in the snow and ice on the other side. As Aunt Bess told it they were all turning blue by that point. The other men all got their clothes on as quickly as they could. Uncle T put his right leg in the right leg of his long john bottoms, but when he went to put the left leg in, that leg had turned inside out when he took them off on the other side of the creek. He quickly pulled his right leg out of the bottoms and turned the left leg back the way it was supposed to be. By now he was really freezing so moving as fast as he could, he put his left leg in the bottoms, only to find that the right leg of the underwear was now inside out. Remember he is standing barefooted in the snow and still dripping wet from the crotch down from fording the icy creek. He pulled his left leg out and as fast as he could, turned the right leg the other way around and put his right leg back in his long johns, only to find that the left leg was now inside out.

At that point according to Aunt Bess he lost his temper and tore the bottoms in two, turned the left leg inside out again and put on that half by itself and got dressed. She had the job of sewing the two halves together that night when he came back from raiding the still. No matter how many times Aunt Bess told this story it always got a big laugh. It was inevitable that the Devil of topology having found such an easy mark would never let Uncle T off so easily, which leads to story I really wanted to tell.

After prohibition ended and Uncle T lost his job as an agent, he and Aunt Bess had moved in the early 30's to Frogs creek where we lived. The Lanhams were operating a sawmill at the time sawing timber they were mainly cutting on their own land. The best trees were high on the ridge tops, so the problem was getting them down to the sawmill. The way this is done is that smaller trees that aren't much good for lumber, such as poplar, are cut and peeled and staked side by side to form a chute from the top of the mountain to the bottom. If a log is entered into the chute at the top and given a start down the mountain it will thunder down the chute and out onto the flat at the bottom. Sometimes they will jump the chute and tear off into the woods

on the way down, but once the chute is working, this rarely happens. The logs that are cut on top of the mountain have to be pulled to the chute and then given a start to get them headed down the mountain. You can't use horses for this since horses are flighty creatures and will panic when they hear the log gaining from behind them in the chute and try to outrun it.

Of course, they can't and would be killed or injured when the log overran them. Oxen on the other hand are placid and don't panic, so they are used for logging. A short length of logging chain with sharpened hooks on each end is attached to one end of the log by driving the hooks in on each side of the log with a sledgehammer. A full-length logging chain is then attached from the yoke on the oxen to the small chain and used to drag the log to the chute. The oxen are driven down the hill for a short distance alongside the chute until the log picks up speed, at which point the oxen are turned to the side. The log roars past tearing the hooks free and the team is driven back up the ridge to get the next log.

In those days, most people had horses, a few had mules, but very few had oxen, so logging was a lucrative business for anyone with a good team of oxen. Uncle T had apparently put aside some money during his time as a prohibition agent since shortly after the Lanhams opened their sawmill he bought a fine team of oxen. The lead ox, the one on the right side, was a magnificent creature whom he named Grover. The other ox was named Blue, although he was red from head to toe. Pop always said that Uncle T had named the one ox Grover since he, Uncle T, had been raised by an uncle who was mean to him and was named Grover. Uncle T said it was because his Uncle Grover was as dumb as an ox, so it was fitting that Grover be named Grover.

At any rate, Uncle T took out his long-delayed revenge on Uncle Grover on Grover who got the hot end of a whip more than he deserved. The Lanhams had pretty well logged out their timber by the time of the events of this story and Uncle T had found another job for Grover, Blue and himself working on the county road. Steam shovels were in use for making road cuts elsewhere in West Virginia, but this was poor country with no

money for anything so fancy as a steam shovel so everything was done by manpower and animals alone. Earth moving was largely done with a drag scoop – a device that looks somewhat like an oversized wheelbarrow with substantial oak handles at the rear but no wheel in front. The front of the scoop is a reinforced blade for cutting into the dirt. The whole thing is pulled by draft animals while a man uses the handles to control the scoop, so it cuts into the earth.

As you can imagine, if the front edge hits a stone or root too large to be dislodged, the whole thing will pivot up violently around the front edge as a pivot, dumping both the operator and the load in the scoop. Just as in logging, horses are not much good for this task either since a horse's natural instinct when a load it is drawing binds is to lunge forward in the harness – the worse thing imaginable for the operator holding the handles of the scoop.

Oxen on the other hand are placid creatures and will stop instantly on command so Uncle T and his team of oxen were much in demand to work on the new county road being put in on Frogs creek. Although many readers will be familiar with how horses are harnessed to a load, very few will know how oxen are harnessed and the story requires you to know this. In place of the harness and singletrees and doubletrees used to couple horses to a load, a yoke is used with oxen. The beam of the yoke is a large oak timber with rounded notches cut on the underside to fit on top of the necks of the oxen. A U-shaped oxbow is then brought up from below around each ox's neck and through holes in the beam to harness the ox to the yoke. Pins are placed through each leg of the oxbow above the yoke to hold the assembly together. A chain from the center of the yoke to behind the ox's rear ends is then used to couple the oxen to the load. In the case of the drag scoop, the main chain is attached to a cross chain fastened to the sides of the scoop.

Uncle T was working his team of oxen with a crew of men cutting the new road. The men would cut the saplings and underbrush and use pry bars and mattocks to roll out rocks and dig up roots. Uncle T was moving the earth and smaller rocks using the scoop. It was hard work and as you might expect there

were lots of places where the scoop couldn't be used, and hand labor was the only way to proceed. They had come to such a point and Uncle T left Grover and Blue harnessed to the scoop and went to help move some rocks, It took some time since they had to be undercut and then pried loose etc,

When the crew finally reached a point where the scoop could be used again, Uncle T went to get it and found the Devil had been at work. Remember Grover, the lead ox, was on the right and Blue was on the left. What he found was that Grover was now on the left and Blue was on the right and the yoke which had been on top of their necks when he left them was now below their necks with the oxbows on top. Clearly it was impossible for Grover and Blue to have gotten in that position by themselves. Uncle T's first thought was that one of the men was playing a trick on him and had snuck over and done this. But the men had all been working together on removing the rocks, and besides only Uncle T could work with Grover. He was a bullheaded creature – even with Uncle T – and there was simply no way the oxen would have let any of the men reyoke them that way.

Everyone agreed that it was impossible, but there it was. After puzzling over the impossibility of what they could see with their own eyes, they consigned it to the class of things about which it was futile to think anymore with the statement; "Well, if thet don't beat all". There was nothing for it but for Uncle T to unyoke the oxen, move them back to their proper places and then reyoke them.

Since hardly anything out of the ordinary ever happened on Frogs creek, the mystery of Grover and Blue swapping places like that was a big subject of conversation for the next several days. The most likely explanation seemed to be that someone had done it as a prank while the crew was preoccupied with digging out rocks and rolling them down the hill – but who could have done it , especially without being seen, was as big a mystery as the swap itself. Most people, though, just chalked it up as another one of those things that couldn't happen but did, like the morning milk going blink by noon.

Then a few days later it happened again. Again no one saw it happen. Now it was really a hot topic of conversation. You don't often get two impossible events happening in one week. Uncle T was really put out about it since he thought someone had to be responsible and oxen are notoriously stubborn so that unyoking and reyoking them was a job in itself. The road work went on all summer.

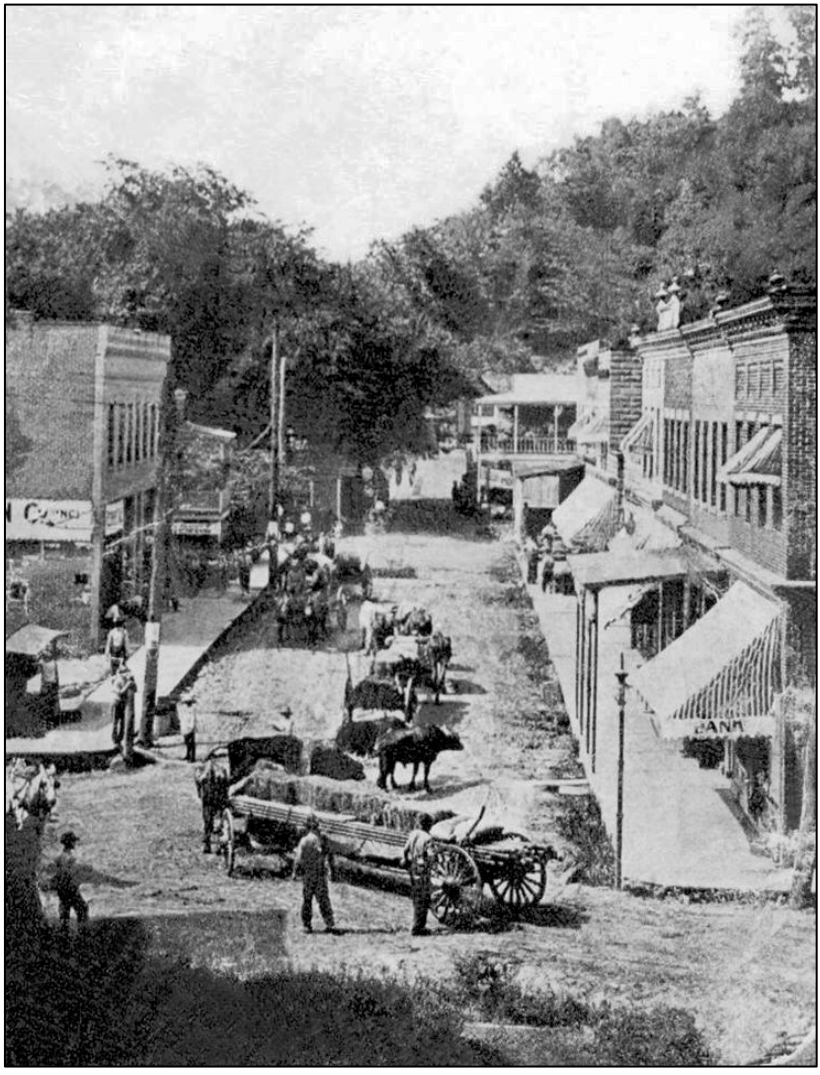
A couple of weeks after these incidents the crew had stopped to eat dinner (dinner is the midday meal in West Virginia, supper is the evening meal). The oxen had been moved into the shade while they ate. Suddenly one of the men said, "Would you look at them oxen". Grover and Blue had put their heads down and turned to sort of face each other which forced their noses down toward the ground with the yoke now between them. They then twisted their necks at the same time, and there they were on the wrong sides again and with the yoke on the bottom of their necks.

Even as I describe it you will think it is impossible although it must be possible since Grover and Blue had done it. It wasn't until much later that I saw a simple way to explain how a yoke could be flipped as Grover and Blue had done. If somehow Grover could be picked up on the right, raised in the air while still yoked to Blue, turned over as he was passed over Blue and then put 4 down on his feet on the left side, the yoke would have slipped around the neck on each ox in the process and would have ended up on the bottom.

How or why Grover and Blue had figured out how to execute this complicated maneuver which required they both move in synchronism if neither was to have his neck wrung in the process I can't imagine, but they had. There was a comedian. Flip Wilson, a few years ago who made famous the punch line; "The Devil made me do it". Maybe that was the explanation. The Devil made them do it. Uncle T was furious. He grabbed his whip and lashed into Grover yelling; "I'll learn you Damn you". But although the oxen bellowed from the pain of the whip, they either couldn't or wouldn't undo the mischief they had wrought. Finally, Uncle T had to unyoke them just as he had before, move them into their proper positions and reyoke them.

That isn't the end of the story though. Everyone knows that horses will feign being lame to get out of work. We had a horse, Old May, who would be frolicking as happy as could be in the pasture until she saw Pop bring the harness out of the barn when she would instantly go lame in her right front foot. She overacted so badly though that she gave the game away. Pop had looked for a nail or a thrown shoe the first time or two she did this but quickly caught on to what she was up to so he would go ahead and harness her and then wallop her a few times in the rump with the reins and the lameness would be magically cured.

She probably remembered a time when she had actually been lame and had gotten out of work as a result and figured it was worth trying again. Well, Grover and Blue learned the same thing. Since being unyoked and reyoked took some time to do, time when they weren't having to pull the drag scoop, they got very proficient at flipping their yoke that summer. Grover was so accustomed to getting the hot end of the whip anyway, he didn't associate the beatings he got for doing that with what he had done. I can understand the Devil of topology tormenting Uncle T but can't imagine why he wanted to torment Grover. After all, Grover was just his agent to get at Uncle T. Since it seemed impossible, even after you had seen the oxen do it, people got to where they would ask Uncle T to show them, and although Grover and Blue wouldn't do it on command, if they had been working and were hot and tired, given the chance they would. I saw them flip their yoke a couple of times and like everyone else could hardly believe what I saw. The Devil of topology must have decided it was no fun tormenting someone who made a public display of his efforts and given up and gone back to Europe since Uncle T had no further topological twists in his life that I know of.



The Education Of Hettie Cunningham

I had completely forgot about Hettie; probably had not thought of her in over fifty years. What caused me to think of her now was finding the diploma Pop was given when he graduated from the elementary school. It was in a small box of family memorabilia my grandmother and then Mom had kept all of these years. Pop was born in 1905 and graduated from elementary school in 1924 – just two months shy of his nineteenth birthday. Such a thing would be unheard of today but was not unusual at the time, and place. What was unusual was that he stuck it out to finish school, even though the state statute said a student could leave school when they reached fourteen years of age or finished elementary school. It was not uncommon for boys to leave school as soon as they turned fourteen. Although it isn't germane to the story I wish to tell, Hettie must have been seventeen or eighteen when she got her diploma.

West Virginia may not be a foreign place now, but in the period just after WW1 it was a foreign place and even more a foreign time. Little had changed in the way people lived or worked or in their attitudes since the Civil War. WW1 had had a minimal impact on life. I can remember the preacher saying the boys who had gone off to fight in France came home, picked up their squirrel rifle and went back up the same hollar they had been hunting in when called up to serve. Consequently, in order

for you to fully appreciate Hettie's story, I will have to digress more than an author is normally indulged to do.

It is difficult to imagine now but in the first few decades of the 20th century most rural kids in West Virginia, which is to say just about everyone, went to school in a one room school where a single teacher taught all eight grades. That hadn't changed when I went to elementary school at the beginning of the great depression. Even though the state had compulsory education statutes, the system pretty much turned a blind eye to attendance since boys were essential labor on family farms and girls were frequently needed at home to care for their younger siblings if the mother was sick or having another baby. No matter when school officially started in the fall or let out in the spring, most boys started school when the last crops had been taken in and left as soon as spring planting could begin.

But getting back to Pop's elementary school diploma which started these musings, it is a grand looking document, far more impressive than most college diplomas. Appropriately so, since graduating from elementary school marked a major achievement for the individual, often the transition to literacy of a child whose parents were illiterate, and for almost everyone the end of formal education. Pop's diploma is yellowed and brittle with age and crumbling on the edges but obviously an heirloom of such family significance my grandmother had kept and safeguarded it all those years through many moves and family tragedies and then entrusted it to Mom.

I said Pop was born in 1905 and graduated from grade school in 1924 so that probably means he started school in 1914 when he was ten. A few days after the school year began a girl, Hettie Cunningham, showed up and asked the teacher if she could come to school too. He told her that her parents would have to enroll her first. She said her father was crippled and couldn't get to the school so he gave her a form to take home to have her father's sign which she brought back the next day; undoubtably signed with an X and most likely put there by Hettie herself. In any event the teacher enrolled her in the first grade along with Pop and a half dozen or so other kids.

Hettie's story is so linked to the misfortunes of the Cunninghams that you can't appreciate the one without knowing the other. In a community where everyone was poor, some worse off than others, everyone said the Cunninghams were poor. The father had worked in the coal mines and been nearly killed in a slate fall. A large slab of slate had broken free of the mine roof and fallen on him folding him double. It would have killed him outright except one side was held up by a pile of the rails used to lay tracks for the coal cars. His hips were crushed, his back broken and his whole body compressed, but miraculously he survived. Surgery wasn't up to fixing such extensive injuries back then so he recovered with his upper body bent permanently at almost a right angle to the lower. He could manage a crab-like mobility for short distances with the assistance of two sticks. He couldn't bend his head back far enough to see you if you were in front of him but could see you by twisting his head if you were to his side. They had a hickory rocker raised on blocks and fastened to the floor which he could back into which was where he spent most of the rest of his life. In those days there was no workman's compensation, no health insurance, no welfare. If you couldn't work, the only way to survive was if other members of the family could or to get help from a relative. The church would generally help right at the time of an accident, but as I said everyone was poor and there were always accidents in the mines placing demands on what little charity there was. The Cunninghams had several kids, the girls Hettie and her older sister Hattie, and their brothers. The older boys did the only thing they could do: went down in the mines. Mineowners knew they had indentured servants when the son(s) of a miner killed or crippled in the mines were forced to go to work in the mines to support the family and took full advantage of the fact; they paid slave wages and gave such boys the least desirable and most dangerous jobs. In any mining community there was a good supply of such forced laborers.

In a sense Mrs. Cunningham was crushed by the slate fall too. Oh I don't mean she had a nervous breakdown or anything so dramatic, but that life simply overwhelmed her. Poker players have a slang expression "to fold" meaning their hand is so bad

they aren't going to play it. In a sense Mrs. Cunningham "folded" psychologically as surely as Mr. Cunningham was folded by the slate fall. I have read that amnesia sometimes occurs as a result of a trauma the mind simply can't cope with. That was what happened to Mrs. Cunningham. Mentally she simply couldn't cope with life anymore. By necessity Hattie took over running the household. Mrs. Cunningham could still do things, but not on her own initiative. Hattie would say to her; Momma why don't you pick a mess of green beans and snap and string them for dinner and she would or Hattie would say, Momma why don't you washboard the boys work clothes and she would. But the ability to initiate even such a simple thing as building up the fire was beyond her. She didn't take to bed or anything like that, it was as though she were totally disconnected from what was going on around her.

There was certainly no appreciation of education in the Cunningham household. In that respect they were just like virtually every household at the time. Both parents were illiterate. It is possible that before the father's accident the older boys might have attended school and learned enough to print and maybe to even cipher a bit – meaning to be able to count change and add up the prices of a few items at the store. Perhaps not. So there was no one in the family who would have encouraged Hettie to get an education, especially since she was a girl. Women wouldn't get the right to vote in the US until 1920 and the prevailing opinion was that education was just wasted on a girl, or a woman, anyway. If anyone in the Cunningham family had an opinion on education, this was probably it. This is the setting in which Hettie's story takes place.

Pop said Hettie was bright but didn't seem unusually so, but was very intent on learning. He was right in that, but not for the reason he first thought. He noticed that she generally stayed in the classroom studying while the other students went out to play at recess and noon. The cloakroom where the students hung their outdoor coats, put their boots etc. was behind a false wall on one side of the classroom. A couple of times when he came in to either get his jacket or to hang it up from playing at noon, he noticed Hettie wasn't eating lunch – that she had no lunch. Being

nosy, he then watched and saw she often went out to play at recess – tag, blind man's bluff, fox and the geese – but was avoiding being with the other students when they were eating lunch by staying at her desk studying. Staying in during a free period was not as unusual as it may sound, The teacher gave very little homework since he knew the students often had serious chores waiting for them when they got home, milking, bringing in firewood for the night, feeding and bedding down stock in the barn so homework would have to be done after dark, The only light anyone had was from kerosene lamps and kerosene cost cash money. So doing very much homework by kerosene lamps would have been an unreasonable thing to expect. It was not unusual therefore for a student to stay in at recess to get even that minimal amount of homework done before going home.

Hettie thrived in the school environment. No doubt because it was challenging and interesting, but probably more so because it was so different from her home environment where both parents were detached from life – her father physically and her mother mentally. She was probably seven or eight when she started school so she was not needed at home and could attend school regularly – which she did before winter set in. Winters can be severe in West Virginia; cold with deep snows. First thing in the morning the teacher would build a roaring fire in the potbellied Burnside stove, and everyone would crowd close to warm up before taking their seat. Pop noticed that when the weather was cold and snowy Hettie missed a lot of classes. She didn't live any further from school than many of the other students and she was a healthy young girl. He finally figured out that she and Hattie had only one pair of rubber boots between them, and generally no shoes. So if Hettie came to school, which meant she had to use the boots, Hattie was confined to the house, The teacher with eight grades to teach couldn't spare any time for makeup instruction. Pop said Hettie tried to figure out what she had missed by asking her classmates – which probably resulted in a much-garbled version of the lesson the teacher had given.

The curriculum was organized around the hard fact of life that many boys would be leaving school somewhere between their fourteenth and sixteenth birthdays. So there was an urgency to teaching the most critical skills before the fourth grade which more or less coincided with this cutoff. The first priority was to enlarge the working vocabulary from the couple of hundred words they started school knowing – a significant fraction of which were drawn from the local idiom and some of which were simply not acceptable. The next was to teach rudimentary reading skills coupled with being able to print the words in the basic vocabulary they were learning. The teacher regularly used one of the students in an upper grade to drill the lower grade students with cardboard flash cards. The development of this basic ability to communicate was half of the objective in those first years for both vocabulary development and reading skill. The other was to develop an ability to add and subtract – that old bugaboo of being able to cipher in the form of counting change. The first three years were considered a success if a student had mastered the basic vocabulary, could do sums, count change and print and read simple sentences. The more capable students were bored by such modest aims so on their own could become quite proficient at simple arithmetic and discover the joys of reading by working their way through dogeared copies of the McGuffey readers. This was in the days before students owned their own text books so there was a stock of the readers for grades one through six. Hettie was in the latter group and was reading several years ahead of her grade by the time she was in second grade. That year the teacher promoted her to start the fourth grade the next fall, jumping her ahead of Pop and her other classmates.

The curriculum and the objectives changed abruptly in the fourth grade. Cursive script replaced printing. Up to that point grammar instruction had been primarily aimed at getting the students to stop saying ain't, fetch, ken etc. Now it focused on the rules of grammar. Similarly arithmetic instruction which had shied away from such abstract notions as multiplication and long division now focused on these very things. School centered on learning to write flowing script using the Palmer method,

diagraming sentences to identify parts of speech, learning to recite the multiplication tables to 12 x 12 with the same facility – and thought – as saying How much wood could a woodchuck chuck etc. This created a large gender gap. Girls, well at least most girls, who were present from the beginning of the school year mastered diagraming sentences and reciting the multiplication tables. Boys who were started the school year late were simply lost and never caught up. Even those who persisted and came back a second year after failing to get promoted from the fourth to the fifth grade generally gave up when they failed a second time.

Hettie had an aptitude for both math and grammar. She delighted in the challenge of doing the set problems in math and in diagraming sentences. It would not be correct to say she stood out in her studies – that was impossible in a classroom where the teacher had to minister to eight grades – but she was proficient, and she enjoyed the challenge. The next several years may have been the most pleasurable of her life.

The year Hettie was in the eighth grade was a terrible year for the Cunninghams. In early winter her father died from lingering health problems from the accident. You could say the slate fall killed him; it just took him an awfully long time to die. There had been medical bills at the end, plus the expense of a funeral so Hattie was forced to move to Beckley to find work to help pay them. The boys were now all old enough they had either left home or gone down in the mines so that left only Hettie and her mother most of the time. Hettie, who was a teenager by then, had no choice but to take over where Hattie had left off. Most people would have given up on finishing school under such circumstances. Not Hettie. She seemed more determined than ever. Of course, a significant part of Hattie's burden was gone now that Mr. Cunningham had died. He had been unable to dress himself or care for his bodily needs. Even a trip to the toilet required Hattie to stop whatever she was doing and help her father. Mrs. Cunningham was neither better nor worse. Within reason she could do what she was told to do but seemed unable to see the need to do anything herself. Luckily, she wasn't like people with dementia. She was no threat to herself or anyone

else. She would sit placidly in her chair unless someone told her to do something. That winter Hettie would bank the fire like she did at night and leave her mother seated nearby, knowing that when she got home from school it would have burned down to a bed of coals like it did overnight. Her mother would not have roused to put wood or coal on the fire, not even if it had gone out. Luckily Mrs. Cunningham's health was good so Hettie rarely had to care for her mother in that sense. Hettie settled into a routine of getting up well before daylight to do the cooking, prepare dinner pails for those brothers who were still living at home and working in the mines, getting the fire built up and her mother seated nearby. If everything went like clockwork she got to school on time. If it didn't she was late or even absent. Her absences were more frequent than they had been before, but she worked doubly hard at her studies.

It may seem an odd digression, but it will help if you can picture the classroom in your mind. There were eight rows of desks bolted to the floor. To the extent possible, determined by the number of students in a class, each grade was seated in a single row. This made it easier for the teacher to rotate his attention from class to class. Unless there was a discipline problem – "OK, that does it. You come up here and sit in the front of the row" – students could stake a claim to which ever seat they preferred. The front seats were avoided in the belief that if you sat there you were more apt to be called on to recite or answer a question and the rearmost seats competed for by the boys in the hope they would neither be seen nor called on if they sat back there. Almost from the beginning Hettie staked her claim to the front seat – no matter which grade she was in. The first graders were normally seated by the false wall separating the cloak room from the class room since that was the warmest place in the room and the grades moved year by year toward the row by the window. Just like on a train, the best seats were by the window and when you got to the eighth grade you got one of those. Since a student's pencils, tablet, erasers etc. were stored on the shelf below the desktop, barring the teacher having to force a seat change to separate a pair of troublemakers or a couple so interested in each other they were disrupting the class,

each student had “his desk” for the year. Hettie’s desk at the front was hers, even when she was absent.

There was a heightening sense of tension among the eighth graders as end of term approached. A final test over all they had covered would determine whether they received the coveted diploma or merely a certificate showing they had completed eight grades satisfactorily. Most of them would have spent half of their lives or more getting to that point. Getting a diploma was very much like graduating from a European university with honors; you can graduate, or you can graduate with honors. Pop said there was a nice symbolism to the graduation. The awarding of the diplomas or certificates was done a few days before the term was over while class was in session for everyone else, but the students receiving diplomas or certificates were free to leave after they received it – symbolizing that school was over for them.

The nature of the exam can be guessed at by the subjects Pop’s diploma says the student qualified in: reading, orthography, penmanship, arithmetic, English grammar, United States and West Virginia history, geography and economic geography, civil government, elementary agriculture, physiology and hygiene. It was given in several parts on a single day during which time the other classes were assigned quiet work. The teacher took the finished exam papers home to grade that night and the tension in the classroom the next morning had to have been like the wait in a courtroom as the jury returns with the verdict.

After the pledge of allegiance was completed and everyone was seated. Mr. Ault, the teacher, began calling the eighth graders to his desk, starting from the front of the row which was Hettie.

“Hettie” he said “I don’t know what happened, but you failed the test. You’re one of my best students, but I can’t give you a diploma since you didn’t get a passing score”. Hettie, who didn’t seem surprised by the news just stood there, silent. “What happened Hettie? Were you sick or something?”. “No” Hettie said. “How was I supposed to know the boundaries of the lands of the Indian tribes who lived in West Virginia before the settlers

came or whose invention was responsible for starting the glass industry in West Virginia? You can't figure out the answers to questions like those. And some of the questions didn't make any sense at all. How can West Virginia be responsible for paying debts owed by Virginia from before the Civil War? They lost the war didn't they? There were lots of questions like that to which you couldn't figure out the answer". "I'm sorry Hettie but those topics were probably covered when you were absent. The Board of Education thinks that subjects like West Virginia history and West Virginia government should be reserved for the final year of elementary school when students are most mature, and even though I understand why, you were absent a lot this year."

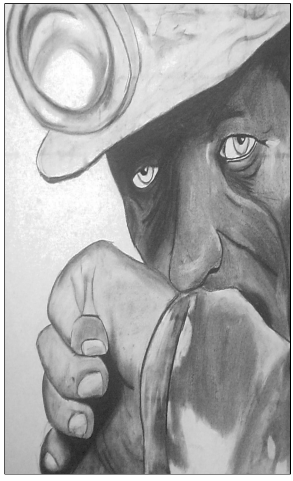
"I don't know what to do Mr. Ault. I wanted to graduate with a diploma more than anything in the whole world. But I don't think I can continue doing what I had to do this year just to be here as much as I was." "Hettie, lots of students fail in the lower grades and just repeat the grade the following year, but in all the years I have been teaching I have never had a student repeat the eighth grade. Whether they pass the test and graduate with a diploma or fail and leave without it, in every case they have left school and gone on with their lives. You don't need to repeat the entire year. In fact you did well above average on over half the material. I have a proposition for you. I know something of your family situation so it is likely you are going to be here anyway. I can't lend you my textbooks. The state only provides me one for each subject. But I do have a good West Virginia history I used in college and the facts will be the same. It won't cover exactly the same topics but if you were to study it over the next year you would know a lot about West Virginia history and government. In addition, I can get one of the students to let you know when we are going to be covering topics you failed and you can join us. It will require a lot of work on your part but not as much as repeating the entire year would be and you can retake the exam next year. Would you be willing to do that?" Hettie looked like she had had the weight of the world lifted from her shoulders. "When can I borrow the book?" she said.

The next year, Pop's year in the eighth grade, Hettie came to school occasionally. It could have been an embarrassing or awkward experience for her, after all she had failed her exam the previous year, but wasn't since for the main part she was with the students she had started school with nine years before. A few had dropped out in the interim and at least one had been added who had repeated a grade from the class she used to be in. She was given her usual seat at the front of the row; not that anyone else wanted it. Just as in previous years there was the apprehension and excitement as the day of the final exam approached – for her and for Pop –and then the long awaited ritual the morning after.

This time when Mr. Ault called Hettie to his desk, he signed Hettie's diploma and handed it to her, saying; "Congratulations Hettie. You've earned it". Hettie accepted the diploma, looked at it for a moment and sort of hugged it to her chest. "Do you know, Mr. Ault I'm the first Cunningham to ever get an education? I wish daddy could have lived to see it. It would have meant so much to him", which was an odd thing for her to say. You could understand her saying "He would have been so proud (of me)" or "He would have been so happy (for me)", sentiments directed toward Hettie, not "It would have meant so much to him". Mr. Cunningham was illiterate and like his contemporaries almost certainly had a low regard for what was referred to as "book learning" which was generally considered to be a waste of time. Hettie certainly knew that. Her statement was not a reflection of what her father would have thought about her graduating with distinction, but of what she thought and felt and had for the nine years it had taken her to get there. Hettie's comment made clear what had given her the strength of character to sit in the classroom while the other students ate their lunches since she had none, had caused her to avoid school picnics and outings since she had nothing to contribute, had allowed her to face the embarrassment of wearing a pair of boots that were obviously not hers and which at least Pop had figured out she was sharing with her sister. What it revealed was that as a seven or eight year old girl she had set out to do something, not for herself, but for her family and had persisted with the

single mindedness and determination of an arctic explorer or a mountain climber. It was the only thing she had in her power to do, and she had done it. She had proven the Cunninghams counted for something and that would have meant a lot to her father.

The Inheritance



Slo Asbury, short for Slocum, was a weekend drunk, meaning that if it was humanly possible, he got drunk on Saturday and sobered up on Sunday. He was many other things of course, but that was his defining trait. He was also a coal miner when such work was available, but then so were two thirds of the men on Frogs Creek, West Virginia where we lived in the 30's. Most miners drank as a way to escape an intolerable existence, if only momentarily.

I don't know whether you have seen Tom Lea's painting *The Two Thousand Yard Stare* of a marine who had survived the battle for Peleliu in the South Pacific in WWII, but if you look at photographs of miners coming out after a shift in the notoriously unsafe West Virginia coal mines in the 20's and 30's you'll recognize the same vacant stare in their eyes.

They have just survived an 8- or 10-hour shift in an unsafe mine in which they could have died at any moment, have a wife at home desperately trying to make do with nothing and a houseful of kids whose prospects are no better than theirs – all living in a company shack little better than a pigpen on posts. And the next day and the day after that is going to be exactly the same – or worse.

To these men, getting drunk was a way of momentarily escaping their desperate life, and generally brought out the worst in them. Many of them became belligerent and started fights, sometimes requiring intervention by the sheriff and his deputy to prevent serious injuries. Wife beating was common, even though the wife's situation was even more desperate than their

own. Some went on crying jags that were hard to forget later. The truly inexplicable thing though was that it was not uncommon for one of them to smash up the few household possessions they had and probably couldn't replace.

I can remember several occasions on which Pop had to dissuade a drunk from smashing dishes and crockery while Mom frantically tried to calm the terrified wife and kids. Slo was never belligerent, loud or weepy when drunk. In fact, he seemed unusually happy. Belatedly I think I know why. I've had friends who have done LSD try to explain why they did. As they explained the experience, LSD took them to a wonderful place you couldn't get to in any other way. They disparaged other drugs as being like high octane alcohol, simply providing an escape from reality, LSD took them to a totally different reality. For whatever reason, I think that alcohol had this effect on Slo. At least that is how he behaved.

Pop occasionally worked a face with Slo and described the experience as follows. Most men tried to get ahead at the beginning of a shift when they were fresh and before the air became intolerable from sweating, shooting and shitting – and before they wore down to where they could barely swing a pick anymore. As Pop described it. Slo started slow and finished at exactly the same pace – stuck in low gear as he put it – and then correcting himself to say "stuck in Slo gear", laughing at the play on words.

Ordinarily no one would want to be paired with a low gear pardner, but Slo's steadiness more than made up for it so he was an accepted crew member Slo boarded with Aunt Reba Asbury, no relation, which was about like putting a cat in a kennel full of dogs. Aunt Reba lived by herself but took in boarders for the two rooms she didn't use. Her husband had been a drunk and abusive so now that she was rid of him, she was free to enforce her aversion to drunks. "No drinking" was the first thing she said to a prospective boarder. "You ever break that rule, I'll throw you and your stuff out in the county road and no way you'll get back in".

Aunt Reba's place was ideal for Slo though; she fixed his meals, including packing his dinner pail when he had a shift in

the mines, did his laundry on Saturdays, even patching his work clothes when needed. For that he paid her roughly half of what he made which left enough for a bottle of Berty's best most every weekend and for occasional necessities. Sometimes on a Sunday when the weather was really bad, when we went to the barn at daybreak to milk, feed the stock and shovel out the stalls, Slo would come climbing down from the hay mow always saying "I was just fixin' to leave". Pop would say, "What's your hurry Slo? It's still snowing (or raining) out. No point in getting wet if you don't have to". Slo always said the same thing: "Much obliged" and climbed back up to the hay mow to work on sobering up so he could go home to his room at Aunt Reba's. Pop said he would have forbidden Slo to use our barn if he smoked because of the risk of a fire, but Slo only chewed Red Mule plug tobacco.

Chances are Slo had similar dibs on several other barns on Frogs Creek and Kellys Creek. In good weather I am sure Slo preferred one of many cosy's in the woods and cliffs nearby. You've met two Asbury's thus far, Slo and Aunt Reba, but Asbury was one of the commonest surnames in that part of West Virginia, along with McClanahan and Bailey, descendants of the Scotch/Irish clans who first settled there. Slo however had only one known relative anywhere nearby – an Uncle Arthur who owned a decent sized farm at the head of Frogs Creek; which is the genesis of this story.

The gossip was that the brothers, Slo's dad and Arthur, hadn't gotten along too well since Arthur was hardworking and sober and Slo's dad saw no reason to wait till Saturday to start drinking and it wasn't clear when or if he stopped. It came as a great surprise therefore when one day, during dinner break down in the mines, Slo told the crew that his Uncle Arthur had died and left him the farm. Reckon I'll have to do something with it he said. Does that mean you are going to quit working in the mines and take up farming? Pop asked. Nope, Slo said. I never could understand someone working all summer, just as hard as we do, on the chance they will get something for their efforts in the fall. Me, I want to work where you get paid on Friday for that week's work, even if it ain't much.

Pop said he was pretty sure Slo had figured out that farming wasn't going to provide a steady bottle of Berty's best every Saturday which made up his mind. I ain't going to be no dirt farmer. No siree. But I'm going to have to do something with Uncle Arthur's farm. Everyone was of one opinion, if Slo wasn't going to farm Uncle Arthur's place he had only two choices; sell it or rent to a nearby farmer. Slo didn't even consider the latter option, probably because it involved things he didn't know how to do and would commit him to long term responsibilities he didn't even want to contemplate. On the first he had a strong opinion. Uncle Arthur left me his farm. Somehow it just don't seem right to turn right around and sell it. Nope, that wouldn't be right. Pop said that the topic of what Slo should do with Uncle Arthur's farm came up several times in the next few weeks, always with the same inconclusive conclusion: selling it seemed the only option, which Slo wouldn't even consider since "that didn't seem right" to him. Then Slo stopped bringing up the subject, apparently having settled the matter to his satisfaction.

The funny thing was that no matter how bad the weather we never again had Slo climb down from the hay mow on a Sunday morning, saying as he did; "I was just fixin' to leave". Since Uncle Arthur's farm was quite a ways further up Frogs Creek from ours we had few occasions to go by it but occasionally someone who had come down Frogs Creek to go to church at the community church over on Kelly's Creek, next to the Betty L. grade school where all of us kids went to school, would mention they had seen Slo sitting on the porch, or going to the outhouse, or drawing a bucket of water from the well. They all agreed no one was living there since there was never any smoke from either of the chimneys and the place had the look of being deserted. But they had seen Slo.

Slo continued to board at Aunt Reba's and work in the mines as he always had. Not long after I left West Virginia to go to college, in one of her letters Mom mentioned that Slo had been killed in a slate fall in the mine. Subsistence farming is a thing of the past and the fields Uncle Arthur so laboriously wrested from the wild reverted back to the wild even before I left. It has been eighty years since Uncle Arthur passed so more than likely

the house collapsed in on itself years ago. Given that Slo had no known relatives I wonder what happened to Slo's inheritance? It is unlikely the place is even worth the accumulated tax arrears now.

The Letters

It's strange how small things can jog long forgotten memories. Yesterday in a grocery store I saw a bag of piñon nuts on which there was a profile of an Indian in a headdress—the brand name was Big Chief—and suddenly the picture and the name brought back memories of the war, and of Dooter and all the rest. In the middle thirties, after my Pop had been blackballed by the Cabin Creek Coal Company for joining the Union and the company sheriff had evicted us from the company house and thrown our few household furnishings into the county road, we'd gone to live on Frogs Creek, several miles up the river from Poca, West Virginia.

This was at the height of the depression and almost all of the men on Frogs Creek were also out of work and had been since they'd been laid off several years before from the mines at Cabin Creek and Harmon's Creek. Life never had been easy there—hillside farming, occasional day labor or loading coal even in the best of times. As Pop was fond of saying "Times were hard—but no one knew any better."

But if times were hard for everyone else, they were even harder for Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony Martin. Uncle Frank had been injured in a slate fall in the mines before they closed and had been feeble ever since. He'd been folded double in the fall and his back broken and pelvis crushed—but he'd lived. Everyone said he should have died, but he didn't. He recovered

to where he could get around, but he never was much good for anything after the accident. There wasn't any workmen's compensation in those days, so the Martin's had to make do with no man in the family.

I didn't know the older Martin boys, Daniel and David, too well—nor their sisters Dorothy, Deborah and Delilah for that matter—since we hadn't gone to school together and they didn't go to church much. The youngest boy who was several years younger than his brothers and sisters was called Dooter—my Pop said the Martins hadn't expected him and had used up all the names in the Bible starting with D before he came, so they named him Deuteronomy. I never did know Dooter's real name and never heard him called anything but Dooter—even in school. Dooter was only a year ahead of me in school when we first moved to Frogs Creek, so we got to know each other at school. Uncle Frank, as he'd say, "Didn't put much truck by book learnin" so Dooter mostly didn't go to school in the fall until the crops were all in and he quit early each spring when it was time to plow.

The three boys—although Daniel, the oldest, was in his mid-twenties by that time—kept the Martin place going. The most noticeable difference between the Martins and the other families on Frogs Creek was that they never had any cash money and had to trade sorghum or eggs or butter for small things from the store like Red Mule chewing tobacco or snuff and had to hire out the boys as day labor in exchange for necessities such as overalls and shoes. Then the war came and the draft got Daniel and David right away.

By this time, I had finished the eighth grade at the one-room school over on Kelly's Creek and started high school—but Dooter, who was fourteen or fifteen by this time, was still in the fourth grade. He had stalled at that level several years before, unable to master the intricacies of the multiplication tables or of cursive script—and each year for a few months in the winter would labor his way through the fourth grade—the reader, the spelling and the printing, and the arithmetic—all over again. Then when his brothers left, he stayed home from school for good so I didn't see him anymore. Finally, he, too, was drafted

into the Army near midway in the war. Pop had joined the Navy not long after the war started, and my Mom and I were running a small store out of the basement of our home to supplement his small monthly allotment.

There were quite a few people like Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony in the community whose boys were in the service but who "couldn't read ner cipher." Sometimes they'd ask me, since I was in high school, to write a letter to their boy for them. Not wanting to admit right out that they couldn't write themselves, they'd usually laugh when they asked and say that their writing was so bad that it just looked like hen tracks anyway.

Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony lived about four miles further up Frogs Creek than we did and a full mile beyond even the end of the dirt road, so their mail was left at our store for them to pick up. I don't recall any letters ever coming for them from either of the older boys but after Dooter went away we started getting letters for the Martins and an allotment check every month from Dooter. Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony never had come to the store much—once in a while they would stop to trade eggs or butter, which we sold in Charleston, for tobacco or something, but often we wouldn't see them for months on end. But after Dooter's letters started coming, they hiked down the creek almost every Saturday since they knew I'd be home from school then. If there was a letter, Uncle Frank would take it and open it and then hand it back to me to read to them. Dooter never had learned script, so the letters were all printed—and were always nearly the same. "I am here in Fort Bragg. They are working us real hard. They are feeding us good. Is the corn making. Did the cow drop her calf." It was like he was writing from Frogs Creek himself. Sometimes Aunt Frony would ask me to go back over a part but mostly they just listened.

Then they'd buy a Big Chief nickel tablet with the Indian Chief profile on the cover and ask me to write a letter to Dooter for them. They never brought back the tablet they'd bought the previous time, but always bought a new one and then carried it away with them. Mom and I used to laugh about it and wonder what they did with all those tablets. I'd print "Dear Dooter" and wait. They'd say "tell him that the cow was fresh," or that "the

cow was dry" or that "she'd gotten in some wild onions"—which made the milk fit only for the hogs. Then they'd look at each other and say "tell him"—everything started with "tell him"—"that the corn is laid by." "Tell him that Uncle Bertie (Martin) helped out"—except that when they said it sounded like "hepped out." Then finally they'd say "well, I guess that's about it" and I'd print "well that's about all for now" and Frank would take the pencil and print his name which he could do. Dooter went overseas. I knew this since his letters now had an APO number—but they still started, "I am here in _____" and the censor would cut out the name.

They were still keeping him busy and feeding him well—but other than that the letters didn't change much. Then one Saturday there was a pencil drawing in with the letter. It wasn't much of a drawing, just a clump of tall spindly trees and some neatly tilled fields beyond. Uncle Frank looked at the drawing in bewilderment and said, "I wonder why he did that." But he carefully folded up the drawing along with the letter and put it in the bib of his overalls like he always did. The next letter had another drawing in it—this time of some rock cliffs above the sea with birds soaring overhead—but the letter was the same as always. Some weeks there wouldn't be any letters, and then they'd pile up so that maybe two or even three would come all at once. But by now they always had drawings in them; mostly of country scenes, although a few of them were of soldiers and camp scenes.

Then one day the drawing was of a town on a hillside with some walls partly around it. My closest friend Allie and I were following the war news closely—and reading everything we could find about the places where the battles were being fought. I figured from the drawing that Dooter was probably in Italy, maybe in the Italian mountain campaign we were reading about in the news at that time. The next few letters were like the others—"I am here in _____," etc. But the censor apparently didn't think the drawings meant anything since they were always left uncut.

Then in the midst of the Italian campaign Dooter printed, "Say hi to Ben for me." Ben or Bennie as he was usually called,

was an outsider from over at Harmon's Creek who had loaded coal with Uncle Frank and my Pop back before the war. Everyone called Ben a Bohunk, but his family had come from Italy. I knew for sure then that Dooter was in Italy and told Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony so. "Wonder what he's doing with them Italians"—except as Uncle Frank said it, it was "Eye-tal-yuns." There were several Saturdays then with no letters. Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony never had me write a letter for them if there was no letter from Dooter to answer. Then the letter I remember most came. In it was another drawing—which Dooter must have worked on a long time—of a creek with trees along its banks and flat bottom land behind the trees. A wagon road came down the far bank and up the near side where Dooter must have been to make the drawing. The letter was different this time, too. Dooter had written as always that he was O.K. and that he was busy—but he also said, "I wisht you could see this place." Aunt Frony looked a long time at the drawing and opined that it looked an awful lot like the ford where the road crossed Frogs Creek and climbed over the ridge just before you got to their place.

I don't remember what Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony wrote that day, but I do remember my Mom telling me sometime the following week that a man had come from Charleston looking for the Martin's and had told her that Dooter had been killed in action. Uncle Frank and Aunt Frony didn't come to the store again for a long time after that and in the meantime two more letters from Dooter came. Then one Saturday Aunt Frony walked down to the store by herself—to get "her old man" a plug of Red Mule chewing tobacco. I gave her the letters from Dooter and asked her if she wanted me to read them to her—but she didn't. She folded the letters in two, so that they'd fit in her pocket and set out back up the creek to home. They didn't come much to the store after that. David was killed somewhere in the Pacific, but Daniel came back after the war and married a girl from Charleston and moved there. The Martin girls had gone away during the war to work in the defense plants in Nitro and South Charleston and gotten married. I left not long after the war myself.

The Singletree Incident

Toby McClanahan was, as the preacher would have said, a prideful man. No matter how bad things were for him and his family—which generally speaking, were just about as bad as it was possible to get, he wouldn't deign to do day labor for anyone, since in his mind that would have been an admission of inferiority. At the time of this story, there was just him, his wife and one little girl who was so sickly she hadn't started school, even though she was old enough. The others—of whom there had been several over the years—had all died early; a couple at childbirth, and most recently a boy who had probably had whooping cough, although Toby said he had died of the croup.

Toby and his wife scraped out an existence on a small place a mile or so up Frog's Creek from where we lived. They depended on what little they could raise or gather and on animals, such as rabbits and coons, that Toby caught in his deadfalls or box traps. Their place was mostly rocky hillside, but it did include an acre or so of bottom land down by the creek which they gardened and on which they raised a little tobacco and corn. Toby didn't own a horse or mule, nor for that matter, not even a cow, so that each spring when it came time to plow, he was faced with the problem of bartering with one of his neighbors who had a horse and plow to do the plowing for him.

By some curious line of reasoning, Toby had decided that clearing new land—cutting the old growth trees and brush, digging out the stumps and rolling the rocks to one side—was

something he could do without sacrificing his pride. Why this was different than any other kind of labor wasn't clear, but in his mind it was. He'd go from house to house offering to clear new land in exchange for getting his plowing done, and neighbors who knew of his odd quirk about working for others would ofttimes tease him and say: "Well Toby I don't really have any new land to clear this year, but I do need some fence put up", or "I do need some wood cut" etc. But he would only shake his head and say, " Don't reckon I will." and would hike on down the creek looking for someone who needed new land cleared.

This was at a time in the heart of the depression when the going rate for day labor was a dollar and found; found being the term for the noonday meal which the person doing the hiring was expected to provide. One was expected to work from dawn until dark except for the time they stopped for dinner (which was what we called the noonday meal). Lots of people were cheap about the found, and fixed mostly beans and greens since these were the cheapest of foods, but Mom always tried to have a little meat and a pan of fresh baked biscuits, but even so Toby wouldn't come to the house to eat.

On the occasions when he cleared new ground for us, I took his vittles and a fruit jar of cold buttermilk to the field where he was working. He never stopped working while I was there, but just told me to put it over in the shade, and he'd have it later. To him it was clearly demeaning to accept the found, even though it was his due, just as he couldn't bring himself to sit down at someone elses table, even though he was welcome to do so. Surprisingly, he did a good days work, but always went back up the creek to his place without ever stopping by the house. Pop, or which ever neighbor had bartered with him to plow his place, would simply go over with their horse and plow and turn his land for him.

Pop always went over the new plowed ground with his drag harrow after the plowing was done to break up the worst of the clods and smooth the surface some, but since this was extra work, most of the neighbors just left the land as it plowed. There wasn't any exact arrangement made before or after as to how much work Toby was to do in exchange for the plowing, and in

thinking back over it after all of these years, I'm sure he would have taken offense at being offered any money to boot for what he had done. After the ground had been plowed, Toby and his wife would spend a couple of days breaking up the biggest clods with field hoes getting it ready for planting.

The big bottom plows turned a foot thick curl of earth, so this was a difficult process, especially if we had had a wet winter and the grass had rooted well. Even after the surface had been knocked down, big clods still lay just below the surface. They had a small garden plow used to lay out furrows for planting--with a wheel at the front and high handles at the rear. We had one like this at home, which our old horse, May, pulled with ease when we put in our garden. However, with no horse to help out, Toby tied a rope to the front of the plow, and with his wife pulling with the rope over her shoulder and him pushing and shoving on the handles, they managed to get in a garden each year.

The plow would frequently catch on the big clods and Mrs. McClanahan would be pulled off balance and sprawl flat on the ground. Pop used to laugh about how crooked the rows were that they laid out, saying that they were so crooked that Toby would have to get staggering drunk to harvest his corn. As a kid, I used to wonder about Mrs. McClanahan pulling that garden plow since no one else I knew did that sort of thing. The point of all of this is that with no horse or prospect of one, Toby had no use for harness or harness attachments which is essential to the story I wanted to tell.

Toby had the reputation of taking anything that wasn't nailed down. A hoe left in the cornfield while you went in for dinner was apt to be gone when you came back. A pitchfork left in a haystack overnight was almost certain to be gone in the morning. Our cornfield was down by the creek below the house, and when corn was in season, Toby would detour off of the county road to walk along the creek edge of the field filling the bib of his overalls with roasting ears of corn as he went. Everyone knew this, and when anything was lost they would half-jokingly say that Toby must have "found" it. Pop used to

say Toby had a knack for finding things even before people lost them.

To the best of my knowledge, he never took anything from inside a building. Barns and corncribs were never locked, but tools inside such sanctuaries were safe from Toby's attention. I suspect that he considered it to be stealing to take something from indoors, while to take something that had been left outdoors wasn't. One day Pop was plowing the bottom land down by the creek with old May, when a buckle on her harness broke so he had to come in to repair it. The harness was old and brittle, so it took him awhile to make up a patch out of some scrap shoe leather—probably an hour or more. Not long after he finished and returned with May to the field, he came storming into the house. "That damn Toby McClanahan stole the singletree right off of the plow". He didn't say "Someone stole the singletree, but "That damn Toby stole the singletree".

For the reader who isn't familiar with harness I should explain that the item that goes between the horse's harness and the load they are pulling is a drawbar called a singletree if you are working one horse, or a doubletree if you are working a team. It is a short length of wood with a swivel in the center for attaching to the load, and with rings at each end to attach to the harness. It evens out the load and makes it possible to turn the horse or team at the end of the row without tangling them in the load. A singletree has no conceivable use other than the one it was made for. From my earlier comments, you can appreciate that of all people, Toby had the least use for a singletree. Pop was an easy-going man, but this was too much—even for him. He took the harness off of May, put her in the pasture by the barn, and in a really bad mood set off up the creek for Toby's place. Maybe an hour or so later, he was back with the singletree, and not in a bad mood anymore.

As he told it he got to Toby's place, and there was the singletree leaning up against the side of the house by the kitchen door. Not concealed or anything; just leaning up against the house. There wasn't any question as to whose singletree it was since Pop was a blacksmith and everything we owned had been patched and forge mended by him so many times they were as

unique as if they had fingerprints. Pop said he stormed into the yard and picked up the singletree like a club expecting he might have some trouble with Toby. Toby apparently heard Pop in the yard and came out of the house. Pop may have even yelled for him to come out. He never said whether he did or not, but when he came out Pop accused him of stealing the singletree. Toby's response was; "I figured that was your singletree, and I was going to get it right back over to you. Yessiree". Pop said, "Damn it Toby, you took it right off of my plow in my cornfield, so you knew damn well it was my singletree." "Well, that's why I figured it was your'n, and I was gonna get it right back to you. Yessiree."

By the time he got home, the twisted logic of Toby's response had tickled my Pop more than the theft had made him mad. He hooked up old May and finished the days plowing, but he delighted for years in telling how Toby figured it must have been his singletree since it was on his plow. Aristotle couldn't have reasoned more clearly. There were no lasting hard feelings over the incident on either side. I can't be sure after all of these years, but as best I can recall, Pop still plowed for Toby occasionally. If he did it was with the infamous singletree, and if he did, Toby cleared new ground for us just as if nothing had ever happened.

The Trash Collector

Josh had died. Died in his sleep with no one around; just as he had lived for the past twenty years or so; ever since his wife Eadie had passed. More than likely he had died of a heart attack or a stroke, but no one would ever know for sure. His death certificate would simply say "died of natural causes" – whatever that means – and there was no one left to whom a more definitive description would have meant anything anyway. He was an old man, and old men die. Josh had died. Josh awoke, at least that was how it felt, surrounded by a huge crowd of people.

Multitude was the word that came to his mind, although he would ordinarily never have thought of or used such a word. The unusualness of the word caused him to momentarily be conscious of it. More people than he had ever seen at one time in his whole life. On his way home from Europe at the end of WWII he had been in Times Square for a victory celebration, but this was even more people than that. They were all moving, almost imperceptibly, toward what appeared to be high mountains in the far distance. However, when he looked at them closely, he couldn't be sure if they were mountains or not. They could be clouds.

You must have seen clouds on the distant horizon where the light was hitting them in such a way you couldn't tell if they

were clouds or mountains. That is the way these were. Mountains or clouds, they sure were a long way off he thought to himself. Josh puzzled over it for a bit and then turned his attention to the people around him. Quite a few of them were darker skinned than he was accustomed to seeing in West Virginia where he lived. Must be foreigners, he thought.

Thinking he might be able to figure out where they came from by their clothing, he looked to see what they were wearing. But try as he might he couldn't see any clothes. They weren't naked, but they had on no clothes that he could see. Now that is downright odd, he thought. But on looking down at himself he realized he couldn't see what he had on either. He certainly wasn't naked, at least he didn't feel naked, and he sure would have with all these strangers about if he didn't have on his clothes. But for the life of him he couldn't see what he was wearing. Stranger still, when he looked down, he saw that he wasn't walking even though he knew he was moving. Neither was anyone else. They were all moving very slowly toward the distant cloud/mountains, sort of like they were standing on one of those moving sidewalks, which they weren't.

Looking at the distant cloud/mountains which appeared to be their destination, Josh thought to himself, we're never going to get there at this rate. All these people have no right to be here he thought, but since he couldn't figure out where he was, maybe he didn't have a right to be there either. But sure as shooting, here they were. Funny. Some of those closest to him appeared to be talking, but Josh couldn't hear a sound. That's odd he thought since he took unreasonable pride in the fact that his hearing was still as good as it had been when he was a young man, unlike so many old people whose hearing fails with age. He often said to people that he could still hear as well as a dog. But try as he might, he couldn't hear a thing. He was tempted to say something to the person nearest him just to see if he could hear himself. But when he turned to speak, the person who had been almost touching his shoulder the moment before was now too far away to speak to comfortably. But the instant he turned to face the direction they were moving; he could see out of the

tail of his eye that his neighbor was again almost touching his shoulder.

Not wanting to put a stranger out by causing him to jump back and forth that way, Josh gave up any intention of speaking to him and returned to studying the crowd of people around him. They stretched as far in front of him as he could see so he figured he must have come in late and be on the tail end of the line, even though there wasn't any line he could make out. As soon as he thought of this he decided to look back to see how many people were in line behind him. Even though he knew he was moving, he didn't feel unsteady on his feet so he was pretty sure he wouldn't lose his balance and fall if he turned around carefully to face the rear – the direction they were coming from. When he did so, he couldn't believe what he saw. There was the same crowd of people stretching off to the horizon he had seen when facing the other way and he was certain they were moving toward the same distant cloud/mountains he had seen in the other direction.

By now his curiosity was really aroused, so he tried turning to his right, and then to his left. Each time he was looking at the backs of a crowd of people moving toward the same distant cloud/mountains. Like when I was in the Army he thought and the sergeant gave a drill order; "To the right flank – march" or "To the left flank – march," and everyone swiveled at the same instant to continue marching at right angles to the direction they had been marching a moment before. Never expected to see anything like this though he thought, and besides he hadn't heard any order that could have caused everyone to swivel at the same time. In fact, he hadn't heard a sound since he came there. It was such an unexpected thing that he tried turning this way and that several times just to be sure. But no matter which way he faced; the crowd stretched out in front of him moving slowly toward the cloud/mountains on the horizon.

Well, I must be dreaming he decided. Everyone has had a dream in which they suspected they were dreaming and has tried all sorts of things to see if they were awake as they felt they were or if they were asleep and dreaming as they suspected they might be. Am I awake and think I am dreaming or am I dreaming and

think I am awake? This usually happens just before you wake up, and the effort of wrestling with the conundrum wakes you up. But the instant Josh thought of this he knew for certain this was no dream. Whatever else it might be, it was no dream. Maybe I have gone crazy he thought, but he had always heard that if you thought you were crazy, you weren't. Crazy people don't know they are crazy – and he sure knew this was crazy; every bit of it. I could be drunk he thought, and immediately corrected himself since he hadn't had a drink in years.

Well, if I ain't crazy, and I ain't drunk and I'm not dreaming, beats the Hell out of me where I am and what's going on. While thinking these thoughts he had not been paying attention to the crowd around him. When he looked up, he was startled to find they were all gone, at least in front and to the sides of him, and that he was standing in front of a white pulpit like lectern on which there was a book bigger than any dictionary you ever saw. Behind the pulpit stood an old man with a long white beard, dressed in a flowing white robe, who must have been standing on something since he towered over it.

It had been many decades since Josh had gone to church and even more since he had gone to Sunday school as a small boy, but he instantly recognized the scene before him. It was Saint Peter and the Doomsday book just as he had looked on a card Josh had been given in Sunday school for reciting some verses of scripture back when he was four or five years old. I wonder how I remembered that after all of these years, and how the man that drew that card knew exactly what Saint Peter would look like – but he was not at all surprised to be there. Josh didn't want to interrupt Saint Peter who was looking down at the book intently, apparently reading something written in it, so without turning – which he felt would be rude given that he was standing before Saint Peter – he looked around. The cloud/mountains were now as near as the hills in West Virginia when you were standing in a holler between them. So, close you felt you could almost touch them, and just as steep as the hills he knew so well. Try as he might though, he couldn't make out any trees or brush on them. But there is a special feeling you get when in the deep woods that you don't feel any place else. Sort of peaceful and

restful, reassuring and secure like when you were a kid and with your parents.

Josh had spent years in the woods, so he knew that feeling so well he was sure the cloud/mountains were densely covered with trees just like the hills in West Virginia. Must be like those people who had on clothes I couldn't make out, he thought. The moment he thought of this explanation, everything made sense to him. There were lots of trees, had to be – he could feel them even if he couldn't see them. Feeling much better about the whole thing, he looked back to Saint Peter just as he beckoned Josh to come closer.

Since he hadn't heard a sound since he arrived, Josh was startled when he heard Saint Peter say; "Josh, you present a problem. You don't have much of a record in here" – patting the book in front of him. "You certainly didn't do anything bad enough to justify being sent to Hell, but you didn't do much of anything to justify being admitted to heaven either." Saint Peter started to rotate the book as though he were going to show Josh what was recorded there about him. Josh started forward as though to look at the book, but Saint Peter changed his mind and rotated the book back to where it had been before. "Tell you what," he said. "I can let you in on probation." Josh didn't know what he should say or do, so he just stood there for what seemed like an awfully long time. "What's this probation thing?" he finally asked. "Well, I can let you in. But after a time, you will have to come back here again" Saint Peter said.

Josh couldn't imagine how he had failed to notice them before, but when he looked up he saw what he knew had to be The Pearly Gates rising high behind Saint Peter. They were slightly ajar and through them Josh could see a crowd of people just like the crowd he had been in earlier – moving slowly toward a bright light on the horizon. He looked at the nearby cloud/mountains and back at the way he assumed he had come. Saint Peter was clearly waiting for Josh to say something, but he didn't seem impatient at all; in spite of all of the people Josh assumed must be waiting their turn, even though he hadn't seen anyone behind him when he looked back. Finally, he said; "If it's all the same to you, reckon I'll stay out here and pick up the

trash." He had no idea of why he had said such a darn fool thing. It just came into his head, and he said it. After a moment's reflection, Saint Peter said; "Well, if that's what you want. Come on back when you get done. "Josh turned back in the direction he had come. The plain had not had any litter before that he could recall, but now it was littered with paper, containers and odds and ends like a city street in the early morning before it is swept. Wonder what would have happened if I had said something else he thought. He turned to ask Saint Peter where he should put the trash he picked up, but now the same plain stretched off to the horizon in that direction as well. Saint Peter and the Pearly Gates were nowhere to be seen.

The cloud/mountains pressed in close on each side, but the littered way stretched in front of him no matter which way he faced. I don't know where I am going to put it he thought, but I better get started. He bent and picked up a piece of paper. It vanished the instant he picked it up. He picked up another piece

with the same result. “Why, I’m gonna have this job done in no time at all” he thought.

The two men were wrestling the gurney with a body bag on it into the back of the ambulance. They had had an incredibly difficult time getting the body bag across the footslog over the creek since the gurney couldn’t be used and there were no handrails with which to steady themselves. Several times it had looked like they and the bag would end up in the creek. The one holding up the rear of the gurney, while the other folded the wheel assembly at the front to allow the stretcher to slide into the ambulance, said; “Lord, he must have been dead for a couple of weeks or so.” “Likely longer,” the other said as the stretcher slid into place and locked in position, “given the cold weather we been having.” Slamming the ambulance doors closed, he said; “Well, lets get this load on the road.”

The Yeller School Bus

Most remembrances are linear in time—like a good story—with the events ordering themselves so that there is a natural beginning and ending. This one isn't like that, perhaps because there really isn't any story line to order the events, and yet it remains one of the most vivid memories of my childhood in West Virginia. Even today, over seventy years later, I can still see Roybert running back and forth in desperate indecision between the school bus shed and the moving state road truck—but the story begins much earlier than that.

In the late thirties the part of West Virginia I grew up in was very much like the Appalachia pictured in today's socially pretentious TV documentaries. At one time most of the able-bodied men in the community had loaded coal in the mines on Harmon's Creek or Cabin Creek but in the layoffs, several years before, they had all lost their jobs. In spite of this, the mines were still the focal point of attention and conversation—"I hear they're rebuilding the tipple on Cabin Creek number two...," "I heared just the other day that they're gonna reopen the drift over at Harmon's creek...," and endless, frighteningly somber, discussion of what was clearly a devilish device; the Jolly loader, that could load more coal in a day than an entire shift of men—no one had been rehired at the mines.

Maybe it was that way in the South after the war when people still talked about the so vividly remembered ante bellum days that were expected to be again. In any event, preoccupation with a past remembered as far better than the present and the

special isolation that comes with poverty had shrunk the real world to the boundaries of the mines at Cabin Creek and Harmon's Creek and up the river to Charleston. I know it's common for a child to have such a myopic view of the world: but as proof that this wasn't simply my own childish perception of the world, I never heard a grown-up talk about the events in Europe until after Pearl Harbor nor mention national politics, even though this was the time of the New Deal—not even talk about baseball or any other sport. In a very real sense, the world ended at Charleston, and even that wasn't quite as real as the closed mines.

Every once in a while, there'd be a flurry of interest because rumor had it that they were hiring at one of the chemical plants in Nitro or South Charleston, or else because Dravo was supposed to be putting on men to work on the locks in the Kanawha river. But no one that I knew ever got one of those jobs. Don't misunderstand me, no one really believed that the world ended at Charleston, it was just that the world beyond Charleston and the mines didn't intrude meaningfully on us.

For example, we had one of those floors standing multiband battery powered radios at home on which we listened to the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville on Saturday nights and on which I can remember hearing a shortwave broadcast of a speech by Hitler. But none of these were as real as the mines or putting by the crops or just the day-by-day events of life around us. Then sometime in the middle thirties four men from Frogs Creek where we lived got on the WPA. It wasn't much of a job for a man who had loaded coal to walk alongside a state road truck all day shoveling leaves out of ditches or carrying rocks to fill in mud holes in the roads—but I can remember my Pop saying things were starting to look up when they got on the WPA. They were all men he'd worked with in the mines, and as he said, they needed the jobs worse than anyone else around. In looking back over what I've written I realize that in a sense all of this is extraneous to the story I wanted to tell, yet in another sense every bit of it is essential.

I mentioned earlier that we had a battery powered radio; the nearest electricity was seventeen miles away at Ault's

Junction—which was also the end of the paved road. A red dog topped county road came on up to the mouth of Frog's Creek. We lived another two miles up Frog's Creek, with other families above us until finally, five miles further up the creek and a full mile beyond the end of even the dirt road, there lived the Martin boys. During winter and spring, the Frog's Creek road became such a permanent mire of red clay that no vehicle other than a well teamed wagon could possibly get through. Since this was also the school season, all of us kids who had finished the first eight grades of school in the one-room school over on Kelly's Creek hiked down each morning to the mouth of Frog's Creek where the school bus picked us up for the twenty-mile ride to the high school.

Before I can remember, someone had built a shed at the school bus stop so that we could get in out of the rain or snow—although it didn't really make much difference after the long hike down Frog's Creek. The state road truck, a bright yellow open-bed dump truck, also came to the end of the red dog topped road each morning to pick up the four WPA men. Since their truck came a few minutes before the school bus, the men were usually already waiting at the shed when we kids got there.

Us older boys watched with envy the grown-up fun they always seemed to have while waiting for their truck. There was always a lot of horseplay between them, a carry-over from their days in the mines when the men often slid down the rails to the tipple on a piece of slab or else would "cut britches" with mule quirts while waiting for an empty coal car at the drift mouth. This game in which two men faced off at three or four paces and slashed at each other with plaited leather mule quirts until one of them was compelled to turn tail and run with the other chasing him to get in a few free licks was copied by the boys during recess at school using hickory switches. I don't know how long the men held out before one of them couldn't stand the pain anymore and broke and ran to the jeers of his peers, but at school with all of the girls looking on, one would hold out with involuntary tears pouring until raw survival instinct finally overwhelmed all rational control.

Of the four men, one's name is lost to my memory but two of them were unforgettable: Singing Sam and Bill Will. Sam was one of three Sam Asburys in the Asbury clan, and each was nicknamed. The oldest was Uncle Sam since he had a white beard; then came Singing Sam, although I never heard him sing, even in church; and finally, Little Sam. Bill Will was a McClanahan. Most of the McClanahans lived on Kelly's Creek, but Bill Will had married an Asbury girl and moved over to Frog's Creek onto her folk's place after he was laid off at the mines.

Almost all of the older men in the community had distinctive nicknames. The most unusual was the patriarch of the Asbury clan, John Asbury, who was known to everyone as Old Man John Top—because, according to my Pop, he lived on top of the hill. At any rate, Singing Sam and Bill Will were always cutting up and telling jokes. The third man that I remember was also an Asbury: Roybert. Roybert had no nickname—except sometimes people just called him Roy. Everyone said he was a little "tetched" in the head and it was true that in the mines he always got stuck working in the sump or clearing slate which no one else wanted to do and at tent revivals he was always the first to be touched by the spirit and go forward to be saved. Roybert naturally ended up being the butt of a lot of the horseplay and jokes at the bus stop. Like one morning when Roybert was late; Bill Will saw him coming and in a loud voice so Roybert would be sure to hear him said, "Boy, thet Roy sure looks like something the dog drug in." They all laughed, especially Roybert, who said a couple of times, too, "Just like somethin' the dog drug in."

Roybert often did that; repeating whatever had gotten a laugh like he had just thought of it and was telling the joke himself. Bill Will and Singing Sam were always grabbing Roybert's lunch box or his cap and throwing it back and forth over his head—and getting a big laugh from everyone including Roybert. In fact, the story I started to tell earlier began with such a bit of horseplay. Bill Will and Singing Sam had managed to get Roybert's overall jacket that particular morning and were throwing it back and forth as usual while Roybert ran toward

whoever happened to have the jacket, when the state road truck drove up and stopped for them. At that instant Bill Will threw the jacket on the roof of the shed and the three other men all jumped in the back of the truck and pounded on the roof to signal the driver that he could go.

Bill Will's action had caught Roybert completely by surprise and he couldn't decide what to do. The truck was already starting to pull out and he just ran frantically back and forth—a few steps each way—first toward the truck and then toward the shed where his jacket was and then back toward the truck again. Singing Sam and Bill Will were yelling at him to hurry up and get in the truck or he was going to be left behind. Then finally, when the truck was already too far away for him to catch it, he took off running after it as fast as he could and chased it like a dog for a quarter of a mile or so before they finally stopped and pulled him in.

I guess he got his overall jacket that evening since it wasn't on the shed roof when we got off the bus. The main thing I remember though isn't this story, which I've told to help you see, as I still do, the morning waits at the bus stop. As I mentioned earlier, Bill Will and Singing Sam were always the center of attention; but what I remember most vividly was once, just once, when Roybert got a laugh on his own. The school bus was the same bright yellow as the state road truck—perhaps all state vehicles were painted that color. One morning while we were waiting at the bus stop, as the state road truck topped the hill and came in sight, Roybert said, "Well boys, here comes our yellow school bus, except as he said it, it was more nearly—our yeller school bus," and everybody laughed like they usually did for Bill Will's or Singing Sam's jokes. That was the year I started junior high school. Every morning thereafter that I can recall, until I graduated from high school and went away to the service, Roybert would watch anxiously for the state road truck to come in view and then would say, "Well boys, here comes our yeller school bus." But he never got much of a laugh again.

Till Death Do Us Part

In the period between the wars, WWI and WWII that is, it was not unusual on Frogs Creek where we lived for someone to never see a doctor in their entire life. They would have been birthed by a midwife, tended to by older female family members during their lifetime and ushered out the same way. It wasn't just that they were backward, although Lord knows they were that, but that we were isolated, in both time and place. The nearest telephone or electricity was twelve miles away on the road between Sissonville and Charleston. Doc Glass at Sissonville was the nearest doctor, and he was nearly twenty miles away – even if you could find someone with a running model A to take you there. That, compounded by the fact the coal mines which had been the main source of cash money for most families were virtually closed by the depression.

Most families lived on subsistence farms unchanged from before the Civil war with a single horse or mule, or a team if they were slightly better off, with which to farm, make road repairs, get in firewood for the winter etc. The country store carried little that could be considered medical in nature, although they were long on laxatives – two I remember with shudders to this day: Black Drought and castor oil. They also carried a variety of patent medicines, such as Nux Vomica advertised to be good as a tonic for man or beast, and Lydia Pinkham's elixir "to make you feel better during menstruation and menopause", which were little more than cleverly marketed herbal concoctions of dubious merit.

Every family had a large bottle of iodine, the universally accepted treatment for cuts and wounds, a bottle of turpentine in case of snake bite and sulfur and molasses tonic in the spring. All families knew the medicinal properties of a few common herbs, roots, and plants, mainly for the treatment of colds and fevers. In the fall each year I was sent to gather bunches of penny royal, ditney, mountain tea etc. which were tied to the rafters in my attic bedroom until, along with the strung snapped green beans, dried apple slices and mushrooms, it looked more like the hayloft in the barn than a bedroom in a house.

The point to the long digression in the preceding paragraph is that on those occasions when medical needs outstripped a family's meager medical means to care for themselves, they turned to a local "expert" in natural remedies. Every community, no matter how small, had at least one such person. Sometimes they were "specialists", like a midwife who also ministered to health problems for babies and female problems for the mothers or someone who wasn't squeamish about lancing the frequent boils, carbuncles and bealings: made common by a general lack of personal hygiene. The more fastidious members of the community, including us, bathed on Saturday evening in preparation for going to church on Sunday morning.

Many however believed bathing was bad for your health and took seriously the Scotch-Irish admonition: "Dinna cast yee cloot, til May is oot" – or literally, don't take off your winter long johns before the end of May. On Frogs Creek and Kelly's Creek however we had a genuine second or third generation arbs lady; Aunt Rodi. Unless you grew up in Appalachia at about the same time you will have no idea of what an arbs lady is and virtually no chance of finding a definition.

The Scotch-Irish pronunciation of herbs is arbs, so an arbs lady is a woman who knows everything that grows and its medicinal properties. To add credence to their medical pronouncements it was common for arbs ladies to attribute them to the Indians who had been there before the settlers came. To give an idea of the Indian connection, one of the most powerful emetics is colloquially known as puke weed or more properly as Indian tobacco. Indian senna is the secret ingredient in Black

Draught, the laxative I said still makes me shudder over eighty years later. Pop described its effect as about like having someone reach up from your rear end, grab your tongue and turn you inside out. For sure nothing that was inside when the senna began to take effect was there when it finished.

Aunt Rodi was intimately familiar with the effects of hundreds, if not thousands, of plants that grew in the forests and fields of West Virginia and in the creeks and on their banks. Pop liked to say that Aunt Rodi dealt in poultices, purges and pukes and then laugh and say if she couldn't get it out one end, she could always get it out the other. As a matter of fact, she had saved several children over the years who had ingested poison using various of her pukes matched to the situation at hand. Aunt Rodi functioned as a combination natural drug store and nurse practitioner.

Aunt Rodi's grandparents had moved to the then newly formed West Virginia from Virginia at the time of the Civil War; probably not due to any Union or Confederate sympathies but rather to avoid conscription into the Confederate army which they would have viewed as a tyrannical intrusion into their lives. Of course, to the hill people any duty imposed from outside the family was tyranny to be resisted by every means possible – including packing up and moving on. They built a settler's cabin at the head of Frogs Creek, stuck to themselves and never fit into the existing community – to the extent that there was no recollection of even their family name in a community where everything was identified by family or clan: the old Asbury place, the Milam or the McClanahan or the Lanham family cemeteries, Kelly's Creek etc.

Their son and his wife – Aunt Rodi's parents – may have come with them or joined them later but, like the grandparents, had virtually no social interaction with the existing community. Shortly after her parents died, when she was approaching middle age, Aunt Rodi got pregnant. The baby, ari, – pronounced like you started out to say Harry but forgot to include the "H"– was feeble minded, not an idiot but on the low end of the imbecile scale. No one ever knew who the father was, and surprisingly there was little or no gossip about who it might have been.

Surprising, since as Pop was fond of saying the prime topic of gossip was always who was pregnant, and by whom, if known. It may simply have been that they were so divorced from the community as to not even warrant being a subject of gossip. Aunt Rodi's folks were all dead by the time of this story, so it was just her and ari now. No family or friends.

One of ari's quirks was that he would become enamored with a sound, like clacking his tongue or making a trilling sound while exhaling sharply through his front teeth and would make the sound for hours on end. That wasn't such a problem when he was young, but people were made uncomfortable by a young man doing such a thing, so Aunt Rodi tried to keep him out of sight as much as possible. ari could do some things to help Aunt Rodi, but only if she was nearby, otherwise he would forget what he was doing and wander off. He could split firewood so long as she was stacking or carrying it into the cabin. If she had to leave for any reason, so did he. Left on his own he amused himself with his tongue clacks, whistles and trills and staring absently at nothing.

Everything said thus far is essential background to understand the following story. The Canterburys lived about a mile further down Frogs Creek from us. Mrs. Canterbury had some sort of female problem which Aunt Rodi had been treating. Whatever the problem was, it had flared up again, so she sent the oldest girl, Jessie, to ask Aunt Rodi to come see her. Jesssie had knocked on the door of Aunt Rodi's cabin and when she got no answer opened it to look in since Aunt Rodi was getting hard of hearing and might not have heard her knock. Aunt Rodi was lying on her back on the bed, eyes wide open staring at the ceiling. The funny thing was she had on a blue dress much too small for her, of a size to fit a schoolgirl. There was no sign she had thrashed about. It looked like she had simply laid down and gone to sleep. Jessie went in and called Aunt Rodi's name loudly a couple of times with no response. ari was nowhere to be seen and didn't answer or come in when Jessie called him from the back door.

Jessie figured she had best go tell her father what she had found so she closed the cabin door and hurried home. Shortly

thereafter Mr. Canterbury, Jessie and one of her sisters showed up at our place asking to talk with Pop who luckily was at home. Mr. Canterbury told Pop what Jessie had found and said he thought Pop should bring his panel truck in case they needed to take Aunt Rodi to Sissonville to see Doc Glass. The four of them headed up Frogs Creek in Pop's truck.

In less than an hour Pop was back by himself to tell Mom that Aunt Rodi was dead – probably a suicide – and that he was going to have to go to the junction to call the State Police in Charleston. He said he would be back as quickly as he could and left. On the way back he stopped first at Reverend Olders to tell him that Aunt Rodi was dead, an apparent suicide, and that at the State Police's request he would be spending the night in his panel truck outside Aunt Rodi's cabin. He persuaded the Reverend to relieve him around daybreak the next morning, saying the State Police, an ambulance and someone from the medical examiners would be there at about the same time. He stopped at our place to ask Mom to fix him a thermos of coffee and some dinner for his all-night vigil which he would pick up when he came back.

He continued on up Frogs Creek to Aunt Rodi's place where he explained to Mr. Canterbury that the State Police wanted someone to be present overnight to prevent anything being disturbed before they got there, which he had volunteered to do. He said Mom was fixing some coffee and sandwiches for him so he would be back shortly. Mr. Canterbury asked if Pop would drop off the girls at the Canterbury home since they had already been gone a long time. When Pop got home, he explained to Mom what he had done. I called the state police in Charleston and got the duty officer. I told him who I was, that I used to be a State Trooper over at Beckley and that we had a death of an elderly woman on Frogs Creek which he might want to investigate.

There was no sign of foul play, in fact if she hadn't been dressed oddly suggesting she had anticipated dying, the natural thing would have been to assume she had died of either a stroke or heart attack. I also mentioned that she had a mentally retarded son, about 15 or 16 years old, who was missing. If he had found

his mother's body it was likely he was frightened and hiding in the woods, but he was so severely retarded he would be unable to fend for himself and would have to come in when he got hungry. I also told him the two Canterbury girls had searched and called for him without success but had found a mound of freshly dug earth back by the woodshed about the dimension of a grave – saying I had no idea whether that was of any significance or not. He wanted to know the family name, which I had to admit I didn't know but that the dead woman was the third generation of the family to live in the same cabin. I told him the names of the owners of the properties on either side and he said that with that information he would be able to get the family name from the county records office.

He said that he would need to arrange for someone from the medical examiner's office to come with him, for an ambulance to move the body to the coroner's office plus getting the information from the county which meant it would either be getting dark by the time he got there or shortly thereafter. "I would much prefer to examine the scene in daylight. If I delay coming out until morning, do you think you could recruit some responsible person to spend the night at the cabin just in case the son comes in? It is vital he not disturb anything." I told him I was sure I could do that and where we lived. He is going to pick me up on his way to Aunt Rodi's tomorrow morning.

The next morning there was quite a procession up Frogs Creek, men and women. The word had spread overnight about Aunt Rodi's death (suicide?) and everyone was curious. While no one would have claimed Aunt Rodi as a friend, nearly everyone had been her "patient" – probably many times – so she was a family fixture to virtually everyone. Besides which, suicides were nearly unheard-of events. The women still spoke at quilting bees and pie suppers in hushed tones about a farmer over near Kelly's Creek who had hung himself in his barn years before or a miner over at Harmons Creek who had shot himself after the mines closed; but here was a real life, up close, fresh one, and of someone they knew to boot. Their curiosity may have known no bounds but was thwarted by the State Police who said the only persons who could come inside the cabin were the

Canterbury girl who had discovered the body and Pop who had reported it.

The Chief explained that the police photographer needed to take photos of the body from a variety of positions before the medical examiner could move it to make his examination. He pressed Jessie if she was certain the body was just as she had discovered it. She was certain, saying all she had done was to call Aunt Rodi's name loudly a few times. Pop said he was certain the body was exactly as he saw it when he entered the cabin with the Canterbury's the first time.

The medical examiner turned the body face down so he could see the hips and lower back. This woman has been dead for more than just a few days he said, how many I can't say until we do an autopsy back at the lab, but maybe for as long as a week. You said she had a feeble-minded son who you thought might be hiding in the woods. Given how long she has been dead, I think we can rule out that possibility. To the Chief: "I think the time has come to excavate the "grave" the girls found out back to see who or what is buried there". To the ambulance man who had been standing by with a gurney: "OK, you can move the body to the ambulance, just be careful to roll the body and not attempt to lift it.'

Now that the activity had moved outdoors, the entire assemblage moved back to the woodshed to watch and comment. The policeman who had driven the Chief's car was drafted to do the digging and promptly began swinging shovelfuls of dirt to the side. As the hole enlarged his audience pressed in to see the bottom of the excavation, resulting in frequent but disregarded orders to stand back. At about three feet down he called out to the Chief: "I just hit some cloth and there is something soft under it." There was an immediate surge forward to see what he had uncovered which the Chief ordered back; threatening to clear the area if they didn't stay back. It didn't take long to reveal the topside of a body in the grave. The face had been covered with a towel which when removed revealed ari lying on his back.

At that point the crowd really was forced to move back so the police photographer could record everything. There hadn't

been a lot to comment on until now, but suddenly everyone had an opinion. The women were almost unanimous in the opinion that with ari dead Aunt Rodi had decided she had nothing more to live for and had taken her own life. She had no known family and no friends and with ari gone, whom she had cared for every day of his life, what did she have to live for? But that raised the question of how ari died.

Several of the men were of the opinion he must have been bitten by a copperhead, saying it was snake season and people were seeing far more copperheads than usual. But the women, who were more familiar with Aunt Rodi's capabilities 4 than the men, said Aunt Rodi had successfully treated many snakebite cases over the years and would surely have saved ari. They even suggested to the policemen who were working to free the body from the remaining dirt that they look on ari's lower legs and ankles for the telltale cross cuts on the fang marks that would be conclusive proof she had tried and failed to save him.

The junior policeman said he didn't see any such marks but the body was still caked in dirt so a careful examination would have to wait until the body was cleaned by the coroner. One of the older women suddenly remembered something Aunt Rodi had told her which might provide an alternate explanation of how ari could have died. As part of her herbarium Aunt Rodi gathered large quantities of sumac berries each fall. Sumac is a wild bush that can grow ten or twelve feet tall. Each branch tip grows a bunch of red berries roughly the shape and size of an upside-down ice cream cone. As the berries mature, they exude a sticky liquid that eventually dries to a glaze on the berries. The glaze is sweet with a slightly astringent taste which Aunt Rodi used to make less palatable arb concoctions palatable. ari had discovered this and developed the habit of licking the glaze off her berries. Aunt Rodi said that once ari discovered the pleasure of licking sumac berries there was no stopping him.

She was finally forced to put a lock on the cabinet in which she stored them. There were a few other arbs she had to keep in the cabinet for the same reason. Who knows what he might have licked or eaten from the hundreds of items in Aunt Rodi's collection? But again, the prevailing opinion among the women

was that she would have known the antidote for anything ari might have gotten into. Interestingly, opinion as to how ari had died split roughly along gender lines, with the men favoring snakebite and the women that he had gotten into something poisonous in Aunt Rodi's collection.

There was a similar gender split about the implication of this: the women believing that this meant Aunt Rodi must have discovered his corpse otherwise she would have saved him or there would be evidence she had tried to do so. By the time the strongest held opinions had had an airing, ari's body had been placed in the ambulance with his mothers and had departed for Charleston. The Chief thanked Pop for reporting the death and for making sure nothing was disturbed until they could get there. Pop commented to Mom later that while the Chief had made a point of thanking him, he pointedly did not say anything about letting him know what the medical examiner or the coroner found in their autopsies. Pop figured that since no one was related to Aunt Rodi, the Chief figured it was no one's business.

At breakfast a couple of days later Pop said to Mom: We can't leave all of that stuff in Aunt Rodi's cabin. Some of it is deadly poison and a lot of it is probably dangerous. Eventually kids are bound to explore her cabin and who knows what might happen. I'm going to talk to Reverend Older this morning to see if he can get a couple of men to go with us to clean out the cabin and get rid of the stuff she collected.

Turned out Pop needn't have worried about someone going in Aunt Rodi's cabin. The only person accompanying the Reverend when he showed up the next morning was the Sisson boy who worked for him in the store – and he was clearly there under duress. The Reverend said that none of the men he asked to help were willing to go in a cabin where someone had committed suicide and the Sisson boy was there only on the promise he could work outside.

Pop got a can of gasoline and a bundle of rags from the shed and the three of them set off up Frogs Creek. It was late afternoon when they returned looking like they had done a hard day's labor 5 and smelling of smoke. The Reverend thanked Pop for having thought of the problem and for helping get rid of it.

He and the Sisson boy headed back down Frogs Creek to their respective homes. Pop asked Mom if she would heat some water so he could take a bath; saying he didn't want anything to eat until after he got cleaned up. Baths were taken in the kitchen in a No. 3 washtub, so Mom put supper in the warming oven, brought in the tub and built up the fire in the kitchen range to heat Pop's bath water.

Pop was unusually quiet through supper which was out of character for him. He was a great storyteller and loved to tell about the day's events, often made funny in his telling of them. When supper was over, he didn't thank Mom for the meal and get up from the table as he always did, but sat for a bit as she cleared the table. Finally, having made up his mind about something that appeared to be bothering him, he asked Mom to sit back down. I'm going to tell you something, but you will have to promise to never repeat it to a living soul, he said. We promised, but he repeated the admonition that we were never to repeat what he was about to say to a living soul.

Since everyone who could conceivably have been affected by what I now repeat has been dead for a half century or more, I don't really feel I am breaking my promise to Pop to not repeat his words to "a living soul". That cabin was a regular rat's nest he said. Bunches of plants of every conceivable sort hanging from the rafters, as well as roots, branches with galls, dried berries, fruits, yaws etc. Sacks and bundles were stashed everywhere.

But worse were the many fruit jars and bottles filled with concoctions whose purpose was known only to Aunt Rodi. Reverend Older and I decided we would hand everything that could be burned to the Sisson boy to stack in small piles in an open area in front of the cabin to be doused with a bit of the gasoline and burned. The jars and bottles though presented a problem. One probably contained whatever Aunt Rodi had taken to commit suicide and several others probably contained poisonous concoctions as well. I remembered that when they had exhumed ari's body from the shallow grave they hadn't bothered to refill it, being mainly concerned with photographing the body in the grave and then getting it on the gurney to take to

the ambulance. Reverend Older and I went back to see if the grave might serve to dispose of the jars and bottles.

Quite a bit of loose dirt was still in the grave since once the body was exposed, they had simply worked it free of the surrounding dirt. We figured that if the loose dirt was shoveled out there would be plenty of room to break all of the jars and bottles which could then be buried using the soft dirt beside the grave. I offered to shovel out the grave while he got started handing the flammable material in the cabin to the Sisson boy to stack out front.

I got down in the grave to shovel it out and noticed something that would have made my hair stand up, if I had any. The undisturbed ground back there is much too hard and compacted for anyone to be able to dig with just a shovel. You first have to break off chunks with a pick, or a mattock or a spud bar and then use a shovel to remove what you have broken loose. The grave had been dug with a mattock which was still leaned against the side of the shed. You know how when you cut into hard ground with a mattock the blade leaves a polished imprint on the undisturbed earth the width of the blade and a depth proportional to the force with which the mattock was swung. These marks were clearly visible on each end of the grave with a depth roughly the width of my hand. There was no way on earth that frail Aunt Rodi could have swung a mattock with that much force. It had to have been ari who was swinging the mattock. I even made a few test swings to see how much force was needed to get the same marks. I'm six feet tall and well-muscled but I had to put some real oomph into it and swing the mattock from over my head.

The conclusion is inescapable; ari dug his own grave. But ari would not have done the job by himself. He would work with Aunt Rodi, but not without her. That means she had to have been present all the time he was digging and most likely to have shoveled at least some of the dirt he loosened. The thing that would have made my hair stand up was the realization that this proved what had happened was a murder-suicide not an unexplained death-suicide as everyone thought.

When the grave was deep enough for her purposes Aunt Rodi probably got ari to drink the same concoction she used later to commit suicide. She then waited until he was dead for sure, drug his body into position in the grave and covered it with the dirt they had loosened. She would have had no trouble getting ari to drink the poison, even if it tasted terrible, since he always did whatever, she asked him to do. I broke every jar and bottle with the shovel and refilled the grave, stomping the dirt down from time to time to get it as compacted as possible. I am sure Reverend Older didn't notice the mattock marks – it's not the sort of thing that would have meant anything to him – and now they are safely reburied so no one can ever see them.

Aunt Rodi's secret has gone to the grave with her in more ways than one. This story really ended with the preceding paragraph, but Mom's comments after Pop finished his tale form

a postscript I can't resist including. Mom said: Aunt Rodi must have agonized every day over what would happen to ari if she died first. Well maybe not so much when he was a little boy and she was younger. She undoubtedly knew that severely retarded children often don't live to maturity so there was a chance she wouldn't have to face the problem. But as ari matured the problem must have tormented her every waking moment. Eventually she must have realized there was only one way she could be sure ari didn't outlive her. Even if he was approaching manhood, to her he was still only a boy whom she had cared for every day of his life. Only God knows how many times she must have decided; Today is the day, only to lose her resolve and put off an act no mother should ever have to contemplate or worse, commit. If there is a merciful God, we can only hope she had a small stroke or heart attack to force a decision she had almost certainly been unable to make many times before. May God rest her soul.

Uncle Damn Booker

His name was Dan, Dan Booker, but everyone, even people his own age, called him Uncle Dan. Uncle Dan was a notorious storyteller; not the kind of stories you repeat, but the kind you make up. He gave the impression of being more educated than most of the other people in the community. He wasn't of course. Like almost everyone his age he had attended the one room school at Jumping Branch, West Virginia for the better part of eight years, but as people were wont to say; "It seemed to have took more with him". It showed in his speech and in his imagination, which was a rare quality in people for whom hard times and hard work left little room,

Once after he had been sick, someone on seeing him up and around again had asked how he was feeling. "Oh, he said, I'm as healthy as a hog. His questioner replied, "You mean as healthy as a horse don't you Dan?" I never could understand why people say as healthy as a horse, he said. Horses have to be tonic-ed in the spring before you can work them. They have to be rubbed down after you work them, or they'll take chill and come down sick. They get colic and have to be dosed with sulfur and lard oil and all sorts of other things. Now I ask you, did you ever hear of anyone treating a hog? Nope, I'm as healthy as a hog. Probably the most infamous of his stories was the one about George Washington's last will and testament.

In the early 30's the US Coast and Geodetic Survey Office resurveyed major benchmarks in the national survey to correct discrepancies in surveys that were in many cases over a century

old. One of those survey teams was based in Charleston but came for a few days in a government vehicle to resurvey benchmarks near Jumping Branch where Uncle Dan lived. In a community where everyone knew everyone else and where not much out of the ordinary happened, they attracted a lot of attention. Besides that, they were "furriners" and government men to boot so people were naturally suspicious of what they were doing anyway. They were even more suspicious when after a few days in the field, having finished their work, they left without having said why they were there.

Since they had enquired about the location of some of the oldest homesteads in the area there was a widespread suspicion, they were looking for something – though what that might be no one could guess. A more widely held suspicion was that the government was in cahoots with the coal mine owners and was planning to seize private property to turn it over to them. Since that sort of thing had happened within the memory of people still living, to most people that seemed the most likely possibility. At any rate almost everyone had an opinion or a guess to offer. Just when the excitement was at its peak, Uncle Dan told someone that he had talked to "them city fellers" and they had told him they were redoing part of the survey George Washington had made at the end of the eighteenth century in what was later to become West Virginia.

Even in grade school it was required that every student study West Virginia state history which told how George Washington had made the first survey along the Great Kanawha River and had been awarded large parcels of choice lands in payment. It was also well known that he was a big land speculator who had traded many veterans out of the lands allocated to them for their military services until he owned a large portion of the choicest lands on the river. Most people had probably forgotten those long-ago lessons, but when reminded some vague memory of them returned. The fact that Jumping Branch was far from the Kanawha River valley and nowhere near the areas surveyed by Washington never occurred to anyone.

Uncle Dan said someone back in Washington DC had discovered that George Washington had deeded those parts of

his land holdings in West Virginia that he hadn't deeded to his dozen or so close relatives back to the Indians from whom it had originally been taken. According to Dan the government had known about this all along but had chosen to keep it quiet since so much money was involved and some of the land in question was owned by important political figures. But now someone had found out the truth and was bringing suit to have the terms of George Washington's will carried out.

To people who disliked and distrusted anything having to do with the government this explanation was completely believable. The fact that there weren't any Indians there anymore and hadn't been for a couple of generations didn't matter. Someone would get that claim and the titles to all of the land in question would be clouded. The discussion turned immediately to the question of what would happen to all of those deeds and titles. Would a house or business that someone had built on a piece of property he had bought in good faith belong to the person who now held the title? If someone had sold a piece of property on which the title was now clouded, would he have to refund the money? What if the seller had died? The possible complications were endless and again everyone had an opinion.

A popular one was that the titles would surely stand just as they were since the property had changed hands five or six times since Washington's death. Most people cited the folk belief in support of this view that if the boundaries of a property were found to be in error the boundaries agreed to by the seller and buyer when it last changed hands would hold. This was universally believed and often discussed since many of the meets and bounds given in deeds for older properties had often long since ceased to exist so existing fence lines were accepted as the property boundary.

One corner of our property, for example, was called out in our deed as "the big wild cherry tree on the point where it breaks over to Frogs Creek". No such tree existed anymore, but a fence that had once joined to the tree was accepted as the boundary of our property. So many people got caught up in the discussion that word of it reached the editors of the newspaper in Beckley who ran an editorial giving the opinion of two attorneys on what

the legal rendering would be. One thought the state legislature would have to act to grant clear titles to the property owners of record. The other cited obscure case law to justify the lay opinion that possession was nine tenths of the law.

When it finally came out that Uncle Dan had made up the whole story, everyone laughed at those damn fools who had believed it. As I said, the story of George Washington's last will and testament was unquestionably the best story Uncle Dan ever told, but he had several others to his credit too. All of this is by way of setting the stage for the story I wanted to tell you. One warm spring day Rush McClanahan was plowing his hay field that was bordered by the county road on one side. It was good bottom land that ran along the county road for maybe four hundred yards and was bordered on the other side by the creek. Now when you are plowing bottom land with a bottom plow you start on the outside and turn a furrow with the curl of new turned earth to the outside and go completely around the field. You then go around and around the field plowing so that the new curl of earth on each furrow is turned into the furrow left by the previous pass. It is easy and pleasurable work which a well-trained team can do with scarcely a gee or haw needed. Rush had been at it for a couple of hours when he saw Uncle Dan coming along the county road on his riding mare.

Uncle Dan was in his Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes with his broad brimmed hat that he only wore on special occasions. Rush and Uncle Dan were old friends and had gone to grade school together many years before. Since it was mid-week and a workday, Rush halted the team at the corner by the road and called out to him when he got close; Hey Dan, where you going all dressed up like that? Dan's answer was noncommittal, he probably said he was going into town or something like that. At any rate they exchanged a few pleasantries with Dan sitting on his horse and Rush leaning on the plow.

As I said it was a nice day and Rush was feeling good since the plowing was going so well, so in a joking mood he said to Dan; Why don't you get down and give your horse a rest and tell me a lie or two? Uncle Dan pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time and said; "Wish I could Rush, but I'm cutting

it close as it is to get to Sam Bailey's funeral over at Beckley. It was good to see you. Visit with you the next time I'm by". With that he started to ride off. Sam was another classmate of Rush's and Dan's so they both knew him well. Rush hadn't heard that Sam had died so he called after Dan: I didn't know that Sam had died. Was it an accident? Dan wheeled the mare around and came back a ways. No, he took sick a week or so ago and the doctors never could figure out what it was. I understand he went downhill so fast hardly anyone knew he was sick. I'm surprised though that Eadie didn't get word to you that Sam had died since she knew you two had grown up together. Eadie was Sam's wife. Rush wanted to know where the funeral was being held. Dan told him that it was at the Baptist church in Mabscott, a town on the edge of Beckley, at eleven o'clock. Looking at his watch again, Dan said I've got to get going and putting his heels to the mare rode off at a trot.

Rush unhooked the team from the plow and took them to the barn where he unharnessed them and put them out to pasture. He then rushed to the house where he told his wife what Dan had told him. Even though he would be too late for the funeral he felt that he had to go pay his respects to Eadie and make some sort of excuse for not being there for the funeral itself. He asked his wife if she would catch General Grant, his riding horse, and get a saddle on him while he got ready. He got cleaned up as quickly as he could, put on his good clothes and headed for Sam's place since he figured the funeral party would have returned to the house from the church by the time he got there.

He didn't want General Grant to work up a lather, but he pushed him pretty hard anyway. Even so it took him almost two hours to get to where Sam and Eadie lived. As he approached, he was puzzled to not see any carriages or horses hitched out front but figured he must have misjudged the time and that they hadn't gotten back from the graveyard yet. He was about to turn to ride out there when he saw movement in the house, so he decided to knock and ask when Eadie and the others were expected back. He tied General Grant to the fence out front and went up and knocked on the door. Sam opened it. From somewhere back in the house he heard Eadie call out; Sam, who

is it? Rush looked at Sam for a moment, dumbfounded, then exploded: That Damn lying Booker. Without a word of explanation, Rush stomped off of the porch, got on General Grant, and went home. Rush never said a word about what had happened, but his wife couldn't resist telling the story to some of her friends, who in turn told it to their husbands, who passed it along until it was eventually told far and wide.

You Should'a Seen The One That Got Away

"Go tuh Hell." "Been there. Got throwed out. But it's the gospel truth I tell yuh" Uncle Ben and Woody Asbury were sitting on the bench out front of Ault's store shooting the bull, chewing tobacco, but mostly just passing the time of the day. Uncle Ben could say Go tuh Hell with such vehemence you could almost feel the red-hot nippers reaching for a tender spot, but he had said it this time much like one of the women would say "Do declare" to something one of the other women said at a quilting bee. He paused for a moment the aimless whittling he was doing on the end of a stick to spit a gob of tobacco juice well out in the road before picking up on the conversation with Woody.

I had just walked the mile or so from our place on Frog's Creek with a jug to get some kerosene for our lamps and came up just as Uncle Ben said "Go tuh Hell". Clearly whatever Woody had said was something Uncle Ben found hard to believe. Being a curious, some might even say nosy, eight-year-old, I stopped to listen instead of going inside to get the jug filled. "You mean to tell me that they both had to be taken to see Doc Glass out at Sissonville?" "They sure did and from what I hear he could hardly patch them up for laughing at what brought them there."

Seems Roybert and Joe had decided to go gigging for eel. Eel used to be plentiful in the creeks in our part of West Virginia in the springtime, coming up the Poca river then on up the many creeks that fed into the river to spawn. But they had been scarce and getting scarcer for several years. then for some reason they had returned that spring. Several folks had seen them in the

shallows as they moved upstream. Eel don't take a hook and they are too slippery to catch by hand so the only way you take them is with a gig. A gig is a three-pronged trident-like head on a long pole with each prong barbed so the fish or eel can't slip off once impaled.

Well, according to Woody, Roybert and Joe decided to gig themselves a mess of eel. Eel spawn at night and dig their bodies into the soft mud on the creek bottom to lay their eggs. So you gig for eel at night, using a lantern to spot their heads sticking out of the creek bottom mud. Roybert and Joe were working their way up Frog's Creek, Joe holding the lantern to spot the eel and Roybert gigging them. I suspect the outing called for a bottle of Berties Best to ward off the night chill, but according to Woody things had been going pretty well and they already had several eel in their sack when "the incident" occurred. Frog's creek was about a foot deep where they were, with a soft mud bottom. Ideal for eel. Joe was moving the lantern from side to side trying to light up the creek bottom when Roybert had whispered "Don't move. I see one" and got into position to get it with the gig. Eels are lightning fast so you only get one chance at them.

Roybert got the gig all lined up and drove it into the water just as he had been doing all evening. When he did, Joe let out a blood curdling scream, swung the lantern in a wide arc that caught Roybert on the side of the head and grabbed his right foot with the gig stuck in his big toe. Luckily for Roybert the kerosene in the lantern didn't dowse him and catch him on fire, but even so he was pretty cut up by the glass from the breaking lantern screen which had burned as well as cut him. Joe was more seriously injured with two prongs of the gig all the way through his big toe. Seems Roybert had seen Joe's big toe sticking up out of the mud and thought it was an eel's head.

Roybert's head was burnt and bleeding and Joe could only move by moving the gig and his foot together – which hurt like Hell. The gig couldn't be pulled out because of the barbs. They had gone some ways up the creek in their hunt for eel and now had to make their way back in the dark, the lantern having disappeared in the creek after Joe swung it. But there was no

alternative: Joe trying to move his foot and the gig exactly together to lessen the pain and Roybert with an eye that was rapidly swelling shut and bleeding from cuts he could feel but not see. When they got back to where they had entered the creek earlier, Joe sat down on the creek bank since moving the gig with his foot was so hard to do and so painful and Roybert went to find someone who could drive them out to Sissonville to see Doc Glass.

That took quite a while since in those days and times not many people had cars, or if they did, cars that were running. After a while he came back with the preacher and his Model A, The preacher wasn't properly sympathetic after being routed out of bed at that hour of the night to take two muddy – and probably well lubricated with Berties Best – men all the way to Sissonville, nearly twenty miles away; even if he was a preacher and steeped in the milk of human kindness. By then Joe's foot had swollen and was throbbing something awful. The handle on a gig is like eight feet long so there was no way Joe and the gig could fit in the car and he wouldn't even hear of them trying to break off the handle while the business end was stuck in his foot.

They finally got him in the car with the handle of the gig sticking up and out the window. Roybert later said where Joe promised to put the gig if the preacher hit a tree branch with the end of the handle – but I can't imagine anyone saying something like that to a preacher. It was well past midnight by the time they got Doc Glass out of bed to come to what he called his surgery – just an addition on the side of his home where he saw patients – to see Roybert and Joe. Doc Glass did an even worse job than the preacher had in showing sympathy. In fact, he laughed out loud at the sight of Joe stuck on the end of a gig.

Nothing in his surgery was up to cutting the barbs off the tines on the gig – which is what he said had to be done to back it out. While he worked on Roybert's burnt and cut face, Mrs. Glass went to get the man who ran the service station out of bed to see if he had bolt cutters or some other tool that could be used to cut off the barbs. Doc Glass had given Joe some pain killer, since Berties Best had long since worn off, so he was in less pain

but not in any better mood. Eventually the guy who ran the garage came back with several tools.

As you might expect, he was even less sympathetic than the preacher and Doc Glass had been so Joe was treated to another round of humor at his expense. Turns out that a gig is made of hardened steel, so it is not easy to cut, and every failed effort to cut the tines sent shock waves into Joe's injured toe. Eventually they did manage to cut the barbs off, but in the meantime the preacher was treated to language he had never heard before and for which the seminary had not prepared him. They got back to Frog's creek about daybreak; Joe with a big bandage on his foot and Roybert with one side of his head swaddled in bandages to match. I am sure they would have liked to forget the whole thing, but too many people had seen them for that to be possible. For the longest time, Roybert and Joe were greeted by; "You should'a seen the one that got away." As Uncle Ben would have said with appropriate vehemence: "Go tuh Hell".

You're in The Army Now

Corey McClanahan must have been twenty-one or twenty-two years old when the war started. Even so, he still lived at home with his parents on the old McClanahan place which had been homesteaded by his great grandpa around the time of the Civil War when so many families had come across the Appalachian Mountains from Virginia to West Virginia. At one time the homestead had been a good one with about as much tillable bottom land down by Frog's Creek as there was hill and holler on the upside but in three generations most of that had been sold. The original cabin had been built on the hillside—bottom land being too valuable to waste for a home site—and added onto over the years. It may have been an illusion because of the steepness of the hill, but the house appeared to be tilting inwards toward the hill. Pop always said that they had leaned it that way on purpose otherwise it would have fallen over long ago and slid down the hill.

During the hard times of the depression though they had had to let the last of the bottom land go, piece by piece, to the Lanhams who, since they ran the local country store, had a little cash money when no one else had any. As a matter of fact, they may have had little choice since the Lanhams allowed people to buy on account at the store until in many cases there was no way they could hope to pay off the accumulated debt. Why and how they lost their bottom land is immaterial to the story I wanted to tell. The point is that the McClanahans now had no choice but to try to farm the hillside they were left with to raise the corn, beans and a little hay needed for them and their animals.

The previous fall Corey had cut the sumac and sassafras scrub and cleared the tangle of wild blackberry vines on an acre or so of the least steep of their land in preparation to till it as new ground in the spring. He had also hauled all of the exposed rocks he could pry out of the ground to the sides of the field, but even so there were plenty that were bedded so deeply they couldn't be moved and many more just under the surface. In December the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

In early spring Corey burned the piles of dried scrub and vines and at the time of this story had begun the task of plowing the new ground. Cory was a big man; six feet tall I would say. When he was a boy his right eye had been injured when he was kicked by a mule so that it always looked to the side, sort of the opposite of being cross-eyed. Pop used to tell a funny story about one time when he and Corey had gotten some day work for the State on a road crew which involved cutting through a rock outcropping. This was before the days of powered tools, so it was manual labor in which one person held a steel drill for the other to drive with overhead swings of a twelve-pound sledgehammer. The person holding the drill is supposed to turn it a quarter turn as the person wielding the hammer swings it back to prepare for the next stroke.

I have turned steel for my Pop and can vouch for the fact that it takes considerable nerve and trust to turn steel for someone bringing a sledge from behind his back with all of his strength in each swing. At any rate since Corey was a big man and well-muscled, the foreman gave him the job of swinging the sledge and another, smaller, man the job of turning steel for him. As Pop told it, the second man after he had squatted down to hold the drill looked up at Corey with his skew eye and asked him if he always hit what he was looking at. When Corey assured him that he did, Pop said the other man got up quickly and said, Here, you hold this steel and I'll swing the hammer. Hard labor had hardened Corey physically which is relevant to the story I want to tell.

There are few of us left that can tell from experience what it is like to plow new ground on a hillside in West Virginia. A bottom plow is a gentle tool. The blade always turns a curl of

earth to the same side, so you plow around the outside of the field to lay the first furrow and then plow each successive furrow just to the inside of the last one so as to turn the new curl of earth into the furrow left on the previous pass.

On good bottom land when the moisture is just right in the soil it is a pleasure to roll the earth in a smooth sweep this way. The horse or mule pulling the plow has no jolts or jars from the plow to interfere with its smooth gait and quickly learns where it is expected to step on each successive pass, so you rarely need to even touch the reins and can leave them looped loosely over your neck.

Hill side plowing is another matter entirely. Even if the land has been tilled for years so that it is relatively free of rocks and roots, a hill side plow is not designed for going around and around the edges of the unplowed area; instead, the blade of the plow is pivoted so that you can switch it from one side to the other. You plow a furrow across the slope of the field and when you get to the end, raise the whole plow up on its tongue, kick loose the lock on the pivot and flop the blade over to the other side and then kick the lock back in place again. By reversing the blade, the earth will be turned in the opposite direction on the return pass. In this way you can turn the earth downhill as you plow back and forth working your way up the hillside.

New ground however is totally unlike bottom land, or even previously tilled hillside. You can't relax your attention for even an instant since there is a constant struggle with the plow to avoid obvious obstacles which in turn requires a continual stream of gee and haw commands to the horse or mule to get them to step to the right or left. The plow gathers up vines and roots on the support for the blade so that at the end of a furrow you frequently have to clear the tangle by hand in order to get the blade moved over and locked. Worse than that, the ground is still filled with hidden rocks and roots.

Since the ground hasn't been plowed before, it is necessary for the man to lean heavily on the plow handles in order to get the blade to cut deep enough for the plowing to be of any value. When the blade hits a root too large for it to cut through or a rock it can't dislodge, the plow levers up about the blade as a

pivot point with a force that can't be resisted. A horse or mule will eventually learn – usually the hard way after the plowman has used the reins as a whip to vent his anger on its rump a few times – to slack off the moment it feels the plow bind, but over the winter they will have forgotten the previous year's lessons.

As a result, when you first begin plowing new ground in the spring they don't slack off when the plow hits an obstacle, and the handles fly up with tremendous speed and force. Since the driver was leaning into them, they inevitably slam him in the ribs and wrench his arms. It hurts like hell, and since you are already hot and tired, it doesn't take much of this to put you in a bad mood. Corey had been plowing the new ground for several hours when the events of this story took place.

As I mentioned earlier, the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor the previous December, so the United States was already in WW II. It is likely that the draft board in Charleston, some twenty miles away, had sent a registration notice to Corey, but I don't know this to be a fact. Corey was functionally illiterate, although most young men of his generation had learned to read printed material if the words were simple enough, even though cursive script was a mystery to them, and to do simple sums and count change. Corey's parents, like many of their generation, were totally illiterate. If old man McClanahan had picked up the mail at the Lanham's store, he would have thrown it away since as he always said; "I don't have no truck with that stuff", stuff in this case being anything that required reading. I don't know the origins of the expression "to not have truck with" but it was universally used in that part of West Virginia and understood to mean "not to have anything to do with something or someone". If someone was an outcast in the community, people would say about them for example, "I don't have no truck with them Martins". It is likely though that the draft board had sent one or more letters to Corey which had either never reached him or had been ignored if they had since neither he nor his parents would have known what they were.

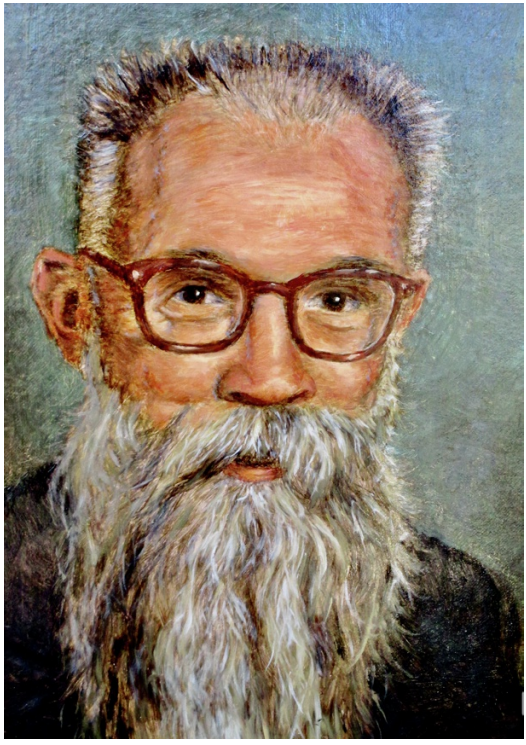
Corey had worked his way halfway up the hillside plowing with a mule that hadn't worked since the previous fall. This would have been in mid to late April, so what had started as a

cool morning would have become a hot midday. A Model A pulled up on the dirt road down by Frog's Creek and what was obviously a city feller in a dark double-breasted suit and shiny dress shoes got out. He called to Corey a couple of times, obviously expecting him to stop plowing and come down to see what he wanted. Corey didn't stop, so after a while the man climbed through the fence and worked his way up the hill over the newly plowed ground to where Corey was; picking his way carefully so as to not scuff his shined shoes.

When he got there, Corey whoa-ed the mule, wiped the sweat off his face and waited to see what he wanted. The man had a clipboard with a bunch of papers clipped to it which he consulted and then asked Corey if he was Corey McClanahan. Corey allowed as to how he was. The man then wanted to know why he hadn't answered the notices they had sent him, to which Corey replied that he didn't know anything about any notices. There may have been more to the exchange than this, but Corey was not one to elaborate on a tale, and this is all he said took place. The man then got quite upset and wanted to know if he, Corey, knew there was a war on, to which Corey replied that he had heard something about it. The man obviously thought this was a smart aleck response to a serious question, so in a tone befitting a representative of the US government said that since the country was at war everyone either had to work (meaning, I suppose, to work in the defense plants in and around South Charleston) or fight. At this, Corey peeled off his overall jacket, hung it on the plow handle, pushed up the sleeves of his shirt and started toward the city feller, saying "Reckon I'll do a little of both."

As Corey told it, the man dropped his clipboard and ran back down the hill with no regard for his shoes this time and scrambled through the barb wire fence at the bottom. Corey said he scaled the clipboard after him with pages flying off as it went, yelling at him that he had forgotten something. The man jumped in his Model A and took off without even bothering to retrieve his clipboard. Corey said he went back to plowing feeling better than he had all morning.

A few days later the sheriff and a couple of his deputies came out from Charleston and took Corey back with them to the registration center where draftees were being examined for induction into the army. In spite of his skew eye, his illiteracy and the fact that his feet that were as flat as a sloppy cow pile, Corey was passed as fully fit for service and inducted into the army on the spot, where, if he didn't serve with distinction, he at least served as well as most other draftees. He survived the war, but afterwards couldn't settle down to the life he had left and eventually moved to Charleston where I assume he ended up becoming a city feller himself.



So, there you have it folks, some stories from a special time in the history of West Virginia.
Gus