

# The Day The Mules Went Crazy

And Other Stories

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## Chapter 1

### LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN

Living in a small town is like living in a fishbowl; almost everything you do is visible to everyone else and even if you try your best to hide it, everybody still knows what's going on. In most cases, the majority of the residents usually know who is going to do what to or with whom even before the people involved do.

Take for instance the small town where I grew up. It's located in the middle of the Texas Panhandle, which was the last part of the state to be settled. An early explorer referred to the Panhandle as, "Miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles suitable for nothing but buffalo and coyotes." Prior to the discovery of oil, the Panhandle was nothing but grass and cows. Stinnett was founded shortly before the oil boom days of the mid 1920s but never really benefited from them. As my dad used to say about Stinnett, "It started off slow and then tapered." About all it has ever had going for it is possession of the court house and they stole it, but that's another story.

Stinnett was not only a one-horse town, it was also a one of just about everything town. It had one barber, one drug store, one grocery store, one undertaker, one church, one lawyer, one water tower, one rich man and one really poor family. There was one doctor, one town drunk, one village idiot and one strange little man who invented things. His last name had several x's, k's and z's in it and no one could pronounce it except him.

Stinnett had just one main street, unless you count the one running from the school to the train depot, but it had no businesses on it except the post office and Jake Early's place that he called a hotel. We knew what went on at the post office but were never sure about Jake's place. All that we knew was that there was usually several single women living there. Up until I was about ten years old, main street wasn't even paved. The only reason why it was ever paved was because it was part of the road from Borger to Spearman and the state paved it.

Stinnett was founded by a rancher by the name of Jasper Stinnett on a corner of his ranch which wasn't good for anything else. He wanted to call it Jasper but since Texas already had a town by that name, he decided to use his last name. Surveyors for the Rock Island Railroad were staking out a route for the new line from Liberal, Kansas to Amarillo and were planning for it to go across the Burdick Ranch about a couple miles east of town. It's claimed that Stinnett got the head surveyor drunk and then into an all night poker game in which he lost everything, including his dignity.

When surveyor woke up the next morning, he found that Stinnett was holding his markers for two thousand dollars which he certainly didn't have. After a bit of negotiation, the route for the railroad moved west just enough for it to pass through the east edge of town. Stinnett got his railroad, the surveyor got his markers back and everyone was happy. Burdick wasn't really in favor of having the railroad cutting across his ranch in the first place.

The town of Stinnett also had one nosy, old maid telephone operator named Lena Belle Leland who not only served as the center of communication for the town, but was also the source of most of its really good gossip. Every phone call made in or out of town had to go through her. She not only connected the calls but also listened in on most of them, then passed along everything that she heard to most anyone who would listen. In fact, if she picked up an especially juicy conversation, she would ring up a couple of her old biddy friends and cross the plugs so they could listen in on the dirt first hand.

Lena Belle had the heart of a raging vigilante when it came to sin. She took it upon herself to correct what she perceived to be the sins and evils of everyone in town. She was something like a morals director in a house of ill repute. Take for instance the time when Ed Young over at the funeral home had quite a thing going with Marie Stimmons, the local beauty operator. Business must have been rather slow at both the funeral home and the beauty shop that day because they were indulging in a bit of telephonic foreplay in preparation for their clandestine meeting in the back room of the funeral home as soon as they could close shop for the day. All the heavy breathing and rather vivid descriptions of what they were going to do to, with and for one another as soon as they could get together was a bit too much for Lena Belle's moral standards. After listening to them for about half an hour, she decided that she just had to do something about their plans. She gave Helen Young the secret signal and plugged her into the conversation. Everyone in town knew Lena Belle's secret signal. If you got three quick dings on your phone, you were to pick up the receiver without saying anything and just listen.

Helen had known what was going on between Ed and Marie even before it got down to really serious sweating and heavy breathing. Ed's getting a little on the side didn't really bother her all that much because she viewed sex more as a wifely obligation than a pleasure. As long as Ed was trying to keep Marie's rather lusty sexual appetite satisfied, he was so pussy-whipped that he left her alone.

First Ed and Marie discussed doing it on the table where he embalmed the bodies for burial, but Marie complained that the stainless steel surface was always so cold that it was difficult for her to maintain her concentration on matters at hand. Ed, being somewhat of a romantic and certainly not wanting to do anything that might dampen her enthusiasm, suggested that they get it on among the flowers that were already in the back of the hearse for the Herbert funeral the next day. That brought a squeal of excited anticipation from Marie, then she said that it might be even more fun to take old man Herbert out of his fancy, satin-lined coffin so they could do it in there.

When Ed joked that making love in a dead man's coffin might be too much like having sex at home with his wife, Helen decided that she had heard enough and it was time to put out the fire in Ed's furnace. No one was ever sure of the punishment that Helen dished out to poor old Ed, but it was said that for the next couple weeks, he wore un-ironed shirts and went around looking like a deer caught in the headlights of a truck.

Stinnett had a town drunk who it was claimed, hadn't had a sober moment for at least the past thirty years. There was a joke going around town that he ran out of whiskey and came home

sober one time and his dog bit him. The thing that I remember most about Mr. Adler was that the top half of his right ear was missing. Everyone figured that he had lost it in the war or else it had been bitten off in a fight. My dad finally told me the true story about the missing ear. Seems that he had been sitting in the shade on the front porch of the pool hall, drunk as usual and whittling on a slat out of an apple box with his pocket knife. A bee began to buzz around his head and as he batted at it with the hand holding the knife, he accidentally sliced off the top of his ear. Dad claimed that he kept his ear in a jelly jar of pure alcohol for several years in case he ever got enough money to pay a doctor to sew it back on. That plan ended one morning when he woke up with a particularly bad case of the heebie-jeebies and drank the contents of the jar, ear and all.

Being the only one of anything has certain advantages but it also has its down side because there is no one else to compare you with and you tend to stand out like a sore thumb. Take Crazy Walter for instance. He hadn't been crazy all his life; he got that way after being struck by lightning while walking home from his first day in school. His real name was Walter Johnson and he lived just across the tracks east of town where his father was the section foreman for the Rock Island Railroad.

Walter was balancing himself on a rail when the lightning bolt came out of a little cloud no bigger than your hat but it burned all his hair off, set his school books on fire and blew his brand new Keds tennis shoes to shreds. All that was left of them was the round blue patches which Walter carried around in his pocket for years. It also caused him to start talking like Donald Duck. All the other first grade students would scream with laughter when he said anything, but the teacher, Mrs. US Nicks, sent him home for talking funny. She said he was just doing it to create attention.

After about a month Walter stopped talking like a duck and seemed to get back to being more or less normal except that when his hair came back, it was bright red and no matter how much Wildroot Cream Oil they smeared on, it stuck straight out like the bristles on a toilet bowl brush. One day Mrs. Nicks told him to go to the bathroom and comb his hair. When he replied, "Your hair would stick out funny too if you got struck by lightning," it brought such gales of laughter from the other kids that she gave him five swats on the butt with the special ruler she kept on her desk for unruly kids. In those days, every grade school teacher had one of those special seventeen-inch rulers on their desk. No one knows why they were seventeen inches long, other than it must be the optimum length for hitting a kid.

Small towns seem to have a self-limiting factor which causes them to maintain exactly the same population year after year. Every time that a baby is born, someone leaves town and every time that someone dies, a shirt-tail relative moves into his house. It's a never-ending cycle which has maintained a stable population of about nine hundred people living in Stinnett for the past seventy-five years.

Stinnett didn't start out with nearly as many people as live there now. When it was founded in 1923, it was supposed to become a railroad town and shipping point for cattle from all the ranches in the area. Within the first couple years, it grew to around two hundred people with a few businesses, mostly associated with the ranching industry.

When oil was discovered in 1926, it shot up to its present size then sort of leveled out. It was still the smaller of three towns on the north side of the river. About five miles to the east was a place called Signal Hill, named after California's famous Signal Hill district where the new oil-rich people around Long Beach built their mansions. A land promoter from Amarillo figured that all those people in the Panhandle of Texas who were getting rich on oil needed a similar place to build their

mansions so he bought a quarter section of land atop the only hill in the county and named his new town Signal Hill. The going price for a lot in those days was a hundred dollars. Greed got the better of him so he divided the 160 acres up into lots twenty-five by eighty feet in size in order to get as many as possible on his land. It's awfully hard to build much of a mansion on a lot only twenty-five feet wide.

What really made Signal Hill grow by leaps and bounds was the fact that when a person bought a lot, they also got the mineral rights under it. The first thing most of the new owners did was pitch a tent on their lot, set up a rig and start drilling for oil. Since few of them could afford a steam engine for drilling, most of the drilling was done by hand. As a result, progress on most of the wells was rather slow. Within a couple years, Signal Hill had a population of ten thousand people and more coming. I was one of the new arrivals when I was born there on November 3rd of 1928.

The death knell was sounded when all those people drilling on their property finally realized that there wasn't enough oil under the whole town to grease a pig at the county fair and every one of those holes they had been drilling was going to be a duster. Almost overnight, the people picked up their belongings and left. Hundreds of houses were either torn down or put on skids and hauled away. By 1932, there wasn't a single person living there and the only building left standing was the red brick bank and land office. A few of the Signal Hill residents, including my parents, moved to Stinnett but most of them headed for wherever the next oil boom was happening.

My dad bought an entire city block of lots along the northern city limits which abutted a section of grass that he leased for grazing cattle. This allowed us to live in town but still have a ranch.

The real threat to Stinnett's existence was Plemons, located on the river about four miles on past Signal Hill. It had less than half the population of Stinnett, but being the only town around in 1903 when the Panhandle was divided up into counties, it became the county seat. Possession of the court house gave Plemons a distinct advantage when it came to survival. Not only did Plemons have the court house, they also had the only school on the north side of the river. Relations between the two towns became even more strained when Stinnett forced a vote to split the school district down the middle so they could have their own school. Deprived of the school taxes that they had been collecting from the residents of Stinnett, the County Commissioners, most of whom lived in Plemons, reacted by refusing to spend any money keeping up the county road or bridges around Stinnett.

As a gesture of friendship and fence-mending, a group of businessmen from Stinnett offered to spring for a big picnic and dance on a Saturday night and even suggested that it be held under a grove of cottonwood trees along the river just south of Plemons. A couple fat steers were butchered and lowered onto the glowing mesquite coals in the barbecue pits. Tubs of potato salad were made, pots of beans were cooked and dozens of pies baked. The big party started just before sunset.

Even though this was during prohibition, several jugs of moonshine appeared and were passed around to anyone who cared to take a swig. Musicians were playing, people were dancing and the festivities were going full swing when darkness fell. While the men from Plemons were playing rub, feel and squeeze as they danced with the women from Stinnett, who seemed to be unusually friendly that night, a small group of men from Stinnett sneaked into the court house, pried open the vault door and hauled the county records away on a truck. When the residents of Plemons woke up on Sunday morning, all that they had to show for their night of gastronomic indulgence and flagrant attempts at debauchery was a hangover big enough to kill a horse and an empty vault at

the court house. All the county records were safely locked away in Stinnett and having possession of the records made Stinnett the county seat. Plemons filed a lawsuit to recover the courthouse but the judge, who lived in Stinnett, threw it out.

While Stinnett had only one of most everything else, by the beginning of the war, it had more liquor stores and bars than all other businesses combined. When prohibition ended in 1932, the Baptists and bootleggers in Oklahoma and Kansas joined forces to keep those states totally dry. On the other hand, Texas had what was called "Local Option" which meant that each voting precinct could decide whether liquor could be sold there or not. Borger, being the naturally wide-open and rowdy town that it had always been, immediately voted to become the first place in the Panhandle where booze could legally be sold. As such, it became the point of supply for every drop of illegal whiskey sold and drank for hundreds of miles to the north.

Sitting in his office on main street, Lawyer Tate watched the procession of big, black cars as they rolled lightly through town going south, then back north a couple hours later with their rear bumpers riding close to the ground. There was no question that they were laden with cases of half-pint bottles of whiskey destined for the preachers, deputy sheriffs and other bootleggers in the dry states to the north. He immediately began to calculate the amount of money that was passing by in front of his office and plotted ways to get his fingers on some of it.

The Texas Highway Patrol set up a roadblock right in front of the court house and began to stop every car that looked even slightly like it might be hauling illegal booze. Hundreds of arrests were made. It was an ideal place for a roadblock because main street was the only way through town and stopping them right in front of the court house made for a short walk to the jail.

Being the only lawyer in town, Lawyer Tate was inundated with cases to defend. Suddenly, Lawyer Tate found himself with far more business than he could handle as he defended the parade of people accused of illegally transporting whiskey through a dry area. Even though he was doing very well as an attorney, he was still looking for ways to cash in on all the whiskey that made its way past the roadblocks.

In order to get his finger directly into the pie, his first task would be to get the people of Stinnett to vote to legalize the sale of whiskey. This proved to be no small matter because the moment that anyone mentioned having a local option election, the preachers would mount such vocal battle from their pulpits that the whole idea would never get anywhere.

As each trial was brought before the judge, Lawyer Tate would request a jury trial on the possibility that he could get his client off on some legal technicality like someone drank the evidence or a witness had been paid not to show up. In order to fill all those seats in the jury box, it was necessary for the judge to send the sheriff out two or three times each day to round up twelve men for jury duty. Since the sheriff tended to grab the first people he came across, the jury usually consisted of the barber and a half-shaved customer, the blacksmith, the guy who pumped gas at the Texaco station and the rest ranchers who were unlucky enough to have been drinking coffee at the cafe when the sheriff came in. Oh yes, and there was always Shorty Braxton, the town dwarf. Actually, Shorty wasn't really a dwarf, but he was the closest thing that we had to one so he had to do. He was so crippled by birth defects and a severe curvature of the spine that he stood only about four and a half feet tall and had to walk with a crutch.

Shorty was the only person in town who liked to be on jury duty because it paid him two dollars each time he served, which was a lot more than he made sweeping floors. He was so crippled that about all he could do in the way of work was to sweep out the pool hall. The man who

owned the pool hall gave him a few dollars now and then for food and let him sleep on a cot in the back room. Other people in town wanted to help take care of him but he refused to accept what he called pity money. As an alternative, each time that there was a bet of any sort, they would let Shorty hold the stakes. When whatever the bet was settled, the winner would give him part of the winnings. That way they could give him a few dollars without it seeming like charity.

The men of Stinnett soon became so tired of being hauled in for jury duty three or four times a week that they decided that the only way to bring it to an end was to get rid of the Highway Patrol's roadblock by voting the town wet. In spite of all the pulpit pounding with threats of fire, brimstone and eternal damnation, Stinnett became "wet" at the next election, making it now the logical stop for the bootleggers. Lawyer Tate lost no time in opening four liquor stores and two bars of his own. He was also able to rent out every vacant building that he owned as either liquor stores or bars. He had to build half a dozen new buildings just to keep up with the demand. Even if the booze happened not to be bought in one of his stores, at least he got the rent on the place where it was sold.

The men of Stinnett were no longer being dragged away from their jobs for jury duty, but other than Lawyer Tate, few of the residents could see any benefits from having to put up with the drunks, fights, assaults and murders that came along with the bars and liquor stores. It took ten years for the people of Stinnett to reverse their mistake and return the town to what it had been before; a dull little place where the topic of the day was either the price of beef or who was caught sleeping with whom.

## Chapter 2

### THE DAY THE MULES WENT CRAZY

Due to my youthful ignorance, I really wasn't aware of how desperate the situation was during the great depression, however I'm sure that my parents were very concerned. Being more or less a rancher, my dad didn't have a regular job as such, but we were probably much better off than most people because owning several head of cattle provided us with all the meat we needed. In addition, we always had a big garden to supplement the beef. The real problem that my dad had was getting money to buy the other things that we needed. As he would say, "It was hard to find two dimes to rub together."

Actually, calling my dad a rancher was stretching things a bit. He did lease a section of grass land and ran a few range cows but for the most part, he made a living by trading cattle. He had an uncanny ability of being able to look at a cow and guess its weight almost to the pound and would know how much it would sell for at the weekly cattle auction in Amarillo. If he could buy something for less than what he could sell it for, he made a profit. While most of his trades involved cattle, he would buy or sell just about anything that he thought would turn a dollar.

One of FDR's programs to put people to work involved building earthen dams to conserve water during the dustbowl days. The dams were built across places where water naturally flowed during rains. By hiring local people to build these dams, the government not only kept the much-needed water from running away, but it had a secondary benefit of providing people with jobs. Engineers would come out, survey the property for the location of the ponds, decide how big they needed to be then figure out how much money the government would pay for building them. The going price ranged from about thirty dollars for a small dam up to a couple hundred for a larger one.

My dad and my uncle who lived next door decided that if they could come up with a pair of good mules, they could get in on the contracts to build some of those dams. They finally located a matched pair of young mules which could be had for almost nothing because neither of them had ever been broken to harness. Not only had these mules never felt harness on their backs, but running loose in the Canadian River breaks, they had seldom ever seen a human. They finally negotiated a price of five dollars for the pair after viewing them from a quarter mile away as they disappeared over a hill in a dead run. It took three days on horseback to find them again, drive them to our ranch



and get them herded into a catch pasture.

Even though my dad had been breaking horses all his life, he knew absolutely nothing about breaking mules. He figured that it should be no more difficult than breaking horses and set about it in the same way. They soon discovered that the only similarity between mules and horses was size and looks.

Their first mistake was trying to break both of them at the same time when any good mule skinner knows that the only way to break a mule is by putting it between a pair of mules which are already broken to harness. After a considerable amount of bucking, braying, kicking and biting, they were finally able to get ropes around their necks and tie them the snubbing post in the middle of the corral. The main problem with having their heads tied to the post was that the dangerous end was always pointed toward you. They quickly discovered that a mule can kick at least twice as far as the average horse. My dad eventually conceded that the only way they were ever going to get harness on those mules was to get them on the ground with all four feet tied together.

For the next several days, they would tie one of the mules to the snubbing post, rope a hind leg and throw him down. Once he was on the ground, it still took at least an hour of hard work to get the harness on him. As soon as they let the mule up, he would start bucking, braying and trying to throw the harness off. It usually took until noon just to get both of them harnessed. At the end of the day, if the mules hadn't succeeded in bucking the harness off, they had to go through the same battle again just to get the harness off.

After about two weeks of constant battle, interspersed by countless kicks, bites and a few broken ribs, they were finally able to get the mules harnessed together and standing quietly side by side at the snubbing post. This was a red letter day in their battle with the mules but they were still a long way from being able to get any work out of them. At least it was progress.

My cousin and I were about seven years old at the time and far more concerned with playing kid games than in the battle going on between man and beast. We had seen our dads working with livestock before and what was going on in the corral held no interest for us. What did interest us at that particular moment was a half grown cat we had found hiding in the feed room in the barn. It was as wild as a box of snakes and did a lot of spitting and growling when we came close. It's a known fact that boys of our age are never able to leave well enough alone, so after a considerable amount of scratching and biting, we finally got it trapped in a gunny sack. It wasn't enough to simply catch the cat, we had to do something to or with the unfortunate animal.

We found an woman's black knit stocking, or hose as they called them in those days. Because of the way that they were knitted, if you pulled on each end it would stretch in length while getting smaller and smaller in diameter. You could stretch one of those things to at least six feet in length while the diameter would be no bigger your arm.

We dropped the cat headfirst into the stocking and shook him down until his fuzzy little nose was poking through a hole in the toe. It's a lucky thing for the cat that there was a hole in the stocking or he most likely would have smothered. Then we cut holes for its feet to stick through. The cat would run around the feed room with the rest of the stocking dragging behind like a long tail. Still not satisfied with the level of torment being inflicted on the unfortunate kitten, we wadded up newspaper and stuffed it in the sock behind him until we had what looked like a long, black snake with four little fuzzy feet sticking out at the head. We were having great sport with the cat until he escaped our clutches, raced out the door, around the barn and out of our sight.

My dad and uncle were resting out of the sun in the back door of the barn, drinking some water and contemplating their success in getting harness on the mules without any major injuries when a big black snake came streaking around the side of the barn and right between the legs of the two mules. This was the only time in their lives that those two mules that they ever did anything in unison. They screamed in mortal fear and shot straight into the air, jerking their halter ropes over the top of the snubbing post. My dad and uncle ran to catch them but when they hit the ground, nothing going to stop those crazed mules.

They knocked my dad and uncle for a loop, crashed through the corral fence and headed straight for where my mother was hanging her wash on the line to dry. She saw them coming and ran for the safety of the house. One mule went on either side of the clothes line pole, ripping it from the ground and dragged the whole thing away with them; sheets, shirts and socks flapping in the air. All that stuff waving in the air behind the mules drove them even crazier.

The next victim of their rampage was the telephone pole next to the house which they straddled the same way that they had the clothes line. The pole snapped like a matchstick and before the wires finally parted, they jerked the old crank-style phone off the wall, sending it crashing into a pot of beans cooking on the stove.

They made a circle around the house and headed for their final target, one of the poles for the new electric line that the REA was running along the edge of our property. This pole proved to be far more substantial than the others because even though they hit it at full tilt, it only shook slightly. This was a case of an unstoppable force striking an immovable object and the harness was what gave way. The last thing my dad and uncle saw of the mules was them racing toward the back of the ranch. Piled against the REA pole was not only the shredded remains of their harness but everything else that they had gathered in their rampage, including my mother's wash.

Without a word, my dad began to sort through the pile of carnage left by the runaway mules. After he had gathered up mother's wash and returned it to her, he picked up a leather strap from the harness about the length of his arm and came back to where my cousin and I were standing. That was the only real whipping that I can remember my dad ever giving either of us, but it was one which would last a long time.

I guess that they sort of gave up on breaking the mules to harness because they started trying to sell them. But when the potential buyers saw how wild the mules were, they seemed to lose all interest.

## Chapter 3

### CLYDE THE OIL SNIFFING DOG

One of the more colorful characters to inhabit the area around Stinnett its early days was a wild looking character known as Luke the Spook. He never shaved, bathed nor got a haircut and it was claimed that you could smell him for a mile against the wind. He lived with his pack of flea infested dogs in a tumble-down shack on the north bank of the Canadian river. Everyone said that he not only slept in a pile with the dogs, but had the same disposition as his mongrel pack.

Luke the Spook never did an honest day's work in his life. He lived from one handout to the next and if you didn't give him what he wanted, he would come back and steal it. He'd steal just about anything to feed him and his dogs; chickens, pigs, cattle, watermelons, vegetables, fruit, and one time he was caught trying to steal a mule which was still hitched to a plow. In the days when doors were never locked, women knew better than to leave a pot of beans cooking on the stove or a pie cooling on a window sill if they expected to have it for dinner that night. The same held true for clothing hung on the line to dry. Luke wasn't too particular about the size of the stuff he stole and usually went around wearing pants six inches too short and shirts that hung to his knees. It got to the point that if someone lost or mislaid something, they would rationalize it by saying that Luke the Spook took it.

One thing that you could say about Luke was that he could train his dogs to do just about anything. He and his dogs would come slinking into town without making a sound and then suddenly turn into a barking, snarling pack. If they happened to get into town without being noticed, they would head directly for the grocery store where the dogs would chase the storekeeper and all his customers into the back room, then Luke would fill a couple gunny sacks with whatever he wanted. When he was ready to leave the store, each dog would grab something in its mouth and they would all head back for the river at a dead run.

About the only place in town where Luke was welcome was the pool hall where the rest of the town bums hung out. No one ever knew how Luke learned to play pool so well, but he had uncanny skill with a pool cue. It was claimed that eight out of ten times, he could break the balls and then run the table without missing a shot. Whenever some stranger who thought that he was pretty good at pool showed up in town, some of the local pool hall bums would get him into a game, loose a few rounds and then offer to bet him that he couldn't beat Luke who was usually sleeping under

the front porch with his dogs. The poor sucker figured that there was no way that he could lose to such a person, so he usually offered to cover all bets. When enough money was on the line, Luke would clean his clock but good. After the sucker was gone, they would split the winnings with Luke.

Lucas Ayler was born just before midnight on Halloween night in 1900 and almost from the day of his birth, he lived with the nickname of Luke the Spook. It was never known whether it was his name or the fact that his mother and father were first cousins or the moon was in the wrong phase when he was born, but as he grew up he gave a whole new meaning to the word, worthless.

It was an accepted fact that in those days kids were given chores to do as soon as they were big enough to walk. The amount and complexity of those chores were usually more or less equal to their age and ability. While most kids would whine about having to do chores but finally go ahead and do them, it was impossible to get Luke to do anything in the way of work. Even when his dad would take a razor strap to his backside in order to get him to do even the simplest of tasks, he would either run away for a few hours or else mess up so badly that it would have been better if they had never made him do it in the first place. If they sent him to the barn to gather eggs, he would usually end up throwing them at the chickens. If they tried to make him bring in firewood, he was more likely to throw it through a window than carry it in through the back door.

Not only did Luke try to avoid work of any sort, but avoided school with equal determination. He might leave for school with his younger brothers and sisters, but he seldom ever got there. As soon as he was out of sight of the house, he would take their lunches away from them and head for the river where he would spend the day fishing or sleeping. About the only time that he actually went to school was when it was too cold to stay outside and then he would curl up behind the heater and sleep. By the time he was around twelve, all the other kids his age were so far ahead of him that the teachers finally told his parents not to send him back again.

Old man Ayler firmly believed in the Bible's admonition that sparing the rod would spoil the child and would lay in on that kid with a vengeance. The older he got, the harder his dad tried to beat the laziness out of him but about all he got for his efforts was further rebellion. His mother, in an effort to try to balance things out, would secretly do Luke's chores and then let her husband think Luke had done them. By the time Luke was fourteen, things had gotten so bad that his dad finally beat him almost senseless with a broom handle and told him to get out of the house and if he ever came back, he would kill him.

Luke evidently took him at his word because he stuffed his clothes into a pillow case, took all the dogs around the place and moved into a vacant shack about two miles up the river. His mother felt so sorry for him that after her husband went to sleep each night, she would slip out of the house and take a pan of biscuits and some pork chops or fried chicken to him.

In addition to being the laziest man around, he was also the town's worst braggart. If he wasn't fleecing someone at the pool table, he was bragging about something. His favorite subject to boast about was how smart his dogs were. If you were to believe him, every one of his mangy mutts was a genius of some sort. He claimed that he could teach his dogs to do just about anything. One of his favorite stories was about the day that he told his dogs to go catch rabbits for dinner. When they just stood there looking at him, he realized that he hadn't told them how many he wanted.

One day a bunch of oilfield workers were at the pool hall and the subject got around to the new well that had come in just south of town. After Luke listened to them speculate about how

much oil would be found in the new field, he finally remarked that he had known that a well drilled there would be a gusher long before they ever set up the rig.

One of the workers who had heard Luke's endless bragging asked him just how he knew that there would be oil at that spot. Luke replied, "I have an old yellow dog named Clyde who can sniff the ground and tell you whether there is oil under it or not."

The man roared with laughter at the thought that a dog could tell if there was oil under ground and offered to bet Luke ten bucks that he couldn't tell him whether the well that they had just started drilling right behind the pool hall would have oil or not. When Luke called the bet, several of his pool hall buddies also wanted to get in on it because they knew that Luke would never put money on anything that wasn't a sure thing. Within minutes, Shorty Braxton was holding a couple hundred dollars riding on the bet.

Luke called Clyde, who was sleeping under the snooker table, and the whole bunch of them went out the back door to the rig, which was pounding away. They had just started drilling that morning and it was only down a couple hundred feet. When Luke ordered Clyde to sniff, he stretched, yawned and began to sniff around the derrick. He wandered away from the rig a bit and all of a sudden, he started to bark and run in circles right behind the hardware store. As they watched in amazement, he sat down and began to howl.

"According to Clyde, there's probably some oil where they are drilling," said Luke, "but if they would have drilled over there where he is sitting, they'd have hit a gusher."

By this time, several other people had joined the crowd and one of them said, "I think that he is full of crap because there is no way that a dog can smell oil under the ground. Not that I believe him, but I just bought a forty acre lease out west of town and plan to start drilling on it next week. I'll give you twenty bucks if you will have your dog tell me where to drill."

Luke took the wildcatter up on the offer and they all piled into his pickup trucks and headed for the lease. When they got there, Luke told the dog, "Clyde, go sniff for oil."

Clyde began to sniff along the fence where he spooked out a big jack rabbit which bounded away in high leaps. Clyde started to chase after it but a sharp whistle from Luke called him back. Clyde sniffed around for a while without any results, then the driller said, "I don't think that damn dog can smell anything."

"Give him time," said Luke. "He's got to get the rabbit scent out of his nose first. It ain't easy to smell oil three thousand feet under the ground."

"I don't think he could smell it if it was only three inches deep," said the driller. "Give me back my twenty bucks."

Suddenly Clyde began to trot faster, then he started to bark with excitement. "I think he's onto something," said Luke.

All of a sudden, Clyde began to run in circles just as he had done behind the hardware store, then he sat down and began to howl. "Drill right where he is sitting and you'll have a gusher," said Luke.

The driller drove a wooden stake into the ground exactly where Clyde was sitting and ordered his drilling crew to set up the rig there. Four weeks later, the well came in with a roar, blowing the blocks right off the top of the derrick and shooting a stream of oil two hundred feet into the sky. The headlines of the newspaper screamed, "GUSHER BLOWS IN. Oil Sniffing Dog Picks

Location."

The price for a sniff job by Clyde quickly jumped from twenty to fifty and then a hundred dollars. Clyde was sniffing from morning to night. Some of the times he said yes and other times he would say no. Within a few weeks, the demand for the services of Clyde's famous nose became so great that the price for a sniff job had jumped to a thousand dollars. Prices of leases skyrocketed or plunged according to Clyde's magic nose.

A couple shysters offered Luke a thousand dollars to get Clyde to say that there was oil under a lease they owned so they could sell it at a big profit. Luke refused and told everyone in town what they had tried. They were lucky to get out of town without a coating of tar and feathers.

It wasn't long before Luke was hauling more money than the people drilling wildcat wells in the locations picked by Clyde. In fact, anything would have been more than some of them were getting because several of the wells were total dusters when the drill bits hit nothing but dolomite at the three thousand foot level. Anyone familiar with drilling knew that if you haven't hit oil by the time you reach the dolomite layer, you might as well pull up and move because there isn't going to be a drop of oil at that location.

Ugly rumors began to float around town as to Clyde's ability to sniff out oil. In fact, some of the drillers who had sunk every cent that they had or could beg, borrow or steal into those dry holes were getting downright nasty. There was talk by some of them about filing fraud charges with the district attorney while others suggested introducing Luke to a rope and a tall tree.

The thing which saved Luke and Clyde's skin is the fact that wildcat oil drillers are eternally optimistic and they will keep pouring good money after bad. One of them in particular, who had hit the first gusher picked by Clyde, was ready to lay out the going price of a thousand dollars for Clyde to sniff out his new lease. He searched for Luke and Clyde around town for a while then drove down to Luke's shack on the river. When he arrived, he found nothing but an empty cabin and a dozen very hungry dogs.

When he returned to town and told of not being able to find Luke, most of the people around the pool hall were concerned that something terrible had happened to him until Sol Levits, who owned the dry goods store, mentioned that Luke had come into town the day before and not only got himself a shave and a haircut at the barber shop, he even took a bath. After he was all cleaned up and smelling like a French whore, he bought a new suit of clothes and a Derby hat at his place. Sol said that he was carrying a suitcase full of money and paid cash for the new clothes. Then left his filthy old rags laying in a pile on the floor and walked across the street to the bus station. The last time that Sol had seen him, he was boarding the Trailways Bus headed south.

They were overjoyed at the news that Luke was alive and well someplace, but also concerned about his doing something as outrageous as taking a bath. They finally concluded that Luke had gone to such drastic measures so he could get himself a woman and would be back in a week or two. However, since he had left Clyde at the shack, they could see no reason why such a good thing as a dog with a magic nose should go to waste. They rationalized that since he had left Clyde at the shack, and he could now be classed as a stray dog and was open to use by anyone. They jumped at the opportunity to make a little money for themselves.

They went down to the shack, got Clyde and took him out to the lease. When they ordered him to go sniff, he began to wander around with his nose to the ground. It was a rather hot day and after a few minutes, he came back, crawled under the pickup and went to sleep in the shade.

"You suppose that there ain't no oil here," asked one.

"He certainly don't act like there's any," said another. "Maybe his nose is just tired out from all the sniffing that he's done recently," he suggested.

"There's bound to be oil here," said the driller. "There are good wells on three sides and the geologist's reports say that the oil-bearing strata runs right across this property."

"Let's try him again," one of the men suggested as he dragged the dog out by a hind leg. "Clyde, go sniff," he ordered.

Clyde wandered off with his nose to the ground. Every now and then he would stop and look back at them as if expecting something to happen, then go on sniffing some more. After about ten minutes, the driller took his hat off to mop the sweat from his brow. Clyde instantly went into his act, running in circles and barking. When the driller put his hat back on, Clyde sat down and began to howl.

"See, he's done found oil!" shouted one of the men.

"I don't think so," said the driller as he called Clyde back. "I think that I just found the Panhandle's biggest scam."

They had Clyde sniff in two other locations, and he responded instantly to the hat trick each time. The owner of the pool hall took Clyde in and fed him for several years until he was run over by a truck while crossing main street. Luke was never seen again.

## Chapter 4

### THE LAST BUFFALO

As I had mentioned before, my dad made a living as much from buying, selling and trading cattle as he did from raising them. After all, one cow produces only one calf each year and with the going price of no more than about five dollars per head being paid for beef on the hoof during the depression, it left most ranchers with a lot of time and reasons to look elsewhere for income.

The oil boom was over but it had left in its wake dozens of small company camps scattered all over the Panhandle. Only the people who worked for oil companies lived in these company-owned towns. While many of these refinery towns were large enough to qualify as small cities, due to fact that the oil company owned both the land and buildings, few people were willing take the risk of investing their hard-earned money in a business there. Occasionally, one would find a small store selling basic needs, but finding a butcher shop with fresh meat was almost impossible. About the only time that people in those camps could buy fresh beef was when they came to town. With people being able to get to town only once every week or two and so few of them owning refrigerators, fresh beef was seldom found on their tables.

In a day when the expression, "Turning handsprings for hotcakes" had a real meaning, my dad and uncle decided that what was needed to serve all these camps was a traveling butcher shop. There should be a sure market for anyone willing to sell fresh beef door to door in these towns. Besides, it would be a way to get rid of yearling calves which were almost worthless.

They bought an old ice truck, bolted a butcher block to the floor in the back and started the only traveling butcher shop in the Panhandle. It didn't take long before the housewives in those camps knew their schedule and were always waiting for the traveling butcher shop to arrive. They soon found that they could leave home in the morning with a whole beef and return with an empty truck that afternoon. With steaks selling for about fifteen cents a pound and roasts a dime, a fair size yearling worth only five or six dollars on the hoof would bring in thirty to forty when butchered and sold over the chopping block. It wasn't long before they had used up all of the butchering-size cattle on the ranch and my dad had to spend a lot of time out buying yearlings from other small ranchers.

It was along about this time when my dad learned that the Army had decided to close Fort Reno near Oklahoma City and was going to sell the last herd of government-owned buffalo at an



auction at Arnette, Oklahoma. How the government came to own the last remaining buffalo is typical of most of the things that the Army did when it was trying to drive all the Indians back to reservations that had been established for them in the Oklahoma Territory. The Indians didn't really like the idea of the white man telling them where to live so a large number of them headed for the Texas Panhandle where the few remaining buffalo still roamed across the grassy plains. The Army figured that instead of hunting down the Indians, if they killed off all the remaining buffalo, the Indians would starve and have to go back to the reservation where the government would feed them. Between the bounty that the Army put on the buffalo and the demand for buffalo hides, perhaps a million of the beasts were gunned down and their carcasses left to rot on the plains.

Also, as is usual with military thinking, they decided to keep a few buffalo around so they could show what a great job they had done in eliminating an entire species of animals. They sent most of the men at the fort out to round up any remaining buffalo and drive them to Fort Reno. Besides, they certainly didn't want to leave any buffalo roaming across the Texas Panhandle in case the Indians tried to return. They were able to find only a couple dozen animals still alive. With no one shooting at them and plenty grass to eat, the herd increased slowly until sixty years later, they numbered more than three hundred. Few people realize that every American buffalo alive today came from those few animals that the Army rounded up and moved to Fort Reno.

With the depression bearing down on military budgets, the Army decided that they needed to spend their money on guns, tanks and other equally efficient methods of breaking things and killing people more than taking care of a few shaggy old buffalo. As a cost-cutting measure, some General decided to auction off the critters to people who seemed willing to buy most anything at a government auction.

On the appointed day of the sale, my dad, my uncle and I left well before sunrise in order to get there before the bidding began. For the life of me, I will never understand why they wanted to drive all the way to Oklahoma and spend good money to buy something as worthless as a buffalo. Even at my youthful age, I could fathom no reason why any normal person would want to buy something that even the government considered to be worthless.

When the sale was over, my dad was the proud owner of a seven hundred pound buffalo bull for which he had bid twenty-five dollars. This was at least five times what a cow of the same weight would bring at auction. The only remaining task was to get the thing back home. We were in our pickup truck which had sideboards on it for hauling cattle, but it seems that while buffalo and cattle might appear similar in many ways, there is a considerable difference in temperament. As soon as they loaded the critter into the back of the pickup, it leaped right out over the front, onto the cab and back on the ground. Fortunately, the loading chute was inside of the cattle pens and it didn't escape.

They tied a bunch of boards on top of the sideboards and backed up to the chute once again. They jumped the buffalo back into the pickup and when it found that there was no escape, it began to try to turn the pickup over by crashing against first one side and then the other. About the only thing which saved a total disaster was the fact that there was not enough room for the buffalo to get up a good head of steam before he hit the sideboards. After about an hour of thrashing, snorting and pawing, it finally settled down a bit and we left for home. Every now and then it would decide to throw another fit which would nearly turn us over, so we had to drive about twenty miles an hour all the way back to Stinnett.

It was along about midnight when we finally got home and they very wisely decided that the safest thing to do was leave the buffalo in the pickup until morning. When daylight came, the beast seemed to have calmed down considerably because it just stood there and glared at us. Convinced that the buffalo was now more or less tame, they backed up to the loading chute, opened the back gate and turned it loose in the corral. It hit the ground, lowered its head, gave a snort and crashed right through the corral fence which in the past, had been strong enough to stop any number of charging bulls.

Then the buffalo went totally berserk. First, it charged after my dad and uncle who took refuge in the cab of the pickup. I don't know if it knew that they were inside or could see its reflection in the paint on the door, but it began attacking the pickup from all sides, putting dents in just about every piece of sheet metal on it. Unable to vent its pent-up anger on them, it turned its attention to whatever was closest. It knocked the door off the barn and chased our saddle horse out of the corral. It leveled the chicken house and sent a couple dozen old hens flying and squawking. It scared the milk cow so bad that she jumped into the water tank and didn't give a drop of milk for the next four days. With nothing else left standing for it to attack, the buffalo lowered its head and charged toward the house. It was obvious that the buffalo's intention was to turn the house into kindling, so my dad grabbed his Winchester and pumped four 30-30 slugs into it. The buffalo dropped dead with its head only inches from our back door. Now, they had a dead, twenty-five dollar buffalo on their hands.

Always being one to recognize and seize an opportunity, they butchered the buffalo, hung its head on the front of the old ice truck and set out on their meat route the next morning. Even though most people would say that buffalo meat is not nearly as good as a tender steak, they priced it at twenty-five cents a pound. They sold out of buffalo meat before they were out of town and other people who had heard about it were waving them down to buy some.

Faced with such a monumental success, they couldn't give up on a good thing simply because they had sold all of the meat from that one buffalo. Since they had killed the last buffalo in the Panhandle and there were no more to be found, they did the next best thing. Under the assumption that the average person couldn't tell the difference between buffalo meat and mule meat, they butchered those two bronc mules and sold them as buffalo. By the time that they had satisfied the demand of the citizens of the Panhandle for buffalo meat, they had sold nearly a ton of it, all from one seven hundred pound buffalo.

## Chapter 5

### THE DAY THE TWISTER CAME TO TOWN

Twisters, tornadoes, or cyclones as they are variously known, have been spinning across the Texas Panhandle for thousands and perhaps millions of years. The Indians who lived on the plains long before the white man came called them "Dancing Winds". They even had a ceremonial dance which imitated them. According to their legends, the funnel of a tornado was caused by gods in the sky sucking the souls of the dead up to heaven. I don't know about dead souls, but they have been known to suck up just about everything else.

Tornados are both feared and revered. They have been known to pick up a house, turn it around and set it back on the foundation without damaging it. There are stories about tornados sucking wells dry and driving straws through trees. There is the story about the tornado that ripped through town, blew away the roof and walls of the Baptist church but left everything inside untouched. The music book was still on the piano, open to the last hymn that was played. But, probably the best story about the power and mystery of tornados came about because of a simple prank.

There was a man by the name of Barrett who owned the local diary and was, without question, the biggest liar in that part of the state. He had this half-wit son named Waldo who followed him around no matter where he went and every time that Barrett started telling some outrageous lie, he would call on his goofy son to verify it. He would stop in the middle of one of his lies and say, "Ain't that so, Waldo?"

Waldo would always reply, "Shore did, Pa, what was it?" Then old man Barrett would go on just like his story had been sworn to by a Supreme Court Justice.

It seemed that just about any time that you met Mr. Barrett, he would launch into some tall tale. If there wasn't some subject of particular interest to lie about, he would come up with some new exploit of his horse that he called Old Granddad, named after a bottle of rotgut whiskey. His stories ranged from Old Granddad being able to count to going out and bringing home only the cows which were giving milk, but mostly his boasts centered around how high the horse could jump. Everyone around Stinnett was well aware of the fact that the horse was quite a jumper since the time when Barrett won the bet that he made with a traveling salesman that his horse could jump

over a car.

The car-jumping exploit was the biggest thing to happen around Stinnett since the time the fire truck ran away and smashed fifty dollars worth of watermelons in Cletus Burford's garden. The great car jump happened on main street right in front of the cafe one Saturday morning. At least half the town was there to see it. Barrett was bragging about how his horse had won all sorts of blue ribbons in jumping contests in Kentucky where he was born and trained. After a traveling tractor salesman in the crowd had listened to all boasting that he could stand, he decided to call Barrett's bluff and offered to bet five bucks that the horse couldn't jump over the hog-wire fence that Lawyer Tate had put up to keep Ed Bebedorff from parking wrecked cars on a vacant lot he owned next to the garage.

To his surprise, Barrett took him up on the bet. When the money was on the line, Barrett kicked Old Granddad in the flanks and he hopped right over the low fence. Barrett declared that was the easiest five bucks that he had ever made and jumped the horse back over the fence to prove the point. Then he said, "Hell, Old Granddad can jump over things a lot higher than that little fence."

Everyone was laughing about how the salesman had been taken on his own bet so he decided to either get even or else have the satisfaction of making Barrett back down. Everyone gathered around in eager anticipation as he said, "If you think that horse of yours is so damn good, I'll bet you a hundred bucks that he can't jump over the hood of my Buick parked over there."

A gasp came from the crowd because a hundred dollars was more money than most of them had ever seen, much less known to have ever been placed on a bet.

Barrett looked over at the car and said, "Gee, that's a lot higher than he has ever jumped before. Suppose that he hits the hood of your new car and damages it."

"Then you'd lose because he has to clear it, and if he does damage the car, you'll have to pay for it," said the salesman, pushing the point.

Everyone figured that Barrett was going to tuck his head and ride away but he said, "If I'm going to have to be responsible for any damages to the car, then I think that you should give me at least two to one odds."

"Hell, I'll give you three to one odds if that's what it takes to make a lying sack of crap like you back down," boasted the salesman, pulling a big roll of bills out of his pocket and peeling off three one hundred dollar bills.

Barrett just sat there, looking at the shiny new Buick while the salesman gloated and waved the money under his nose. Barrett finally reached in his pocket, counted out five twenties and handed them to Shorty Braxton who was going to hold the stakes.

When the tractor salesman made the offer, he had no idea that there was the slightest possibility that Barrett would take him up on such an outlandish bet, but he was now out on a very thin limb of his own creating and there was no way that his ego would allow him to back down at this point. He reluctantly handed his three hundred dollars to Shorty.

Several people who knew that Barrett would never accept such a bet unless he felt sure of winning, so they rushed forward to get in on the bet too. The salesman was already far deeper into this mess than he ever expected to be, so he refused, saying that this was strictly between him and Barrett and he wouldn't extend it to anyone else.

Barrett rode up to the Buick, let Old Granddad stick his nose over the hood to see how high he had to jump and rode slowly up the street so he could get a good run.

Everyone from both the cafe and the pool hall was lined up along the street, waiting breathlessly as the horse concentrated on the Buick. Then he came galloping easily toward the car, gave a small bound to pace himself and sailed over it with barely an inch to spare. As the horse cleared the hood of the car, a shout went up from everyone except the tractor salesman who stood there in shocked silence.

As Barrett collected his winnings, he told the salesman, "It's only fair that I give you a chance to get even. I'll bet you five hundred dollars even money that he can jump over the top of it."

It was now a matter of pride with the tractor salesman. He had seen the horse jump over the hood but clearing it only by an inch or so. Jumping clear over the top of the car would be another matter. "You're on," said the salesman as he dug into his roll again.

Old Granddad was just as much at ease as he cleared the top of the Buick as when he had hopped over the fence. Barrett collected his winnings and said, "Want to go for a thousand that he can jump over it lengthwise?"

"Hell no. You and that trick horse has already cost me too much," replied the salesman as he got in his car and roared out of town.

I was taking a shortcut by Barrett's place as I walked home from school one afternoon and noticed Old Granddad standing in one of the lots in front of the long milk barn. The barn was at least a hundred feet long with milking stalls downstairs and a hay loft upstairs. As was Barrett's custom, he had tied Old Granddad with a long rope which allowed him to hop from one pen to another but it kept him from jumping over the main fence and getting away. I thought how much fun it would be to give Old Man Barrett something to really lie about.

I untied the rope from where it was tied, led Old Granddad around the end of the barn and into the stack lot behind it and threw the rope back over the top of the barn. I went back around the barn, tied the rope back just like it had been and slipped away. I could just hear old man Barrett telling about how his horse had jumped over the milk barn.

A thunderstorm was rolling in from the southwest and I had to run to get home before the rain hit. As was the custom in those days before television and instant weather warnings, any time that a thunderstorm came up, everyone would go outside and watch it. If things began to look too serious, they would all head for the storm cellar to wait it out. They used to call those storm cellars "Hidey Holes". I had just barely reached the house when I heard my mother shouting for me to get in the cellar with her because there was a thin funnel trailing from the bottom of the cloud.

By normal tornadic standards it wasn't much of a twister. It wasn't one of those big, black things that sounded like a hundred trains, but it more resembled a rope dangling out of the bottom of the cloud. It whipped around in the sky for a few minutes, dipped down and twisted through town, turning over a few outhouses and demolished a couple chicken coops before disappearing back into the cloud. About the most serious damage that it did was to suck several of Mrs. Bateman's old red hens right off their nests and carry them away. The next day, some of Mrs. Bateman's chickens were found five miles east of town, still alive and seemingly little the worse for their airborne trip.

As soon as the twister was gone, everyone in town gathered in front of the courthouse to compare notes on the damage done by the twister. Everyone had a story about how close it came to them and how they barely escaped with their lives, but as the old saying goes, the first liar didn't have a chance. Everyone knew that Mrs. Bateman didn't have more than a dozen chickens on her place, including three or four old ratty roosters, but according to her, the twister had sucked up at

least a hundred of her best laying hens. Old Man Stinson, the town drunk, claimed that he was sitting in his outhouse when the tornado came and sucked it up into the cloud, spun around a couple hundred times and set back down right over the hole where it had been. This story was no surprise because Old Man Stinson was always thinking that things like that happened to him. In fact, he claimed that he had been sucked up into the air by Army planes as they flew over. When everyone thought that all the stories had been told, Mr. Barrett came running up, all wild eyed and out of breath. "You ain't gonna believe what that twister did at my place," he shouted. "It picked Old Granddad up out of the corral in front of the barn where I had him tied, blew him clean over the barn and set him down in the stack lot behind it without putting a mark on him! I know that it did because the rope is still over the top of the barn! Ain't it Waldo!"

"It shore is, Pa! I seen it!"

Since even Waldo seemed to be sure about the story, and the diary was only about a block from the court house, everyone decided to go see it for themselves. Sure enough, there stood Old Granddad in the stack lot with the rope running right over the roof of the barn. Even to this day, whenever stories are told around Stinnett about the strange things that twisters can do, someone will always come up with the one about the tornado that picked up a horse, blew it over a barn and set it down behind it without doing the slightest damage to either the barn or the horse.

## Chapter 6

### CRAZY WALTER

Crazy Walter wasn't really crazy in the way that most people think crazy people should act; like talking to imaginary friends, setting fires and killing cats. Those doctors with funny names and leather couches could probably rattle off several important sounding medical terms for what was wrong with Crazy Walter but everyone around Stinnett knew that when he got struck by the lightning bolt, it simply burned off all his hair, knocked his brain out of gear and left him talking like a duck. No matter how hard teachers and his parents tried to get his brain back in gear and going again, he was never able to get past being a six year old. He looked more or less normal except that the lightning bolt turned his hair bright red and made it stick out in all directions. He looked like one of those cartoon characters who had just stuck a finger in a light socket.

After a month or so his hair began to grow back and he quit talking like Donald Duck, so everyone thought he was going to be just fine. It wasn't long before the teachers realized that he wasn't learning how to read, write or add numbers like the other kids. At the end of the year, he was still a happy little boy on his first day in school and there was nothing to do except make him take first grade all over again.

At the end of the next school year, Walter still hadn't learned a thing but since it was school policy not to keep a student in any one grade for longer than two years, they promoted him to the second grade. I don't know if that policy came about because the teachers couldn't stand any kid for more than two years or if they thought that no matter how dumb a kid might be, he was bound to soak up enough after two years to go on to the next grade.

His parents figured that he would grow out of being struck by lightning in the same way kids grow out of stuttering or wetting the bed, so they kept sending him to school with the hope that if he went there long enough, he was bound to start learning something.

I caught up with and passed Crazy Walter at around the fourth grade. All the rest of the kids were about ten years old while he was at least sixteen and twice as big as the rest of us. The fourth grade was also where we met Mrs. Weaver. I don't know if there was a Mr. Weaver but if there was, I certainly pity the man. If she had a husband we never saw or heard of him. After having her as a teacher for a year, I don't think there was a man alive who could put up with her.

Mrs. Weaver was not only the homeroom teacher for the fourth grade but also taught what she called Music Appreciation in high school. I don't know how anyone could appreciate the stuff that she tried to cram down us because as my daddy always put it, "If you can't dance to it, it ain't music." For kids who thought that The Wabash Cannonball was the national anthem, trying to get them interested in music composed by old men with long hair and funny names was next to impossible.

I don't know where Mrs. Weaver came from but it certainly wasn't from Texas or any other place where normal people live. She talked and acted like one of those rich old biddies you see in the movies. She smoked cigarettes in a long holder like President Roosevelt and used words that none of us understood. Whenever she was particularly displeased with us, she would stamp her foot and call us Filthy Little Urchins. We all knew what filthy was but we had to get a dictionary to find out about urchins. It said an urchin was a spiny creature that lived in the ocean. We decided that if something lived in water, then how could it be filthy. Anyway, being called names, especially ones we didn't understand, didn't bother us all that much because most of us were used to being called much worse names that we did understand.

Every time that Walter came into her class, he would say, "Hore thar Miz Weaver, I hardly reckanosed you."

Mrs. Weaver would always correct him by stressing each syllable in each word, "Hello there, I hardly recognized you."

Walter's instant reply was always the same, "Aw shucks, Miz Weaver, you know who I am. I'm Walter."

This would send all the kids in the room into screaming fits of laughter and Mrs. Weaver into a fit of scolding us by saying, "I certainly do not see anything amusing about that."

Since Walter was always so disruptive in class, Mrs. Weaver made him pull his desk up beside hers so she could keep him under control. One day she was writing something on the black board and as she bent over to write at the very bottom of the board, her rather broad posterior became too much of a temptation for Walter. He pulled a rubber band cut from an old inner tube out of his pocket, then he stretched it out like he was going to pop her on the butt.

When everyone in the class began to snicker, Mrs. Weaver turned around to see what was going on. By the time she turned around, Walter would hide the rubber band. He had done this three or four times when the rubber band broke and he really popped her a good one. She jumped straight up into the air, let out a screech and slapped him across the face so hard that he still had a red hand print on his cheek when school let out.

A man came to the school one day to test everyone to find out how well they could see and discovered that Walter was blind as a bat. He concluded that the reason why Walter couldn't learn to read and write was because everything was just one big blur to him. He fixed him up with a pair of glasses with lenses so thick that they looked like they were made from Coke bottle bottoms. Evidently he could now see a lot better but his field of vision was rather narrow because he had to move his head back and forth in order to zero in on whatever he was looking at. He might have been able to see better with the new glasses but he still couldn't learn anything because his brain had been permanently knocked out of gear.

The three most important things in Walter's life was a pet monkey, an old yellow dog named Bill and a bicycle that he got for Christmas. The monkey had escaped when a carnival was in town



and after they left, Walter found it hiding in a tree. The monkey had been trained to ride on the back of a dog like a little jockey as part of the show, so it was only natural for him to jump right on Bill's back. Bill didn't take too well to having a monkey on his back at first, but he finally got around to accepting it. Walter's mother even made the monkey a little jockey suit and they would dress him up when he rode on Bill.

Crazy Walter rode a bicycle everywhere he went and could pedal about as fast as most people drove in those days. Walter liked to race up and down main street on his bicycle. Bill, with the monkey clinging to his back, would run along beside him.

One Saturday morning they were doing their usual thing on main street when an insurance salesman driving through town in a big old Hudson got so interested in the strange sight of a monkey on a dog chasing after a wild looking man on a bicycle that he ran off the road, knocked the porch off the cafe and crashed into the side of Lawyer Tate's brand new Packard.

Shorty Braxton was the only witness to the accident and the insurance salesman figured that nobody would believe a cripple, so tried to say that it was all Walter's fault for attracting his attention and he shouldn't be held responsible. After Shorty told what had really happened, Lawyer Tate decided that since the insurance salesman didn't live there, he wanted him to pay for the damage on the spot or else leave his car as security. When the insurance man couldn't come up with the money or an insurance policy to cover the damage, Lawyer Tate had Ed Bebedorff drag the Hudson across the street and store it on his vacant lot. It's too bad that the salesman didn't buy some of his own insurance because he couldn't pay for the damage and Lawyer Tate had the Sheriff auction off the Hudson to pay for the damages.

When the war started, Walter went down to the post office and registered for the draft along with all the other young men in town. A few weeks later, he received his induction notice and reported for his physical examination. Everyone in town was surprised that he even got a draft notice considering how goofy he was. Evidently the Army doctors were in a bit of a hurry that morning and the examination consisted of little more than bend over, spread your cheeks, turn your head and cough. The next thing Walter knew, he was on a bus headed for Fort Sill, Oklahoma for basic training. As he was boarding the bus to leave, his dad who had served in World War One, told him the secret for getting along in the Army, "Keep your mouth shut, your bowels open and don't volunteer for nothing."

A month later, an Army Corporal delivered Walter back home with his hair buzzed off and wearing an Army uniform with no insignia or buttons on it. His pants kept falling down because they even kept his belt. Walter told everyone that he was going to be an airplane pilot and they had just sent him home until they could find an airplane for him to fly. Every time that an airplane flew over, Walter would run outside to see if it was coming for him.

Walter said that he really like being in the Army because they fed him all he could eat, gave him his own gun to carry, blew whistles a lot and told him everything to do. He said that the only time that they really got mad and yelled at him was when he accidentally shot a man named Lieutenant in the leg. He liked being in the Army so much that his mother sewed new buttons and his dad's old Sergeant's stripes on the uniform that they sent him home in and he continued to wear it all the time.

One day Walter saw a convoy of Army trucks coming through town so he stood in the middle of main street and saluted each vehicle as it passed. When a Captain in a Jeep spotted him,

he stopped and told Walter that he was out of uniform. Walter replied, "No Sir, I ain't out of my uniform, I'm in it."

Shorty Braxton was drinking coffee in the cafe and saw what was going on so he came to Walter's rescue. If he hadn't, Walter might have ended up back in the Army again.

In those days whenever people heard any airplane, especially one that sounded big enough to be an Army airplane, they would rush outside to watch it fly over. Everyone could tell from the sound of the engine that the airplane was in trouble. It was coughing, sputtering and backfiring; then a stream of blue smoke began to trail from the engine. They watched as it banked left and disappeared behind the depot. A few seconds later a big ball of black smoke rolled into the sky. Everyone in town rushed down to the railroad to see the airplane crash. The plane had crashed in Cletus Fenno's cow pasture, slid through the fence and into Mrs. Rucker's chicken house, killing twenty-three of her best laying hens.

The pilot told them what happened, "The plane was on fire and I had to crash land in a cow lot next to the railroad tracks. As soon as the ship stopped sliding, I was out of it like a shot because I figured that it was going to explode any second. As I ran from the plane, some guy with bright red hair and wearing an Army uniform with Sergeant's stripes ran past me and jumped into the cockpit. A few seconds later the gas tanks blew. He didn't have a chance."

The Army finally paid Mrs. Rucker thirty dollars for the chicken house and a buck each for the laying hens that they killed but refused to give Walter's folks anything for him. They said that it was his own fault that he jumped into a burning airplane.

## Chapter 7

### EVERYTHING THAT I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT SEX

At birth, girls and boys are very different, not just because girls don't have a penis but in many other ways. The moment that babies are old enough to grasp something, girls reach for their dad's finger and boys reach for their penis. Little girls are able to totally control their fathers by holding on to a single finger but boys soon discover that they are totally unable to effect the slightest amount of control over that appendage which falls so readily to hand. While boys are able to produce an erection at the slightest whim, there is no way that they can get one to go away. It seemed to delight in springing to attention at the worst possible places and times.

The accumulated misinformation believed by boys my age about the subject of sex would fill volumes. It was probably one of the most talked-about subjects among prepubescent boys and it also seemed that those who knew the least about the subject had the most to say about it. Our knowledge of sex was limited to cats and dogs. We knew that sex between cats involved lots of screaming, yowling and scratching while dogs usually resulted in their getting hung together and the larger one dragging the smaller one around the neighborhood backward. Also, any time that our mothers saw cats or dogs in the act, they would throw a bucket of cold water on them. The thought of any one, much less all three of these things happening to one of us was enough for us to commit to a life of celibacy

Preachers always had something to say about sex and sin, which seemed to be as inseparable as the Siamese twins we saw in the National Geographic. According to him, only married people should ever have sex and then only if absolutely necessary and they did it only to have babies. About the only thing that we knew for sure about sex was that it was both dirty and sinful, and you should throw a bucket of cold water on cats and dogs if you saw them doing it.

We kept hearing adults talk about the birds and bees until most of us began to believe that, except for chickens, birds could only do it in trees and if a girl got stung by a bee, she would have a baby. Some boys even believed that if you did it in a tree, the girl couldn't get pregnant, even though that was another word which rated right along with the dreaded F word which flowed freely among us boys but was never mentioned around adults. About the only reference you would ever hear concerning a pregnant woman was either that she was in the family way or had swallowed a

watermelon seed. This also caused a lot of misinformation about the connection between eating watermelons and having babies.

Every boy my age knew that nice girls didn't do it and only really bad girls did. We were never sure of which girls were good ones and which were bad ones, because those who might have gone bad and done it once or twice kept it pretty much a secret. It was an accepted fact that girls would only do it with someone that they liked a lot or planned to marry, but even then the boy had to wear a rubber. Little did we realize that since girls tended to mature faster than boys, most of them knew about sex at least a couple years before it became such a big part of our lives. Neither did we realize that the sex drive is often stronger among girls than among boys of the same age.

Even though the main subject of conversation any time that boys got together was which girls in school would do it and which ones wouldn't, we didn't have the slightest idea of why they would or would not do it. In fact, we weren't entirely sure of why we wanted to do it either. From our animal observations, it was over within a couple seconds and seemed to hardly be worth all the effort. About the only animals which took any real amount of time when they did it were dogs when they would get hung up and one of them would drag the other one down the street. We certainly didn't want something like that to happen to us.

While our minds weren't totally aware of what was really going on in our bodies, our basic instincts were. I suppose that it is now an accepted fact that the arrival of puberty and playing with one's self comes at about the same time. Back when I was a kid, boys were told that masturbation, although they never used that word, would drive them crazy, make them go blind or both. If this fable bore the slightest bit of truth, the world would surely be populated by nothing but blind, crazy people. We were also told that playing with ourselves would cause warts to grow in the palms of our hands. Boys were constantly checking their palms for the telltale signs of what they had been doing.

Along with puberty comes another very real problem, especially for boys, because they seemed to go around in a constant state of erection. Any time that we talked about girls, thought about girls, looked at a picture of a girl or even saw a girl walking by, the thing would leap to attention. It seemed to have a mind and will of its own and would spring up the most inopportune times. While there was a certain amount of sexual frustration involved with our condition, it often led to a considerable amount of embarrassment.

Mrs. Higgins, who worked in the school lunch room, had always had a rather low opinion of men, which certainly didn't improve any when she caught her husband, who was the janitor at the school, and the girls gym teacher going at it like a pair of monkeys on the wrestling mats stored in a closet behind the stage. Neither her errant husband nor the gym teacher were ever seen again but after the story got out, all the boys experienced a certain vicarious thrill each time that they used the mats. Mrs. Higgins was also something of a religious fanatic who vowed to bring Mary Beth up with her same fervor and devotion to the church, God and hatred of men.

On the occasion of Mary Beth's thirteenth birthday, instead of ordering the brassiere from the Sears Roebuck catalog that she not only wanted but certainly needed to contain her budding breasts, Mrs. Higgins bought her a new bible in a white leather case with a zipper around it. Her mother also chose this occasion to tell her about the facts of life. Instead of telling Mary Beth about growing up, boys, love, sex, babies and thing like that, she decided that the best way to keep her daughter pure was to scare the hell out of her. Although her lecture may have been well-intended,

it was hardly accurate.

She told Mary Beth, "When the Bible tells the story of Adam and Eve and speaks of the serpent of sin which caused them to be cast out of the Garden of Eden, it isn't talking about the same sort of snake that we find in the garden. The bible is referring to a serpent of sin every man is born with. This serpent of sin is driven by uncontrollable lust to escape from men's pants so it can attack and enter the bodies of young women. If this serpent ever enters your body, it is the ultimate sin and you will be damned to hell forever."

She continued her lecture on men, "This serpent of sin has the ability to tempt young women and cast a spell over them which will make them so weak that they will submit and allow it to do terrible things to them. To even think about this serpent, much less look at one, is the most unspeakable of all sins. To allow it to touch your body will sentence you to a life of eternal damnation."

It was often the case when both boys and girls would have to use the gymnasium at the same time and the teachers would do their best to keep them separated by having the boys play at one end and the girls at the other. No matter how hard the teachers tried to maintain a safe and proper separation between the boys and girls, it seemed that a ball would accidentally bounce to the wrong end of the gym and in retrieving it, there would be a certain amount of playing the old game of tickle, feel and slap.

It also seemed that in the heat of play, gym shorts and tops had a habit of slipping in such a way that the opposite side would be rewarded with a quick glimpse of a bare breast or exposed penis. Mary Beth was always so afraid that she might commit the mortal sin of seeing a serpent of sin that she would always keep her back turned when boys were playing at the other end of the gym.

One day in class, David Keller, who sat directly across the aisle from Mary Beth and had a case of puppy love for her that raged like a grass fire driven by a southwest wind, finally worked up the courage to slip her a note which said, "Can I carry your books home after school?"

Mary Beth, who really liked David a lot, was about to agree when the teacher called on David to stand and read from that day's lesson. David, who had been thinking quite a bit about how nice Mary Beth's breasts looked as her nipples pressed against her starched white blouse like the noses of a pair of puppies and day dreaming about what it would be like to touch them, stood up to read. As David rose from his seat, he and most of the other kids in the class realized that he wasn't the only thing standing erect. Tom Cotter, who was always able to say the wrong thing at the worst possible time, whispered in a voice loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, "Look, Davey's got a boner."

Mary Beth turned her head to see what he was talking about and found herself face to face with the huge bulge in David's pants. She leaped to her feet, her face white as a sheet, and holding her geography book over her crotch she raced to the other side of the room, screaming, "Oh please Dear God, save and protect me from David's serpent of sin. It's lusting for me and wants to enter my body."

It's sufficient to say that while David never carried Mary Beth's books home that day or any other, he was the main topic of conversation around school for the next several weeks.

In those days, about the most available forms of erotic literature available to boys my age was the National Geographic magazine and the women's underwear section of the Sears Roebuck

catalog. As soon as the latest copy of the National Geographic arrived, we would rush off to our rooms with it to see if there were any photos of bare-chested native girls. If it did happen to contain any erotic photos, every boy in town would know about them within an hour. With a little imagination, those photos were equal to the best that Penthouse or Playboy can come up with today.

One day Gary Cotter, Tom's older brother, came home after finishing boot camp in the Navy. He had dropped out of high school the day he turned sixteen and his parents signed the papers to let him join the Navy. Along with some great stories about the things that they did during basic training, he also had a roll of 8mm movie film that he had bought in Tijuana the night after finishing boot camp. That was the only time they let them off the base, and naturally they headed straight for the border. He had never seen the film because he hadn't been able to find a projector but the man who sold it to him said that it was really hot stuff and it showed people doing all sorts of things with one another. Not only did he buy the roll of film, but he also got drunk and had a tattoo of an anchor put on his arm. Across the anchor was a red ribbon with "Anita" on it. Anita was a girl that he had dated a few times before he left. By the time he got home, the tattoo was all swelled up and full of puss but he said that was normal because it happened to everyone who got a tattoo in Mexico. He said that you had to be a real man to get a tattoo.

Not only did he bring home that roll of film, but he let all of us see the real condom, or rubber as it was euphemistically known, that the Navy had issued to all the new boots before they went off the base on a pass. He said that along with giving everyone a rubber, they made them watch what they called personal hygiene movies. He said that you wouldn't believe some of the things that they saw in those movies. He had taken the rubber with him when he went to Tijuana but after buying the film, picking up the tab for several shots of tequila and paying for the tattoo, he didn't have enough money to pay for a girl to use it on. We wanted him to unroll the rubber to see how long it was but he said that he was saving it in case Anita decided to let him do it for good luck before he was shipped off to the war.

When Gary left to go back to his ship, he let Tom have his rubber because he said that Anita told him that she wasn't going to do it until she got married. We all knew the reason why she wouldn't let him do it was because ever since he joined the Navy she had been doing it every day in the back seat of Brad Trent's car behind the bleachers at the football field right after practice. Brad was the starting quarterback and Anita was the head cheerleader. Almost every boy in school knew what was going on because each time Brad and Anita drove around behind the bleachers, we would climb up the framework above the bathrooms under the bleachers and watch through the cracks in the Mail Pouch Chewing Tobacco sign that covered the back wall.

The football coach caught them one afternoon, naked as Jay Birds, and kicked Brad off the team because he said that doing it with a girl saps all your strength and it was no wonder that they lost the last six games of the season. It was a rather stupid and useless thing for the coach to kick him off the team because the season was already over and Brad was a senior and wouldn't be back next year anyway.

A month or two later when Anita showed up a little bit pregnant, her folks took Brad to court to make him pay child support. Brad got all his football buddies to swear to the judge that every one of them had been with Anita so no one was sure who the baby belonged to. Anita became known as the town slut and had to go live with an aunt in Billings, Montana for the next

several months.

We finally borrowed a projector which fit the film from Mr. Zzikxz and went down in Tom's basement to see it. The film broke two or three times before we got it threaded right but when it finally ran, it was a total disappointment. It was only about a minute long and so faded and scratched that you could barely make out that there were people in it but you couldn't tell what they were doing. We ran it ten or fifteen times because there was one place where we thought we could see a bare breast but we were never sure. It was probably nothing more than a water spot. When Tom's mother found out about the film, she took it away and burned it.

Having possession of a genuine Navy-issued condom made Tom a special celebrity among all the boys as soon as the word got around. In almost no time at all, the girls also heard about Tom's rubber and each time that they saw him, they would whisper, point and giggle. The story got started that it had an anchor and USN stamped on it and was over a foot long when unrolled. Everyone wanted to see if it was true, including the girls who were as interested in seeing the genuine Navy condom as we boys were. The only difference was that they were too embarrassed come right out and ask to see it.

One day when Tom was showing us his rubber under the stairs leading down to the basement, a couple of the older girls in high school came along and told him that it was against the law for anyone under sixteen years old to have one of those things and suggested that he give it to them. Tom was about to hand it over when the janitor came walking by and frightened the girls away. That was probably the only thing which saved him from losing his precious rubber.

One day, Tom was showing the rubber to several boys under the stairs when they suggested that he blow it up to see how big it got. Tom unrolled the rubber and started blowing it up like a giant balloon. It got bigger, and bigger, and bigger until it was eight inches across and long as your arm. Tom's face was red and his eyes bugged out from all the huffing and puffing. Suddenly it slipped out of his fingers and rocketed up the stairs with Tom in hot pursuit. As he reached the top of the stairs and bent down to pick up the deflated rubber, he came face to face with Mrs. Weaver who was coming downstairs from her music class. She took one look at the limp blob at her feet, shook her finger in his face and shouted, "Tom Cotter! You are a filthy minded, disgusting little urchin!"

In the days before rubber vending machines found their way into service station restrooms, the only place to buy rubbers was at the drug store. The only problem was Mr. Black kept them locked in a drawer in the prescription department and not out in the open where you could just pick them up. We had gone into Black's Drug Store a number of times with the intention of buying a rubber but Mrs. Black always seemed to be working back there where they were kept and there was no way that we were going to ask a woman for a rubber. Even when Mr. Black was alone in the store, we were never able to work up the courage.

There was another down side associated with buying rubbers at the drug store. Mr. Black had four daughters and I shudder to think what would happen if a boy who had bought a rubber at the drug store ever turned up at his door to take one of his daughters out. I did date Barbara Black several times while in high school and Mr. Black was always nice to me when I came to pick her up. I guess he figured that since I had never bought a rubber, she was relatively safe with me.

Barbara did introduce me to the benefits of double dating with several other couples in a car. In order to get six horny teenagers in the back seat of a car, the girls had to sit on the boy's

laps. This could lead to some very interesting situations, especially when the driver went over big bumps that bounced everyone around. Barbara seemed to delight in bouncing and squirming on my lap long after the bump was past.

Every boy our age is well aware that the reason why a you had an erection was to make it stiff enough so you could stick it into something, preferably a girl. Since we were having absolutely no success in finding willing girls, we were always looking for a suitable alternative to practice on. Often, those substitutes proved to be totally unsuitable for the purpose. Take the situation of my cousin and the Log Cabin Bank.

Back in those days, the Log Cabin Syrup Company sold their maple pancake syrup in cans which were shaped and painted to look like little log cabins. You unscrewed a cap on the chimney to pour the syrup out. As an advertising promotion, when you bought a can of their syrup, you also got a bank which looked just like one of their regular syrup cans except that it had a coin slot in the top and a little square door in the bottom that locked with a small brass key.

I was spending a week or two with my cousin up in Guymon, Oklahoma. He had the neatest tree house. It wasn't really a tree house even though we called it that. It was more like a windmill house since it was built about half way up in an old windmill derrick. There were few trees around Guymon big enough to hold a bird's a nest, much less strong enough for a kid to build a tree house. When the city extended water and sewer service into that neighborhood, they took down the windmill wheel but left the derrick. With indoor plumbing, the outhouse was no longer needed, so we tore it down for the lumber to build the tree house. To get into the tree house, you had to climb up the ladder on the outside of the derrick and crawl through a window in one wall.

Boys build tree houses so they can have a place of their own where they can do secret things without fear of girls finding out what they were doing. This always struck me as being a bit asinine because girls were usually the main subject of conversation when boys gathered in their tree houses. Had we possessed the slightest amount of basic intelligence, we would have known that inviting girls to join us in these conversations about sex would probably have led to a much better knowledge of the subject for all of us.

We were up in the tree house one day and the topic of discussion naturally came around to doing it with a girl. Since we were never able to find a willing girl to do it with, my cousin decided to show me how to do it with the next best thing available, a Log Cabin Bank. Evidently, he underestimated either the size of the square hole cut in the bottom of the bank or his own size because when he stuck his penis into the bank and had an erection, things quickly became very uncomfortable. In fact, the sharp edges of the hole in the bank were making the situation extremely painful.

His mother heard him screaming in pain and thinking that something really awful had happened to him, she and her younger sister, who was about nineteen and had just gotten married, rushed out to see what was the matter. When they discovered the problem, they knew that there was only one sure way of getting him out of his rather awkward and embarrassing predicament. The funniest thing I can remember ever seeing in all my life was my cousin laying on his back and his mother and aunt weeping tears of laughter as they poured ice water through the coin slot in the bank.

I suppose that you could say that while I was growing up, I was never very lucky in love, and especially unlucky when it came to sex. I had been going with this sweet young sophomore for



some time during my junior year in high school and I was beginning to get the impression that things were progressing very nicely in the direction dictated by my raging hormones and very possibly the ending of my virginity. If one was to believe the claims of all the other boys my age, I seemed to be the only boy in high school who had never had sex. In retrospect, I'm certain that their accomplishments were far more fantasy than fact.

My anticipation of a successful carnal conquest was based on the fact that I was well past what was termed second base with a girl. She had become far more liberal in allowing me to rest my hand on her breast when I drove with my arm around her shoulders and didn't seem to mind when I put my hand on her knee. When we first began dating and I would casually brush my hand against her breast or touch her knee while shifting gears, she would deftly move it away. Now, not only did she allow me to casually feel her breasts but I could do all the cuddling and fondling that I liked. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying it as much as I was because I could feel her breasts get firm and her nipples stand straight out when I touched them. On our last couple dates, just before we kissed goodnight and I walked her to the door, she had let me release the hooks on her bra and slip my hand under her sweater for a better feel. However, no matter how much progress I was making above her waist, everything between her belt and the hem on her skirt was still forbidden territory.

On this particular Saturday night I got my dad's car, picked up my date and we headed to Borger to the movies. I had four dollars in my pocket, love in my heart, lust in my pants and my hand on a firm breast. Life couldn't get much better than that. We stopped by the Jolly Pig Drive-In for their famous Pig Hip sandwiches, fries and cokes. That took a fair amount of my money, then two tickets to the movie took some more. A big sack of popcorn and a giant Coke with two straws used up the rest of it except for a quarter.

We climbed to the back row of seats in the balcony to watch the movie. That's where the couples who were going steady and guys with one of the town sluts and didn't want to be seen always sat. It was a Gene Autry movie and most of the kids our age were sitting close to the screen so they could see all the action. The balcony was vacant except for us and three nine year old boys who had come up there so they could throw popcorn and spitwads at the people below. In between the cartoons and an advertisement for the local funeral home, the usher came up and chased the boys out, leaving us all alone.

She placed the popcorn bag between her legs so we could both reach in to get some. As the level of the popcorn dropped, I suddenly realized that I was getting much more than popcorn each time that I reached into the bag, I was also getting a good feel between her warm legs. When the sack was almost empty and I had to do a considerable amount of feeling and searching around to find those last few kernels, she responded by giving me a lingering kiss like none that I had ever had before.

There in the seclusion and darkness of the deserted balcony, while Gene Autry played his guitar and sang to his horse, I found myself making progress like nothing I had ever imagined. There was a considerable amount of mutual groping, feeling and fumbling in places neither of us had dared venture before. She offered no resistance when I slipped my hand between her legs and inside her panties and responded by exploring the bulge in my pants with her hand.

In the midst of all this unbridled passion, she laid a French kiss on me that kept my toenails curled for the next two weeks. I had never even imagined what it would be like to have another

tongue in my mouth. It also failed to occurred to me to wonder where she had learned to kiss like that. Then I received the shock of my life when she whispered, "I wish we could do it right now."

I had rounded third base in a dead run and was sliding for home plate. After hearing her say something like that, there was no way that I had the slightest interest in what Gene was doing, except that how long was it going to take him to wipe out all the bad guys and ride off into the sunset so we could get out of there. We couldn't simply walk out in the middle of the movie because everyone would know why we were leaving early and what we were going to do. As our burning passion reached inferno proportions, Gene sang his final song and we stood up to leave. The only problem was that my anticipation was so high that our intentions would be obvious to anyone within a block of us. She thoughtfully handed me her coat to carry over my arm to conceal my enthusiasm.

This was no time to waste precious seconds, so with my arm around her shoulder and my hand on her firm breast, I headed out of town, bound for a dark country road I had long before scouted out as the perfect place for a seduction. I could feel her warm body next to mine and her skirt was pulled up to give me a good view of her creamy white legs. She snuggled very close, slipped her hand inside my fly and gave me a gentle squeeze, then she whispered, "You know we can't do anything unless you use a rubber so you don't make me pregnant."

At this point in my life, I seldom planned very far ahead for anything, and while I had given my first sexual encounter a great amount of thought and anticipation, I had failed to make even the slightest preparations for accomplishing it. Unlike most boys my age, I didn't carry a rubber around in my wallet. I figured that most of them just did that to bolster their egos and give them something to brag about. If the truth was known, most of the rubbers lurking in those wallets were so old that they would crumble and provide absolutely no protection even if they happened to get a chance to be used.

Obtaining a rubber when you needed one no longer involved the embarrassment of having to ask the druggist because vending machines dispensing three rubbers for a quarter could be found in the men's bathroom in nearly every service station. Not only were rubbers available from these machines, but one could also buy playing cards with pictures of naked girls on them as well as those little comic books like the ones kept under the counter at the pool hall. In addition to the strictly carnal merchandise, one could obtain all sorts of personal items from these machines. Items which normally sold for a quarter or less; like razor blades, pocket knives, nail clippers, cigarette lighters, flashlights and even tooth brushes found their way into these machines. Some bathrooms had so many vending machines that they were almost a Woolworth store on a wall.

The rubber machines in service station bathrooms usually provided a choice of at least three styles of rubbers. Regular rubbers were three for a quarter, those in exotic colors came two to a package but you got only one genuine French Tickler which was supposed to drive a woman wild. Each selection was illustrated by a picture of a naked woman consumed in the erotic pleasures provided by that particular style. In order to escape the wrath of preachers and other do-gooders who claimed that rubbers in vending machines promoted fornication and sin, each machine contained a notice that they should be used only for protection against disease.

Who did they think they were fooling? Using a rubber was the sure way to prevent girls from having babies and if a girl knew that she was safe, she might be more likely to let you do it. Tonight, the girl snuggled beside me with her hand in my pants was going to let me do it as soon as

she was assured of safety from pregnancy. Not only was she going to let me have the ultimate thrill, she was going to be an enthusiastic participant.

Tonight was going to be the night to end all nights; the night when I would become a man, the night when I would shed my dreaded virginity. It never occurred to me that she might also be giving up her virginity, but in retrospect it would be my guess that she had done that several boyfriends before me because she was far more knowledgeable about the situation than I was.

I pulled up next to a service station at the north edge of town, zipped up my fly and walked casually into the bathroom so the people inside wouldn't suspect that I was really there to buy rubbers. Since I was far more interested in seminal protection than sensual qualities, I didn't bother to read the sales literature describing what was available from each of the various compartments of the machine. My fingers trembled with excited anticipation as I deposited my last quarter in a slot, turned the knob and out dropped a comb.

As we pulled away, she whispered, "Did you get them?"

I was too embarrassed to admit not only my stupidity in putting my last quarter in the wrong machine but also that I had no more money. "Not exactly," I replied. "I got a comb."

She gave me the most incredulous look I had ever seen, slid over next to the door and didn't say a word all the way home. There was no goodnight kiss, much less any breast fondling. She didn't even wait for me to walk her to the door, the moment I stopped the car, she was out the door and gone.

With a foil packages of three brand new rubbers safely tucked away in my wallet, I was ready to pick up where our plans had been so abruptly squelched on our last date. I called her on Thursday and asked her for a date that Saturday night.

"No," she said. "I'm going steady with Gary Cotter now. He got home from the Navy on Monday and has a new Studebaker."

"Are you going to change your name to Anita?" I asked.

"Of course not, why should I?" came her shocked reply.

"Because that's the name he has tattooed on his arm."

"Go to hell!" she said and hung up the phone.

## Chapter 8

### Lawyer Tate and the Monkey

Lawyer Tate was not only the richest and most powerful man in town, he was also the fattest, meanest and grouchiest. He owned all the vacant lots in town and at least half of the business buildings along main street. What he didn't own outright, he held a mortgage on. Rumor had it that when old man Jasper Stinnett died, Lawyer Tate got the judge to appoint him as trustee of his estate and within a year, he had swiped all of it from the heirs. He was also the town mayor, tax collector and judge. He appointed his goofy son, Woodfin, town marshal, dog catcher and manager of the city water plant. Each of those jobs paid thirty dollars a month. The only thing that Woodfin had to do as town marshal was sit beside the ballot boxes on election day to see that no one did any electioneering within a hundred feet. No one gave a hoot about stray dogs and running the water department wasn't all that difficult since it consisted of one well and a water tower. When the water level got low, he turned the pump on till the tank was full again. In fact, he usually didn't even have to do that because when the water got low and the pressure dropped, someone would go turn the pump on for him. When the tank started running over, someone would go turn it off. They didn't even have water meters and everyone was charged a flat fee no matter how much or how little water they used.

Lawyer Tate used to own the town's only bank but it was robbed so many times during the depression that he finally closed it. He rented out rooms upstairs over the bank and the last time that the bank was robbed, the two guys who did it hid out in one of the front rooms where they could look right down on the sidewalk to see who was going in or out of the bank. In a couple weeks when the heat died down and then calmly walked out to leave.

It just so happened that the sheriff had come over to Stinnett to tell Lawyer Tate that they hadn't found any trace of the bank robbers when they came walking around the corner to leave. Lawyer Tate recognized them and the sheriff arrested them on the spot. They still had every cent of Lawyer Tate's money in a suitcase and even though he got it all back, he was so embarrassed that he had provided the robbers with a place to hide that he told everyone to take their money elsewhere. He closed the bank and rented the building to Mr. Black for a drug store.

If you got in trouble with the law, your neighbor or your wife, the first person you went to

see was Lawyer Tate. He was not only the only lawyer in town who could defend you, he was also a bail bondsman and the only person around who could get you out of jail in less than a week. It's claimed that a man stopped by the pool hall one day and asked if there was a criminal lawyer in town. Ed Stinson, the town drunk, said, "Well, we all think that Lawyer Tate's one, but we ain't never been able to prove it."

Lawyer Tate stood only about five feet tall but he must have tipped the Toledos at well over three hundred pounds. He could have sent the big dial on the penny scales at the cafe all the way back around to zero but he was so tightfisted that he would never squander a penny just to see how much he weighed. Whenever he wanted to know how much he weighed, he stopped by the feed store and used their scales. His office was next door to the cafe and it wasn't unusual for him to eat two fried chickens and a whole pie for lunch. All the kids called him Mr. Five by Five.

Lawyer Tate was not only the biggest man in town, he had the biggest house, the biggest car and the biggest dog in town. He lived in a big old two-story house with a porch all the way around it. It looked like one of those haunted houses that they use in scary movies. Every Halloween, the kids would drag a couple outhouses to Lawyer Tate's house and put one on the front porch and one on the back. Then they would open the outhouse doors, slide them up against his front and back doors and nail them down to the porch. The next morning when Lawyer Tate stepped out of either door to leave, he found himself inside of an outhouse. The only way that he could get out of the house was to climb out a window which was quite a feat for someone as fat as he was. One time he was trying to climb out a window and got stuck. You could hear him cussing and yelling for help all the way to the depot.

He usually walked to his office, which was only a block from where he lived, and always brought a huge English Bulldog that he called Lord George with him. Lawyer Tate claimed that the Queen of England had given the dog to him as a present and that it was worth all kinds of money. We figured that the only way that he would be worth anything was if they rendered him down for his fat. Lord George was without a doubt the biggest, nastiest and ugliest dog that anyone in Stinnett had ever seen. His lower jaw stuck out about two inches past his nose and his tail had been cut off to where it was just a stub barely long enough to form a lid over his butt. He was snow white and had the worst case of bow legs that anyone had ever seen. As my dad put it, "That dog couldn't head off a pig in a ditch."

Lawyer Tate kept the dog on a leash about six feet long and as he walked to his office, the growling, snapping old dog would clear a path in front of him like a mine sweeper. No one ever got in their way because they knew that the dog would take a chunk out of their leg if they did. He was the only dog I ever saw that had green teeth.

One morning Lawyer Tate was walking to his office with Lord George clearing a path in front of him when they met a little Italian looking guy from the traveling side show which had set up in the vacant lot just north of the court house. The Italian guy was leading a monkey dressed in a red, white and blue suit with a top hat that looked like they had been made from an American flag. The monkey was beating on a little drum as they marched along.

Lord George spied the monkey and began to growl. The monkey saw Lord George and immediately climbed on the shoulders of the Italian guy and began to pound on the drum and screech in fear.

"Get the hell out of my way or I'll let my dog eat that damn hairy thing," said Lawyer Tate

as he got hold of the leash with both hands to hold the dog back.

"This is a free country and I can walk anywhere I want to with my monkey," said the Italian as the monkey began to pound the drum even faster.

"This country is free for regular people but not for Wops like you and mangy little varmints like that," retorted Lawyer Tate. "Now get the hell out of the way before I turn my dog loose on both of you."

"If your dog is so mean, then how about a fight between him and my monkey," asked the little Italian. People had begun to gather around and apparently he felt a certain safety in numbers.

"Hell, there wouldn't be any fight," snorted Lawyer Tate. "Lord George would take one gulp and that monkey would be gone, drum and all."

"Perhaps you would like to make a little bet on a fight," said the Italian. "How about fifty dollars on the winner."

"You just lost yourself fifty dollars and a monkey, that is if you can come up with fifty dollars to bet," said Lawyer Tate as he hauled in the leash and unsnapped it from the collar. Lord George was struggling to get at the man with the monkey.

"Don't worry about me having the money," said the Italian as he pulled a big roll of bills out of his pocket and peeled off a ten and two twenties. "But since your dog has such big teeth, if you let my monkey keep one of his drum sticks to defend himself with, I'll make it a hundred."

"A hundred it is, and you can let him have a pitchfork if you want to," boasted Lawyer Tate as they handed their money to Shorty Braxton who had joined the crowd of interested spectators.

The Italian guy took the monkey off his shoulders and set him on the ground, then he took the drum and one drumstick from it. The monkey stood there, looking so frightened and forlorn as he faced the huge dog, which was now clawing the ground to get at him.

"We might as well get this over with," said the Italian. "Turn your dog lose whenever you are ready."

Lawyer Tate released his grip on the collar and Lord George bounded for the little monkey, gnashing his mismatched green teeth. At the last instant, the monkey leaped into the air and landed on Lord George's back. As the dog turned to get to the tormentor on his back, the monkey scampered along the dog's spine, lifted that lid of a tail and deftly inserted the drumstick where, as the old saying goes, the sun don't shine.

Lord George forgot all about his fight with the monkey and started spinning around in circles, trying to get a grip on that offending drumstick with his teeth. The monkey hopped off his back and scampered up a telephone pole where it sat screeching at everyone.

Lord George gave up on being able to get the drumstick out and took off for home in a dead run. Shorty handed the money to the Italian who was trying to coax the monkey down from the pole.

Someone in the crowd said, "Hey, Lawyer Tate, I'll bet Old Lord George is damn glad that monkey had a drumstick instead of a pitchfork."

## Chapter 9

### THE GREAT HUNTING TRIP

I suppose that some primal urge which dates back a million years or so causes modern man to take up a gun and set out to kill something as defenseless as a deer. It certainly can't be an economic situation because it has been proven time after time that a person can go down to the local A&P and buy a good steak for a tenth of what it costs to hunt down and kill an animal which by most standards, is barely edible.

Today I can see no reason why I should intentionally kill any animal except in self-defense and for the life of me, I can't remember a single instance during my lifetime when I have found myself in mortal danger from a deer, turkey or even an armadillo. However, at age fifteen I suppose that it was very easy for me to get caught up in the thrill of the hunt.

World War Two was in full swing and meat was one of the things which was rationed, however with all the cattle that we had on the ranch, we had no fear that we would run out of red ration coupons. I suppose that due to the war, meat was a rather scarce item on many dinner tables across the nation but where we lived, fresh beef was more or less taken for granted. My dad always gave his red coupons to people who could use them.

The justification that my dad and Pete Borger gave for wanting to go to Colorado during hunting season was to bring back a load of coal for the winter. The fact that a hunting license wasn't required for anyone under the age of sixteen was more than likely the reason why they decided to include Pete's son, Roland, and me on this excursion on which I killed my one and only deer.

There have been expeditions to deepest and darkest Africa staged with less effort and outfitting than what was done for this simple trip to Colorado. By the time that everything that we were taking along was loaded on Pete's ancient truck, there was little room for hauling coal on the return. Come to think of it, I suppose that bringing back a load of coal was more of an excuse than a reason for going, especially when you consider that one could buy coal hauled in by railroad for little more than it costs at the mine.

Between stopping to allow a boiling radiator to cool, add oil to the engine or fix flat tires, the two hundred mile trip to just over Raton Pass into Colorado was made in only two days. From

Trinidad, we made out way westward a few miles into the San Isabel National Forest and the location of our great hunting adventure.

When we found the ideal spot, we set up a garish tent with orange and red stripes which had once been a cook tent for a circus. Once that the tent was up, we carried our food in and spread out our bedrolls. In those days, we didn't have all the fancy camping equipment like Coleman stoves, down sleeping bags, ice chests and other things which we now take for granted. We were going to cook on a wood-burning potbelly stove and sleep on the ground in bedrolls made of blankets and quilts.

Our selection of firearms was about as limited as our camping equipment. They consisted of my Dad's old 30-30 lever action Winchester, Pete's bolt action 30.06 rifle, my .22 Caliber rifle and an old long-tom 12 Gauge pump shotgun which held seven shells in the magazine. We rationalized that we would use the 30.06 for long shots and the Winchester for short ones. The shotgun would be great for turkey and the 22 for rabbits. Just so everyone would have an equal chance at getting both a deer and a bear, we would swap guns each morning. While we fully expected to kill far more game than we could ever eat, at least someone had the forethought to bring along a side of bacon.

It had been a rather dry fall in Colorado and golden aspen leaves had long since dropped to the ground, forming a blanket about six inches deep. Every time that you took a step, the leaves could crunch like walking through a bowl of corn flakes.

After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs, fried potatoes and cowboy biscuits, we were ready to set forth like mighty nimrods to kill all sorts of wild animals. We crept through underbrush, walked over hills and sneaked around groves of trees in search of our quarry. The only problem was that our every move we made produced so much noise that no wild animal in its right mind would have stayed within a mile of any of us. We did hear a few wild animals as they crashed away through the brush but never saw any of them. When noon came without sighting anything bearing either hair, fur or feathers, we sat down in a small clearing to eat the lunches that we had packed. While we sat there eating, a large grouse strutted out of the underbrush, took one look at our startled expressions and disappeared in a flash of beating wings so quickly that we never had the slightest chance of getting off a shot at it. That was the only wild game we saw that day.

The next day, in fact the next three days were all the same. We walked, we tramped, we thrashed, we crunched but we never saw a single animal. It was getting rather late in the afternoon when My dad and I came across Roland who had been hunting a along a ridge with no more luck that either of us. We were walking back toward camp together when we heard the roar of the old goose gun that Pete was carrying that day. The sound came from the direction of the camp. A second later, it fired again and again until we counted the full seven shots that it held. Pete must have found something really big in order to have shot that many times so we began running toward the tent.

Just as we came in sight of the camp, we saw a snow white bear cub that looked to be about half grown burst from the tent in a dead run. Right behind the bear came Pete, also snow white from head to toe. He was trying to shove more shells into the magazine of the shotgun as he chased after the bear. The cub disappeared into the underbrush as Pete threw the shotgun after it and let out a string of cuss-words that turned the air blue. I'd heard him cuss now and then but this was



world class, mule skinner swearing.

When we got there, Pete was still kicking, stomping and swearing. First he would cuss the bear for a while and then he would turn on the shotgun. It was hard to tell which he was the madder at. When we finally got him calmed down, he told us what had happened.

He had returned to the tent to find the half-grown bear cub inside, munching away on our slab of bacon. As he swung the goose gun around to get a shot at the bear, the long barrel struck a tent pole and it went off, kicking him in the groin like a mule. The bear dropped the side of bacon and started trying to get out of the tent, but Pete was between him and the only way out. Pete jacked another shell into the goose gun and took another shot at the bear as it raced around inside the tent, trying to escape. He missed the bear with the second shot but hit a five gallon lard can full of flour which exploded in a dense, white cloud.

The cloud of flour in the tent reduced visibility to a considerable degree and Pete was more or less shooting at where he thought the bear might be until it ran between his legs and turned him a flip just as he fired his last shot, which blew a big hole in the top of the tent. He tried to catch himself with the butt of the shotgun as he came crashing down from his half-gainer and the stock snapped like a twig. The bear darted through the flaps of the tent and that is where we came onto the scene.

We surveyed the disaster created during the bear's rampage and Pete's frenzy of wild shooting. He had not only blown up the barrel of flour but he had also shot a couple of the bedrolls, smashed the stove, peppered several cans of beans and blew a hole in the roof big enough to throw a cat through. To make matters worse, a cold drizzle was beginning to fall.

We spent a very cold, miserable night trying to keep as dry as possible. When dawn finally came, I told them that since it was my day to carry the shotgun, which was broken, I would stay in camp and try to straighten up the disaster from the bout with the bear. Also since the rain had soaked the dry leaves to where one could walk without making noise, they might be able to see something before they spooked it.

The rain had stopped so I strung up ropes between trees and hung out the bedding to dry. The little wood burning stove was beyond repair so any cooking would have to be done over a campfire. After I cleaned out the mess in the tent and put the bedrolls back inside, I began to chop wood for a campfire.

I heard a loud noise and looked up just in time to see a big buck with his head up and tail held high in the air, bound out of the underbrush and come racing straight toward me. As he spotted me, he gave a loud snort, wheeled and caught his antlers in one of the ropes that I had tied between the trees. His feet flew up into the air and he came crashing down on his back. The rope had caught him in such a way that he was trapped flat on his back and all that he could do was flail the air with his feet.

I ran over to where he was thrashing about and took a swing at his head with the blunt end of the axe. As luck would have it, I got in a good lick right between his eyes on the first swing and he shuddered and lay still. I hit him a couple more times just to be sure that he was dead.

When Pete, Roland and my dad returned after another fruitless day of trekking through the woods, I had the deer field dressed and strung up in a tree to cool. There was no way that I could convince them that I had killed a deer with an axe. Pete claimed that he had shot at a large buck as it bounded away into the trees and that he must have hit it and it ran into camp before it died. They

searched the carcass from one end to the other for a bullet hole but never found one.

By sunset, the light rain had turned into snow and there was at least six inches of it on the ground when we got up the following morning. There was some discussion as to whether the hunt should continue but good judgment prevailed and we decided to break camp and head for lower elevations before we were snowed in for the winter.

As we attempted to keep the truck from running away on the steep downgrade by using both gears and the minimal brakes, we turned a corner and found ourselves face to face with a large bear standing in the middle of the narrow road. Instead of getting out of our way as any smart bear should, it chose to stand on its hind legs and challenge the errant truck. When it comes to a confrontation between a bear and the radiator of an old Ford truck plunging out of control down a hill, Dearborn iron will always prevail. This isn't to say that the bear didn't inflict a certain amount of damage before his neck snapped; he shoved the radiator back into the fan and water blew in every direction.

We dressed the bear, stuffed him with snow and let the truck coast down the mountain until we came to a service station. After a considerable amount of searching through junk yards, we found a used radiator which would get us home.

Tales of our great Colorado hunting adventure were told and retold, but none of us ever breathed the truth that the only shots we fired was when Pete shot up the tent, the deer was killed with an axe and the bear run over by the truck.

## Chapter 10

### UNCLE GEORGE

My uncle George was the oldest boy in the Foreman family and my dad was next to the youngest. They were separated by eight brothers and sisters and nearly twenty years in age. Their father died about fifteen years before I was born so I never knew him. However, from the relationship that I had with my uncle George, I would say that he was much more like a grandfather to me than an uncle. Even though he wound up with a whole passel of grandkids, he would never allow any of them to call him Grandpa. One time, when one of them accidentally called him that, he told them, "Call me Grandpa once more and I'll cut your damn ears off and feed them to the hogs." I'm sure he was smiling under his scraggly beard when he said it.

Uncle George lived just across the Oklahoma line in Guymon where he had a wife, six or seven kids and a goofy brother-in-law living with him. Evidently conditions at home must have gotten a bit tedious for him at times because at least twice a year he would show up at our house to spend a week or two.

During those infrequent visits, he taught me all sorts of earthy lessons that few fathers would ever pass on to their young sons; like how to chew tobacco and spit the juice, how to sneak up on a fly and catch it in my hand and how to blow my nose without using a handkerchief. He also taught me how make vulgar noises with my hand under my armpit, to lift my leg when I farted and how to pee my name in the snow. Fortunately with the passing of time, I have gotten over most of those disgusting traits. He also tried to teach me how to whistle through my teeth but the only time that I was ever able to do it happened to be in school. I was hiding behind my geography book, curling my tongue and puckering my lips just the way that he showed me and trying to whistle. By pure chance I got everything right and let fly one of the most ear splitting whistles you ever heard. That got me a quick trip to the Principal's office for a dose of the type of discipline that he used to keep unruly boys in line. I don't know if it was because of the five swats on my butt or what, but I was never able to whistle again.

Uncle George was a huge horse of a man, standing at least six feet five tall with nearly three hundred pounds of pure muscle. During his younger years, he owned a carnival and medicine show which traveled all over the country selling patent medicine. One of the main attractions was

his strong man act. Part of his act was to put his middle finger through a small ring in the top of a two hundred pound chunk of iron shaped like a pyramid, pick it up, carry it across the stage and place it in a wooden framework bolted to the stage floor. After proving that he could move the chunk of iron, he would invite any of the men in the audience who thought that they were fairly strong to come up on the stage and try to move it back. Naturally, since this was a carnival, the invitation always included a little wager just to make it more interesting. They had to put up a dollar in order to try to pick the weight up and carry it back to where it had been. If they were able to do it, they would win five dollars. Needless to say, few of any of them were ever successful in getting it out of the frame, much less carrying it across the stage.

What the people didn't know was that inside the glove that George wore, there was a metal hook which followed along the inside of his middle finger and attached to a leather strap which went up his sleeve and looped around his opposite shoulder. Without this hook, there was no way that a person's finger was strong enough to pick up that much weight.

After several of the young men would try unsuccessfully to move the weight, Uncle George would sweeten the offer by allowing two or three of them work together to move it. This was an even safer bet for him because there was room for only one finger in the ring and all of them trying to get around it to pick it up would just get in the way of one another.

He was close to sixty years old when I was a kid but he always betting on some feat of strength. I was at his blacksmith shop one time when a man rode up on a horse. They got to talking about how big the horse was and Uncle George offered to bet that he could pick it up and carry it across the street. Before the betting was over, there was quite a bit of money involved.

Uncle George took the saddle off the horse and placed a sort of harness on it. The harness had a ring about mid-point on the horse's side. Then Uncle George slipped a harness over his shoulders which had a hook in the back to match the ring on the harness. He backed up against the side of the horse, engaged the hook and bent forward, lifting the horse right off the ground. He carried the horse across the street, put it down and collected his money.

Not only would Uncle George stand out in a crowd because of his size, but he usually sported a full beard and scraggly hair down to his collar. Had he been born a couple generations later, his appearance would have fit right into the counter culture of the hippie generation. On the rare occasions when he pulled off his bib overalls, got a shave and haircut and put on a suit, he would have passed as a lawyer, banker or even a senator.

I suppose that he was trying to escape from the pressures of family life through his guise as an old prospector. It was his way to momentarily escape to a life normally associated with solitude except that it brought him notoriety instead of the seclusion that he sought. It was around the beginning of the great depression when he began marching in Guymon's Old Settlers Reunion parade as the Old Prospector. I never understood what prospecting for gold had to do with the pioneer days of the Panhandle of Oklahoma but he would load all sorts of prospecting gear on his old jackass and lead the parade through town. He received so much national publicity that parades all over the nation were asking him to appear. Probably the most notable parade in which he ever appeared was the 1938 Rose Parade in Pasadena, California. He lived the life of the Old Prospector in the same vicarious way that Mark Twain lived the life of a precocious foundling through his stories about Huckleberry Finn.

The thing which always impressed me the most about Uncle George was his sense of

humor and love of practical jokes. He was the sort of person who could find humor in the most bizarre ways. His wife's brother, who was about two sandwiches short of a picnic, lived with them for years. George never did anything which would hurt someone, just drive them crazy. Since Boliver was already a bit slack twisted, no harm seemed to come from playing a joke on him now and then.

There was only one bathroom in the house and with all the people who lived there, getting in when you had the urge to go was usually next to impossible. Not being able to get into the bathroom was no problem for his goofy brother-in-law because he would just head for the barn when he needed to go. In fact, if it wasn't too cold, he seemed to prefer going behind the barn instead of using the bathroom in the house.

One day George saw him unhooking his bib overalls as he went around behind the barn and just couldn't pass up the opportunity to play a joke on him. The wind had blown the dirt from under the back wall of the barn until there was about six inches of space between it and the ground. George got a shovel and when Boliver squatted down to do his thing, George slipped the shovel under him. When he finished, George pulled the shovel, complete with its contents, back inside the barn. When poor old Boliver turned around to admire his accomplishment, there was nothing on the ground. Figuring that it had to be someplace, he began a frantic search of his overalls, finally pulling them off and shaking them.

There were times when George would go to great lengths in order to perpetrate a practical joke. One time he rigged up a coffin with batteries, an electric motor and an off-center weight which would shake, gyrate and make a thumping noise when the motor ran. He hooked the switch to one of the handles so the thing would start when that handle was lifted.

He dressed up in a black suit and hat and took his trick coffin down to the loading dock at the railroad station. When the train pulled in, he was standing there with his Bible in his hand and a most soulful look on his face. When the porters stepped off the passenger cars of the train, he asked them if they would put his poor, departed brother on the freight car for him. When they didn't seem to be all that willing to pick up the coffin, he put on his most pathetic look and began to read something out of the Bible about helping your fellow man. I'm sure that what he was saying was far more out of his head than from the scripture.

Loading freight wasn't part of a Porter's job and besides, they weren't all that thrilled about picking up a dead man, but since he looked like he might be carrying a fat roll of money in his pocket, the prospect of a hefty tip overcame their fear. Four of the porters gathered around the coffin, picked it up and started carrying it along the loading dock toward the freight car. Suddenly, a thumping noise came from inside the coffin as it began to shake in their hands like something in it was alive. They screamed, dropped the coffin and dashed for the safety of the Pullman cars.

On Halloween night a few years later, George took the coffin down to the funeral home, opened the back door of the hearse parked in the driveway and left it leaning on the bumper like it had just fallen out. The kids making their rounds of tricks and terror that night naturally found the coffin and did the only logical thing for boys to do, they decided to steal it. When it began to thump and shake, they dropped it and ran to the police station with the story about a man coming to life in a coffin. By the time that the police got there, George and the trick coffin were nowhere to be found.

One Saturday morning the driver of a truck loaded with frozen whole tuna stopped by the

blacksmith shop to see if Uncle George would weld the truck's front bumper back in place. The mount for the bumper had broken and he had it tied up to a headlight with a piece of bailing wire to keep it from falling under a wheel. He told Uncle George that he didn't have any extra money to pay for the repairs but offered to give him four of the fish as payment for the welding.

When the welding job was finished, George wrapped the fish in newspaper and laid them aside to take home that evening when he finished work. Unfortunately, the next time that George thought about the fish was on Sunday morning. After laying around in the summer heat for a day and a night, there was no question that they were well past the point of being safe to eat. However, George was never one to let a good thing go to waste so as soon as he finished breakfast, he went to the shop to get them.

The Guymon city park had a small muddy lake in it with a few ducks swimming around, but everyone knew that there were no fish worth catching in it. Kids would fish there occasionally but all that they ever caught was some little things about five inches long which swam around with their eyes and mouths sticking out of the water, as if gasping for air. These things which seemed to be more closely related to salamanders than fish so the kids called them gasper-goos. Even if they had been big enough to eat, they tasted so much like mud that the ducks wouldn't even eat them.

When the preachers finally let their flocks go at noon, most of them would descend on the park for a picnic. When they arrived on this particular Sunday, they found George sitting in the shade of a tree, watching the bobber on his fishing line. It was such a strange sight to see an adult fishing in the lake that they just had to find out what was going on.

When they asked George if he was catching anything, he answered by lifting his stringer so they could see the big fish that he had on it. This set off an immediate frenzy of fishing and soon dozens of people were throwing hooks into the water. They baited their hooks with all the usual things like chicken livers, worms and grasshoppers. True to form, all that any of them caught was those little gasper-goos.

Every time that George thought that their enthusiasm was beginning to wane, he would pull up his stringer to check his catch, setting off another frantic bout of fishing. After about an hour of catching nothing but these little mud-cats, some of the frustrated anglers asked George what he was using for bait. He replied, "Raw turnips."

Since few people bring raw turnips to a picnic, they all rushed off to find some for bait. When they switched to chunks of raw turnip on their hooks, the even stopped catching the little gasper-goos. After another hour or so of enjoying his joke, George figured that he had pushed the scam about as far as it was going to go, so he gave them one last shot. He jumped to his feet and began to thrash his fishing pole back and forth like he had just snagged another big fish. As soon as he had everyone's attention, he dragged in the dead fish that had been on his line all the time, put it on the stringer with his other spoiled fish and took them home to feed to the hogs. I doubt that anyone ever noticed that the fish on his stringer were already dressed.

## Chapter 11

### THE AIRPLANE

Calling Mr. Zzikxz a crazy inventor isn't totally correct. He was certainly an inventor and occasionally one of his inventions would go awry with spectacular results. But, just because most everyone in Stinnett thought he was nuts didn't make it so. In fact, after I got to know him, I considered him to be one of the smartest men I've ever known.

He spoke a thick Eastern European accent in which he said Vot instead of What and Vere instead of Where. He claimed that he was the rightful ruler of some little country which had been taken over by Germany during World War One but his family was never able to get it back after the war ended. Now, with another war going on in the same area, there was probably no chance that he would ever be able to return to his homeland. Evidently he had plenty money because he never worked but always seemed to be able to buy whatever he needed. The postmaster said that he was always getting heavy packages through the mail COD and always paid for them in cash.

He lived down by the railroad tracks in a shack that was so stuffed with books, papers and drawings of his inventions that it was difficult for him to find a place to sit or sleep, that is if he ever did either. No matter what time I went by his place, he was always busy tinkering with something. Over the years he had built a collection of sheds, barns and even hauled in several old oilfield storage tanks to serve as workshops.

He had several old cars parked around his place but I never saw him drive any of them. He was always trying to invent a carburetor which would make them get a hundred miles to the gallon of gas or else one which would allow them to burn kerosene or some other cheap fuel. Every time that he would start one of the engines, it would do a lot of belching and smoking but never ran very well. In between working on the carburetors, he invented all sorts of other things.

He must have invented what was the world's first microwave oven. It was made out of a steel oil drum with lots of pipes and wires running in and out of it. He was always trying to sell that invention to one of the big company that made gas ranges. When engineers from one of the stove companies would come out to see his new oven, he would demonstrate how it worked by putting a pan of biscuits inside, closing the door and turning the thing on. The biscuits would come out fully cooked in about two minutes but it made all the radios in town go crazy with static. All the women

around Stinnett were mad at him because he always seemed to start testing something just when the radio soap operas like Pepper Young's Family or Young Widder Brown came on.

I was watching him do some sort of experiment one time when I noticed an airplane propeller standing in the corner. When I asked him about it, he said that he had started building an airplane one time but got busy on something else and never finished it. He said that it was in the back of one of his barns and offered to show it to me.

I was fourteen at the time but had been interested in flying all my life. I suppose that I was around four or five years old when I built my first airplane. It didn't look all that much like an airplane, just one stick nailed across another one, but it was an airplane to me. One Sunday after church, as was the custom in those days, it came our turn to invite the preacher to eat with us. The first thing that I did when he arrived was to bring out my airplane to show to him. He held it in his hand like a cross and said, "It is such a thrill to see a young person with such dedication. Do you plan to devote your life to God and become a minister like me?"

"Heck no," I replied. "That's an airplane. I want to be a pilot."

The preacher shook his head and said, "Oh, that's terrible, perhaps he will grow out of such a foolish notion."

The local library abounded with books about flying and how to fly airplanes, and I had read every one of them at least twice and some of them dozens of times. Most of them were fictional stories about dashing young pilots, always named Ace, Tailspin or Buzz, who flew across the country and were involved in all sorts of thrilling escapades. As much as I enjoyed reading those stories, I was especially interested in the books that claimed to teach one how to fly without ever getting into an airplane. They were written in such glowing terms and so profusely illustrated with pictures and diagrams of each step in learning how to fly that there was no question in my mind but that I could hop into an airplane and fly away.

A man by the name of Gus Irvin, who lived at the west edge of town, had an airplane but he was away in the Army as a flying instructor and kept it locked in a hangar. I had been up to his hangar many times and peeked through the crack between the two big doors, but all I could see was just the nose of it. While I had built dozens of model airplanes, the thought of actually seeing a real airplane up close to where I could touch it was something that I had only dreamed of.

Mr. Zzikxz took me back into a barn and there it sat. Actually all that was there was the fuselage without an engine and a pair of uncovered wings, but it was a real airplane. He said that he had built it from a kit and all that was needed to finish it was to cover the wings and put an engine on it.

It was beautiful, bright red with a white stripe down the side. I looked at the instruments in the little cockpit and asked him, "Why don't you finish it and fly it?"

"Ven I got it built this far, I realized that I don't know how to fly, zo I stopped and vent to vork on somezing else," he replied. "Besides, it uses a Harley Davidson motorcycle engine and I don't have vun to put in it."

As luck would have it, one of my cousins had stored his motorcycle in our barn when he joined the Army and it was just setting there gathering dust and chicken droppings. "I know where there's an engine that we can use," I shouted excitedly. "If I furnish the engine, would you finish it and let me fly it?"

Mr. Zzikxz thought about my suggestion for a few minutes and said, "I vill giff zee airplane



to you and I will show you how to finish it yourself, then you can fly it."

I was in a total state of shock as I ran home to tell my parents that Mr. Zzikxz had given me a real airplane and all I had to do was cover the wings and put the engine on it and I would have my own airplane to fly.

My dad listened to my enthusiasm for several minutes and then summed the situation up in one sentence, "You don't know how to fly an airplane and you aren't old enough to get a license."

I wasn't about to let some simple little problem like that slow me down so I charged ahead at full speed. I dragged the parts of the airplane to our barn and set about covering the wings. Mr. Zzikxz had all the materials needed to cover and finish them. He carefully showed me how to sew the cloth covers, attach them to the ribs and apply the dozen or so coats of dope necessary to finish them.

When the ship was finally finished and assembled, it was a beautiful thing to behold. The only thing left to do was borrow the engine from my cousin's motorcycle and get it installed. After all, my cousin was away in the Army and he should be happy that someone was keeping his engine in good shape. The final task of converting the engine and getting it fitted to the airplane proved to be a lot more work than I had expected but with Mr. Zzikxz's help, it was finally done.

The door of the barn was far too small to allow us to take the airplane out with the wings on, so they had to be removed and put back on once we had it outside. If the wings hadn't been easily removable, it would have been like the man who built a boat in his basement and then couldn't get it out.

With the tail tied firmly to a post, I sat in the cockpit to operate the throttle and switches while Mr. Zzikxz swung the propeller to start the engine. It came to life in a sputtering cloud of blue smoke before it finally settled down to a roar. The little airplane strained at the rope securing it to the ground and to me, I was like a young eagle ready to take its first leap into the air. I wasn't really flying, but I was sitting in my own airplane, smelling the burning oil and feeling the blast of wind in my face.

Mr. Irvin, who was home on leave from the Army at the time, heard about my airplane and stopped by to see it. After looking it over for a while, he suggested that he make the first flight just to check it out. I agreed with great enthusiasm because if he flew it, that meant that I was just that much closer to flying it myself. Instead of taking it up to his airstrip, he decided that a relatively level area in our cow pasture would be a suitable place for the test flights.

After several runs across the pasture, each one a bit faster than the one before, he lifted the little ship a few feet off the ground, then dropped back for a landing. After doing this two or three times, he climbed into the air and flew around in large circles. After he landed, he made a few adjustments to the wing struts and wires, then he flew it once again. His only comment was that it was a nice little airplane and flew surprisingly well. After we tied it down in a sheltered area behind the barn so it wouldn't blow away in the Texas winds, he said, "Come up to my place tomorrow morning and I'll give you a lesson in my airplane."

Needless to say, I didn't sleep a wink that night as I lay there waiting for daylight to come so I could get what was to be my first flying lesson. Not only would it be my first lesson, but also my first ride in an airplane. I would turn fifteen in about three months and then it would be another full year before I would be old enough to legally fly solo, but I was on my way to becoming a pilot.

That excitement of that first lesson was almost a mental overload because he was having

me do things which were totally new to me. He did the takeoff but allowed me to hold the controls and feel what he was doing as he explained each movement of the stick and rudder pedals. When he turned the controls over to me in the air, I quickly discovered that none of the things that I had read about flying had prepared me for the real thing. As I wallowed through the air, I quickly realized that it is impossible to learn how to fly from a book. He was what was called a seat-of-the-pants pilot who wanted his students to feel and sense what was going on instead of simply moving the controls and waiting for the airplane to respond. Before I realized it, the hour was over and I was drenched with perspiration from the tension and excitement.

Back on the ground, he went over what I had learned and told me to come back the following day for another lesson. My initial excitement had subsided somewhat and I could relate to his instructions much better on the second lesson. At the end of the hour, he talked me through a couple approaches and landings. I suppose that I did things right because he never touched the controls. He went over to a cabinet, took out a real pilot's log book and filled out the first two lines. I could now consider myself to be a real pilot because I had a real log book with two lessons in it.

I was filled with excited anticipation of another lesson the next day but the weather turned bad and we couldn't fly. He had to return to his base but promised that he would fly with me again on his next leave. I asked him if I could taxi my plane around a little just to get used to it.

He thought about it for a bit and then rather reluctantly agreed, "Go ahead, but only in light winds. Also, be very careful that you taxi slow enough to keep the tailwheel on the ground at all times. I don't want you to ground loop it and hurt yourself. The main thing I want you to do is practice how to taxi in a perfectly straight line."

For next several days, I puttered back and forth across the cow pasture until I could make it hold a line as straight as a sting. Unfortunately, as my confidence increased, so did my speed until I was bouncing along with the tail in the air and the engine purring at about half speed. I even got to the point where I would shove the throttle wide open as if I was going to take off, let the little ship accelerate to almost flying speed, then close the throttle just before it lifted off the ground and let it coast to a stop as if I had just landed.

I was having so much fun that on one of those fast runs, I very foolishly decided to lift the airplane off the ground just a few inches, then close the throttle and let it land again the way that I had seen Mr. Irvin do when he was testing it. The little ship must have been far more ready to fly than I was because when I pulled back slightly on the stick, I suddenly found myself about fifty feet in the air. I immediately closed the throttle and tried to land straight ahead but realized that I would run out of landing area long before I could get it on the ground and stopped. There was nothing that I could do at this point except open the throttle, go around and come in for a landing.

I shoved the throttle open, climbed to a few hundred feet of altitude and began a large circle to come around so I could line up for a landing. Here I was in the air with only two hours of flying instruction and two landings. One of my many mistakes I made that day was making my turn toward town instead of away and as I passed over the court house, everyone in town became aware that the Foreman kid was actually flying his airplane.

On my first attempt at landing the little airplane, I approached so high and fast that there was no way that I was going to get it on the ground before I ran out of room. Seeing the barbed wire fence at the south end of the field approaching, I opened the throttle to make another circle. The next attempt was a bit better and I almost got the wheels on the ground before having to go

around. On the next try, I actually got the wheels to touch the ground but I was going too fast and immediately bounded back into the air. Things certainly weren't going the way that all the books had claimed that they would.

As I circled around for another attempt to land, I frantically tried to remember all the things that Mr. Irvin had told me when he talked me through those two landings in his airplane. As if to add to my problems, people began arriving in large numbers and lined up along the edge of the grassy flat. I figured that they were there to see me fly but now realize that they were just there to watch me crash. Most of the adults arrived in cars while the kids were either running or riding bicycles. I also noticed a man on a horse racing across our cow pasture, then realized that it was my dad. Now, I was really in trouble.

I made several more attempts to get the airplane back on the ground and even had the wheels rolling on the grass a few times but since the little airplane had no brakes, I was always going too fast to stop before hitting the fence at the end. At the last possible second, I would open the throttle and go around again. Everything that I had ever read or heard about taking off and landing in an airplane was that it had to be done into the wind. There was a very light breeze blowing from the south, no more than three or four miles an hour, and I was trying to land facing into it. The problem was that the ground dropped off in that direction at about the same rate as the glide angle of the airplane and there was no way that I was ever going to make a successful landing. Had I turned around and landed up hill, it would have been a snap, but that was a lesson that I would learn much later in my training.

By the time that I had made at least a dozen attempts to land, everyone in town was there. In looking back, I'm sure that my dad died a thousand deaths as he watched his only child about to smash himself to bits and there was absolutely nothing that he could do about it. It wasn't until years later when I had a son of my own and he did some equally stupid things that I realized the pure hell that my dad must have been going through.

There is an old saying that all good things must come to an end and just as I cleared the fence and telephone wires at the south end of the pasture, the engine coughed a couple times and stopped. I was out of fuel. At least I had the presence of mind to lower the nose so I wouldn't stall and spin in. Directly in front of me was a long open area next to the railroad tracks where they raced horses. All that I had to do was turn slightly to the right to miss a low fence that kept people from parking too close to the race track. The wheels hit the ground, bounced once and suddenly I was rolling straight ahead. The landing seemed so simple. Just before I rolled to a stop, the right wheel dropped into a hole in the ground and with a sickening crunch of bending tubing, the landing gear folded. The little ship skewed around to the right, the tail rose and then dropped back to the ground. Everything became deathly quiet.

I was standing in front of my wounded airplane and contemplating the bent landing gear when my dad came racing up on his horse. His face was as white as a sheet and the horse was dripping with sweat from being run so hard. "Are you OK?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine but the landing gear is bent," I replied. "But, I think that I can fix it," I added.

"You won't have to have to worry about fixing anything," said my dad as he thrust a shaking hand into his pocket. He pulled out some kitchen matches, struck one across the sole of his boot and tossed it into the dry grass under my airplane.

He grabbed my arm as I tried to dash to stamp out the fire. Evidently he had made his

decision about what he was going to do long before I was safely back on the ground and I had to stand there and watch my airplane turn into to a pile of twisted tubing and ashes.

As we walked away from the smoking remains, he said, "When you are old enough to fly legally, I'll pay for your lessons."

True to his words, about three months before my sixteenth birthday, he took me to the airport at Borger to begin flying lessons. I celebrated my sixteenth birthday by making my first official solo flight with eight lessons in my log book.

## Chapter 12

### THE GREAT SPY HUNT

Mr. Zzikxz gave me a huge old radio which would receive all sorts of short wave bands. He said that if people knew that he had a short wave radio at his place, they would accuse him of being a German spy and he would be arrested and shipped off to a prisoner of war camp. He said that the FBI had already been by to talk with him about his political affiliations and feelings but he convinced them that he was no threat to anyone. He told them that he certainly had no love for Germany, mainly because they had taken over his country during World War One. However, since he spoke with an accent, everyone naturally suspected that he was a spy. He said that he used to listen to the classical music broadcast from Austria on the short wave bands but when World War II broke out, all those stations went off the air.

The radio was much too heavy for me to carry home so my dad brought it home for me in his pickup truck and we put it in my workshop. Actually, what I called my workshop was nothing but an old feed shed next to the windmill, but it was a place where I could go to tinker with all sorts of things that boys can find to take apart or fiddle with. I strung up a copper wire antenna from the roof of the house to the platform on the windmill tower and down into the shed. The ground wire was connected to a big nail driven into the ground. I could make the ground work better by pouring water on it.

To my utter surprise, on the regular broadcast band the radio would pick up radio stations all over the nation. I could easily bring in places like Omaha, Denver and Dallas, but on good nights, I could hear New York City and Los Angeles. Our radio in the house would only get Amarillo, Wichita Falls and XERO, the Mexican radio station down in Clint, Texas where they were always advertising records, bibles and baby chickens.

Other than the usual afternoon serials that we boys always listened to, there was nothing worthwhile on the regular dial. It was on the short wave bands where I discovered all sorts of interesting conversations to listen in on. I found the frequency where the Army pilots were talking to one another and the one they used for talking to the control tower when they were ready to land. They were always calling themselves secret names like Bluebird Two and Fox Seven but we knew that they were pilots because we could hear the engines in the background.

My cousin who lived about a block away and I were in the Boy Scouts at the time and there was a merit badge for learning Morse Code, so we got a couple books and set out to earn that badge. In order to be able to practice, we ran a wire from his bedroom to my workshop and began to peck away, referring to our code book before each letter. In a matter of a few weeks, were able to send and receive almost fast enough to pass the test for our merit badges.

In the process of learning the Morse Code, I read everything that I could find in the local library on radios and electronics. One day I was talking with Mr. Zzikxz about radios and he gave me an old book which told how to build what was called a Damped Wave or Spark Gap Transmitter. The article said that it was so simple to build that anyone could make one out of parts from old radios, so I set about building one of my own.

When the transmitter was done, I couldn't wait to try it out. When I turned the thing on and closed the key, blue sparks danced between the copper spark plates. It seemed to be working but there was no way I could be sure without help, so I took it to my cousin's chicken house and told him to start transmitting and I would listen on my short wave radio. Sure enough, it came in loud and clear but it sounded more like harsh static than the clear tones that I had expected.

It's rather difficult to carry on much of a two-way conversation with only one transmitter and one receiver, but we worked out a system. My cousin would transmit a message and I would write it down. Then I would race over to the transmitter in his chicken house while he ran to the workshop and I would tap out an answer to him. My homebuilt transmitter was working just great, in fact, it was working all too great.

The worst problem with this type of transmitter, as we were to learn later, is that there is no modulation of the signal to control the frequency and it spread from one end of the band to the other and probably beyond. Our coded messages could be heard on every radio in town, which made us very unpopular with housewives who were trying to listen to their favorite soap operas which came on at about the same time that we got home from school. The only thing that saved us from their wrath was that everyone figured that it was Mr. Zzikxz doing one of his experiments.

Little did we realize that once a signal is sent into the air, it doesn't simply stop at the person who is receiving it, but can travel many miles in all directions. Among our listeners were all the military pilots flying from the military airfields at Amarillo and Dalhart. As is usual in the military minds, which were always a bit paranoid in their thinking, they decided that they had discovered a spy in their midst. It didn't matter the least that the rather inane messages that they were receiving were being transmitted in a laboriously slow manner, but no spy in his right mind would use the same frequencies as those being used by the military.

Since the military had all sorts of signal tracing equipment, it didn't take long through the process of triangulation, for them to discover that Stinnett was the general location of the source of the transmissions. Each time that we would go on the air, they would send airplanes aloft with direction finding equipment and they would head straight for Stinnett. Since we were far more interested in Army airplanes flying over than we were in playing with the transmitter, the instant that we heard an approaching airplane, we would turn the radio off and run outside to watch it fly over.

The Army Air Corps was having little luck in finding the transmitter on their own, so they turned the matter over to the FBI. Since the FBI already had a suspected spy by the name of Mr. Zzikxz living in the area where the Army said the signals were coming from, it took almost no time

at all for them to show up on his door step. Armed with search warrants, they began to dig through his books, files and notes. The more that they searched, the more convinced they became that they had stumbled upon a man who was a threat to the national security. They were about to haul him off in handcuffs when the man running the direction finding equipment notified them that the transmitter was back on the air. I'm sure that it was quite a blow to their egos to learn that while they had seemingly discovered their spy, he was transmitting coded signals right under their noses.

With their mobile direction finding equipment, it didn't take the FBI long to zero in on the chicken house where the clandestine transmitter was located. As blue sparks danced between the copper plates of the spark gap, the door burst open and I looked up into the faces of two of the meanest looking men I had ever seen. They were dressed in expensive suits and holding guns in their hands. One of them growled, "This is the FBI, don't move."

There were dozens of forms for our parents to fill out and sign while several of the FBI agents lectured my cousin and me about all the problems that we had caused and made us promised that we would never build or operate any kind of transmitter again without getting the proper license. When they were finished with us, our parents made us apologized to Mr. Zzikxz for all the trouble that we caused him. He just smiled as if he had known all the time what we were going to do.

The electronics expert who checked out the transmitter shook his head in disbelief as he watched blue sparks dance between the copper plates. When he was satisfied that it really worked, he boxed it up to take it with him. He even took the book that told how to make it. I'm sure that those relics of the bygone days as a ham radio operator are still labeled "TOP SECRET" and gathering dust in some FBI warehouse today.

## Chapter 13

### THE FILPOT FAMILY

Most everyone living in Stinnett, with the possible exception of Lawyer Tate, was so poor that when the depression came along, they didn't even notice a change. Most of them just thought that it was simply a situation in which more people liked to eat rabbits. As for my family, we were better off than most because living on a ranch with more cattle than anyone wanted, we had all the beef that we cared to eat. My mother always had a big garden which furnished all sorts of vegetables, so all in all, we got along pretty well during those bleak dustbowl days of the 1930s. Other people weren't as lucky.

One day in the middle of a particularly hot and dry summer, a rattling old truck came limping into town and finally expired right next to the town's trash dump just across the railroad tracks at the south edge of town. As soon as the wheezing old truck gasped its last breath, the filthiest bunch of kids we had ever seen began to spew out the back like rats deserting a sinking ship. From all appearances, the couple in the cab of the truck had spawned another dirty little redheaded, short-necked kid every nine months and fifteen minutes for the past dozen years. They even doubled up on the process a few times to produce several sets of twins. They had a whole assortment of screamers, creepers, crappers, tree climbers, yard pissers, cat killers, pig screwers, hubcap stealers, fighters and farters.

They pushed the dead truck off the side of the road and let it coast down the hill into the dump where they pitched a couple tents next to it, built a fire and set up housekeeping. The wife, who looked to be about eight months pregnant at the time, still suckling a pair of twins and dragging another screamer hanging onto one of her legs made her way into the grocery store and announced that she would like to open a charge account for some groceries. In those days, it was customary for all grocery stores to sell to most anyone on credit, then add enough to the bills of those who did pay to make up for those who either couldn't or wouldn't. When Ma Filpot began to pile groceries and canned goods on the counter like she was buying for a threshing crew, Mr. Betendorf, who owned the store, told her that there was a limit of ten dollars credit for any one family. After she ran her charge account to the limit and was still way short of enough groceries to feed all of them, some of the people of Stinnett dropped by with sacks of flour, sides of bacon and



an assortment of fresh vegetables.

It turned out that the people in the truck were named Rose and Bert Filpot who said that they were on their way to California to pick grapes. From what they said, Stinnett was only a stopping place for them to repair the truck, have another kid or two and regroup their forces before moving on. A few people did question how they happened to be in Stinnett when the usual route to the west was some fifty miles to the south and the direction that they were going when they came into town certainly wasn't toward the promised land in California.

At first, the people of Stinnett figured that the Filpots would be around for a couple weeks and then go on their way. However, as time went along, it became obvious that they were settling in for a much longer stay. Within a week after the arrival, they had dug through the trash dump for old lumber, oil drums, tarpaper and whatever else they could find and started nailing it together just like they owned the place. Soon, they had half a dozen shacks built around or shoved up against the old truck. Next, several hogs appeared on the place, along with a milk cow and a whole flock of chickens. People around town had reported the loss of a chicken or pig now and then, but it was impossible to positively identify any of them as the ones that the Filpots had. We finally came to the realization that the Filpots were here to stay when someone came back from the dump and reported that Bert Filpot had built a gate across the road and was charging everyone a dime to get in to dump their trash. The Sheriff said that the land belonged to old man Stinnett and since he had been dead for years, there was no one to order them to leave.

Summer passed and on the first day of school, all the Filpot kids over the age of about six showed up. Some of them claimed that they had been to school at one time or another while others had never seen the inside of a classroom. None of them appeared to have ever seen soap and water. Since there were no school records for the Filpot kids, the teachers talked with each one to see how much they knew then put them into whatever class they figured they belonged.

All the older boys were named something which ended with Bert, their father's name. There was Obert, Filbert, the twins Hobert and Herbert, Egbert and the other twins, Jaybert and Rabert. They must have run out of names ending in Bert because the two youngest were named after dogs. There was Spot and another one called Rover. The girls, of whom there was only five, were named after the states in which they were born, along with Rose as their middle name. There was Georgia Rose, Alabama Rose, Tennessee Rose, Arkansas Rose and Oklahoma Rose. The names of the girls appeared to be a roadmap of their westward travels and how long they had been on the way. If the kid that she was carrying at the time turned out to be a girl, she would probably be named Texas Rose.

Obert, the oldest of the Filpot kids, was three or four years older than me and as big as a horse, but the teachers decided that he belonged somewhere around the fifth grade in school, which put him in the same grade with me. He had a round, fat face with tiny, pig-like eyes, set close together under an overhanging brow. It made one wonder just how long it had been since his ancestors had climbed down from trees and started walking erect. Since the teachers seated kids according to the alphabet, he sat right in front of me. I don't suppose you could call Obert a bully, because bullies like to hit smaller kids. Obert never hit any of us but he liked to push us down and sit on us. I've seen him sitting as many as five kids at a time while he laughed like an idiot. His laugh was sort of like a combination between a donkey braying and a pig snorting. It came out Heee Haww, Snort Snort, Oink Oink.

Not only did Obert look, smell and act like a pig, but he also ate like one. He brought his lunch in a battered old lard can and even though the Filpot family seemed to be on the edge of starvation, he always had enough food for four or five normal boys. It usually consisted of six or eight biscuit sandwiches filled with everything from sausage to onions to sand-plum jelly, at least plus half a pie or cake. On one occasion, he brought a whole watermelon to school, which he ate, seeds rind and all. I've seen him stuff a whole biscuit sandwich into his mouth, give it about two good chomps and wash it down with a big swig from a quart bottle of milk. Each sandwich would be followed by a huge belch. Some of the kids would even give Obert some of their lunch just to hear him belch. The belching would stop in ten or fifteen minutes, only to be replaced by another form of expelled gas. By the middle of the first period after lunch, there would be a pungent cloud hovering around his desk that would kill flies.

There was a timid little girl by the name of Emily Bledsoe who sat directly across the aisle from Obert. She had watery blue eyes, stringy blond hair and was so bashful that she would turn beet red for almost no reason at all. Emily always made straight A's in school and kept her notebook so neat that the teachers would use it to show us how a notebook should look. A couple days after Obert came to our school, he was stricken with the urge to expel some gas, so he leaned to one side and bounced a thunderous fart off the hardwood seat. When every head in the class spun around to locate the origin of the blast, Obert calmly pointed toward Emily.

Her face turned crimson red and huge tears flooded down her pale cheeks as she jumped to her feet and dashed for the door, wailing, "I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" Our teacher, Mrs. Benson, raced after her, trying to calm her down. Evidently Mrs. Benson wasn't too successful because Emily didn't return to school for three days. When she finally came back, she was allowed to sit completely across the room from Obert.

I spent the next three years looking at and smelling Obert's backside. When we had a fire drill, I had to follow Obert. When we went to the lunch room, I followed Obert. I endured Obert until the eighth grade when his father decided that since he had only gone through grade school and was a success in life, that was enough learning for Obert.

I didn't see Obert all that much after he left school because we certainly didn't travel in the same circles. About the only occasion when our paths did cross was when we happened to be at the post office at the same time. After I graduated from high school and went on to college, I almost never saw him again, which was just fine with me.

Several years had passed when I walked into the post office one morning to pick up my mail and there he stood, Obert Filpot, who was now the most repulsive person in Stinnett, possibly even in the whole state of Texas; well perhaps the third most repulsive, when you consider his parents, Big Bert and Mama Rose Filpot. Big Bert, who weighed at least three hundred pounds, had become known around town as "Hawg" so, it was only natural that his first fat offspring became known as "Shoat". Mama Filpot stood well over six feet tall, weighed at least fifty pounds more than Hawg and always looked as if she had just emerged from a fighting a forest fire. She not only could, but did whip Hawg's ass and throw him out of the house every time that he got drunk, which happened at least twice a week. After graduating from the eighth grade, Obert took over the family business of stealing hogs and charging people to dump their trash.

Obert always wore bib overalls and usually had at least one hand thrust down inside of them, alternately scratching himself or playing pocket-pool. Obert's gastric plumbing hadn't

improved since leaving school and he now produced intestinal gasses in such quantity that he could not only fart at will, but could do so with a blast which far surpassed anything which any normal human could produce. His favorite game was "Pull My Finger".

The Filpot's post office box was just above mine and while I waited for Obert to fiddle with the combination lock to get his mail, I did my best not to breathe. The last time that he saw soap, it was going the other way. His bodily odors, combined with his gastric discharges were enough to peel paint. The whole Filpot family smelled so bad that it was claimed that whenever any of them went out to feed the hogs, they would all run to the upwind side of the pen.

Obert finally managed to work the combination, which required only two numbers to open, and removed his mail from the box. He fumbled through his mail and moved down to the window to pick up something. I took my last breath of fresh air and plunged into the fog bank of Obert smell which hung like a cloud in front of the boxes.

I twirled the knob to open the lock box, which was more or less a foolish exercise since every box used the same combination and the primary purpose of the lock was to keep the door from being left open. Mixed in among the seed catalogs, copies of Trade-A-Plane News and the Grit Newspaper was a small yellow slip, indicating that I should call at the window for a registered letter. I moved from the old cloud of Obert in front of the boxes to the new one that he had left hovering at the window.

"Sign yore name rat cheer," said Mr. Bates, the postmaster, pointing to the bottom line on the yellow slip. He then thumbed through a stack of identical letters until he came to the one addressed to me. He ripped off the attached green return card and slid it through the window for my signature. "Looks like we ain't gonna be seein' you 'round cheer much longer. Looks like the Army done gotcha, along with Shoat, Bucky Groves and most of the rest of you young studs who didn't go off to fight like real men in the big war." he added.

"Greeting from the President of the United States." the letter began. "A group of your friends and neighbors have selected you to....." Damn! I barely escaped WW-II by being born one month too late to get drafted, and now they are throwing another war just to get even with me.

Obert was right in front of me as we went through the induction process for being drafted for the Korean War, but our paths parted at that point. I never saw Obert or any of the Filpots again because when I returned two years later, the whole family had picked up and left town after the Texas State Department of Health made Stinnett close the trash dump because of its unsanitary conditions.

## Chapter 14

### POACHING DUCKS FOR FUN AND PROFIT

This is hardly the correct title for this chapter since it turned out to be a lot less fun that we had anticipated and there was certainly no profit ever to come from what we did. In fact, had the game warden lacked a good sense of humor, it could have cost several hundred dollars in a fines for all the various laws that we broke that day.

My cousin and I were constant companions during our salad years and our parents often referred to us the Katchenjammer Kids. For those too young to have ever heard of these kids, they were characters in a comic strip by that name who were always involved in some outlandish antics designed to frustrate their parents. I suppose that some of the things that we did tended to remind our parents of those comic strip kids. What one of us couldn't think up to do in the way of mischief, the other one would. In retrospect, it seems that we must have spent most of our waking hours in search of some way to get ourselves into trouble.

While my cousin and I were separated by only six months in age, we were as different in most other ways as daylight and dark. While I was usually able to outwit him, he could and did whip my butt any time that he cared to. Whenever we became involved in a tussle, I soon found myself flat on my back with him sitting on my chest, beating the daylights out of me. I more or less accepted his beating me up because as soon as I stopped bawling because of the threshing he had given me and he stopped bawling because of the spanking his mother had given him for hitting me, we were inseparable. This made us an unbeatable combination with me furnishing the brains and him provided the brawn for most of our projects.

We often walked to the back part of the ranch where a couple small ponds which had been built by the government to collect rain water. They usually held some water during the rainy season but went dry soon after the rains stopped. They were dry so often that there were never any fish in them but they made a great place for us to swim during the wet season. One Saturday, when we approached one of the ponds, we saw about half a dozen little mud hens swimming around on the water. As soon as they spotted us, they took off like a shot, circled the other pond a quarter mile away and landed on it. Being typical boys who could never leave well enough alone, we decided that the thing to do was to go home, get a shotgun and shoot those ducks.

When we returned with my dad's old single shot twelve gauge shotgun, we crept up on the pond from below the dam so we would be hidden from the ducks as we approached. A few weeds growing along the top of the dam gave us good cover as we sneaked up on our unsuspecting quarry. Sure enough, six little mudhens, each about the size of a pigeon, were happily feeding on the duckweeds growing along the edges of the water.

Since it was my dad's shotgun, I got the honor of making the shot. I eased the barrel of the gun through the weeds, aimed carefully and waited for the ducks to get close enough together so I could bag more than one with a single shot. At just the right moment, I squeezed the trigger. The old gun roared, kicking me so hard that I did a couple backflips down the incline of the dam. This was my first time to shoot the shotgun and certainly wasn't ready for its recoil. The old shotgun had kicked me so hard that I never saw whether I had hit anything or not. When I gathered my wits, we climbed back up the dam to see what I had hit, three dead ducks floated on the muddy water.

We were ecstatic because we had actually killed something that we had shot at. I had a .22 caliber rifle but about the only thing that I was ever able to hit with it was a bottle or a tin can. We gathered up our ducks and headed home, buoyed by the thrill of the hunt.

It was somewhere along the way home that I began to consider the fact that dead ducks had to be cooked before they could be eaten, which meant that they had to be cleaned before they could be cooked. I also knew that there was no way that either of our mothers were going to do the messy job for us because even when our dads killed real ducks, they refused to clean them. I heard my mother say many times that she would clean chickens and turkeys, but when it came to ducks, she drew the line. The closer we got to home, the smaller and more scrawny those little mud hens looked. In a sudden magnanimous gesture, I told my cousin that since they were a bit on the small side and it would take all of them to make a good meal, he could have all three of them. This pleased him no end because he suspected that since I was the one who had killed the ducks, and it would be impossible to split three evenly, I would probably want at least two of them. Somewhere along the line, I forgot to mention that I had also heard that the reason they were called mud hens is because they tasted so much like mud that they were inedible.

Sure enough, as soon as he arrived home with his three dead ducks, his mother told him that the only way that those things were going to get cleaned and cooked was if he did it. She also told him that unlike chickens which were easy to scald to remove the feathers, ducks had to be plucked dry. Undaunted, he sat down in the middle of the living room floor with the three ducks in a dish pan and began the arduous task of plucking all those tiny feathers.

It just so happened that the local game warden picked that very afternoon to visit my cousin's dad who drove a roadgrader for the county. There was a huge lake up west of town where the locals liked to hunt ducks out of season and the game warden wanted my uncle to grade the road which ran around the lake so he could sneak up on the poachers and catch them in action.

By this time, my cousin had two of the ducks plucked as bare as a baby's butt and was nearly finished with the third one. When he heard a knock at the front door and looked up, all that he could see was the game warden with his smoky bear hat, badge and gun. His first thought was to get rid of the incriminating evidence so he leaped to his feet, snatched up the dishpan filled with dead birds and dry duck feathers and dashed through the house toward the back door.

They lived in what was known as a shotgun house. That is a house which has all the rooms built in a row; living room in front, two bedrooms in the middle and the kitchen at the back. One

can look in the front door, through the bedroom doors and out the back door. By the time that my cousin reached the back door, there wasn't a single duck feather left in the dishpan; they were all floating in the air. He tossed the dead ducks to the dogs which were sleeping under the back porch but they just sniffed at them and went back to sleep. In final desperation, he threw the ducks into the hog pen where he knew that the hogs would eat anything. Sure enough, the evidence was gone in seconds.

For years after that, the game warden would be reduced to tears of laughter each time he told and retold the story about my cousin and the illegal ducks, always ending it by saying, "There were so many duck feathers floating in the air that it looked like the place was full of smoke. I thought the house was on fire."

## Chapter 15

### THE COW THAT WENT TO SCHOOL

When I was growing up, the arrival of Halloween night held a far different meaning for kids than it does today, and probably for good cause. Instead of cloaking ourselves in some gruesome costume which was suppose to evoke so much fear in the hearts of people that they would gladly hand over candy and other goodies in order to escape some dire terror that we might heap upon them, we set out on a reign of tricks which ranged from playful to downright destructive. Every kid my age knew that P&G soap was by far the best for soaping windows, gasoline worked best on door knobs and outdoor toilets were fair game for everyone. As we grew older, we graduated to more inventive ways of exercising our vandalistic efforts on that one night each year when we could go freely under the protection of a King's X.

On this particular night of goblins, ghosts and witches, my cousin and I decided to allow the residents of Stinnett a respite from our normal bag of tricks which usually involved outhouses and other movable buildings. We had grown tired of the more common things like nailing outhouse doors shut, turning them over or moving them back just far enough so that the when the owner answered a midnight call from Mother Nature, they would stumble into the hole. Besides, some of the older boys were way ahead of us and had already hauled a couple of them up to Lawyer Tate's house and nailed them down on his porch.

I doubt that there is a person alive who is smart enough to know or explain the process by which boys come up with their ideas on how to get themselves in trouble. If boys bent on mischief directed the same level of effort and inventive genius in more productive directions, the world would be populated by teen-age rocket scientists. On this particular night, any latent thoughts about the problems involved in putting a man on the moon were completely swept away by sudden inspiration to put a cow in the school building. What made it an even better idea was that since Halloween came on Friday night that year, it was most likely that the cow wouldn't be discovered until Monday morning.

My cousin and I, like every boy past the third grade, knew how to open the back door of the school with a pocket knife faster than the janitor could do it with a key. Equipped with this knowledge, we tended to come and go at will after everyone else had left for the night. Our

clandestine entries usually involved nothing more than playing basketball in the gym while wearing street shoes or running and skating on the waxed floors in the hall. Both of these activities were highly frowned upon by the school officials and anyone caught doing so would be sent home for a couple days to think about their foul deeds. It also gave us quite a thrill to sneak into the girl's rest rooms because they always smelled so nice and clean, nothing like the boy's which always smelled like dirty socks and stale farts. Once in a while, we would go down into the basement where the janitor stored his supplies and steal a few bars of soap to whittle on. On one occasion, a bunch of older boys wrote dirty words on all the blackboards but the principal recognized their handwriting and raised such a stink that they never tried that again.

We knew better than to put a cow that was giving milk in the school because not being milked for a whole weekend would really cause a problem. After all, we certainly didn't want to cause a cow any misery and pain, just have fun. Also, since we had grown up around cattle, we knew that she would need something to eat and drink over the weekend. We swiped two bales of alfalfa hay from behind the feed store and dragged them up to the school. We left them in the downstairs hall, along with several of the janitor's mop buckets filled with water.

Finding a cow to put in the school was the least of our problems because Mr. Barrett, who owned the dairy, always kept his dry cows in a pasture with a bull directly behind the football field. That way, they were already with a bull whenever it was time for them to breed so they could have a calf and start producing milk again. While most of the other boys in town were soaping windows and doing other dirty deeds, we stumbled around in the darkness until we found a big old Holstein cow and got a rope tied to the ring in her halter. She had spent her life being led around by a rope so she followed after us like a huge, black and white dog. She probably figured that we were taking her someplace to feed her.

Evidently the old cow smelled the fresh hay the instant that we led her into the darkened hall because she perked up her ears and headed straight for it. We pulled the door shut and quietly joined a bunch of other boys who were unloading an outhouse on the fifty yard line of the football field. They had hauled it there on a freight wagon they had swiped down at the depot. The main thing that we wanted to do was establish an alibi in case we became suspects when the cow was discovered. We knew that no one could say for sure that we hadn't been with them all the time.

Saturday came and while most of the adults in town were involved with searching for missing outhouses, washing soap off windows and putting air back in flat tires, my cousin and I were anticipating how much fun we were going to have on Monday morning when the cow was discovered. We had a burning urge to let some of our buddies in on the secret about the cow in the school but good judgment prevailed and we remained quiet. Had we told a single person about what we had done, within an hour it would have been common knowledge with every boy in town.

Sunday came and it became almost impossible for us to keep our secret. We even discussed going up to the school just to check on the cow but decided that if anyone happened to see us there, they would know that we had been involved.

When Monday morning finally came and we arrived at school, all the students and most of the teachers were standing around on the lawn in front of the building. Several of them were crowding around windows, trying to see what was going on inside. All the women teachers were huddled together, talking in whispers about what a mess there was in the building. The principal finally came to the door and announced that it would be at least an hour before classes could begin,



which brought a shout of glee from all the students. My cousin and I were dying to know what was going on but knew better than to ask. A couple of the older boys came running around from one end of the building and yelled, "Hey guys! Come around and look through the side doors. You never saw so much cow-crap in all your life."

The side doors of the building opened into the hall which ran the length of the building. It was amazing how one cow could convert only two bales of hay into so many meadow muffins. There was hardly a square yard of the waxed tile floor which did not have at least one large cow plop on it. While the men teachers were busy scooping up the piles of manure and carrying it outside, the janitor mopped the floor. One would think that with all that manure, there had to be a cow around someplace, but search as they might, she was nowhere to be found. It was as she had vanished from the face of the earth, or at least from the school.

When the place was finally clean, the students were allowed to go to their classes and school returned to more or less normal except for the occasional fits of giggling which would strike whenever someone thought about all those piles of cow-poop in the hall. Suddenly, during the change of classes after the first period, bedlam broke loose in the upstairs hall as a bunch of girls came running out of the girl's rest room, screaming to the top of their lungs. They had found the errant cow.

Evidently, after she had converted the two bales of hay into compost, drank all the water from the mop buckets and wrung herself dry on the hall floor, she became restless and started exploring the place. She had climbed the stairs to the second floor and nuzzled her way into the girl's bathroom, where she was trapped when the door swung shut behind her. The janitor tied a rope to her halter, thinking that he would simply lead her back down the stairs and out of the building, but the cow had other ideas. As soon as she took one look down those stairs, she planted her feet and refused to go another step. When the janitor tugged harder on the rope in an effort to make her follow him down the stairs, she flopped down on her side and refused to move.

He finally gave up on trying to get her to come down the stairs under her own power and decided that the only way was to carry her down. Carrying a reluctant half-ton cow down a flight of stairs was going to be no easy matter and all the muscle power available would be needed for the task. Finding the necessary manpower to carry the cow down the stairs posed somewhat of a problem because most of the male teachers under the age of about fifty, as well as all the boys in the last two grades of high school who could pass an army physical, were gone off to the war. The principal finally went down to the pool hall and cafe where rounded up eight or nine men who evidently had nothing better to do at ten in the morning than shoot pool or drink coffee. Mr. Barrett, who owned the cow and was more than a little interested in her welfare, was also there.

The day had turned into complete chaos as far as school was concerned, so the principal dismissed classes for the rest of the day and told everyone to go home. Since carrying a cow down the stairs and out of the building was going to be the most exciting thing to happen around Stinnett in quite a while, none of the kids were about leave and miss any part of it. Everyone was crowding in the halls to watch.

All sorts of suggestions were made as to the best method of getting her down; like putting a blindfold on her and leading her down, tying her feet together and sliding her down the stairs on a blanket and building a scaffold to lower her with a rope. After a great amount of discussion, each was rejected and they finally decided that the only logical solution was to resort to pure muscle

power to pick her up and carry her down.

A thousand pounds of cow divided more or less equally among ten men comes to about a hundred pounds each, which is no small feat considering that a cow offers so few good places to grab. The four strongest men each took a leg while the rest reached under her belly from either side and grabbed hands. The principal, with no other place to lift, decided to control direction by hanging onto her tail.

Cows, no matter how gentle and forgiving they might be, really object to being picked up. The instant her feet left the floor, she humped her back and unloaded about ten pounds of manure all over the principal's suit and shoes. For some reason, we kids found that a lot funnier than did the principal and he ordered everyone not involved in carrying the cow down the stairs to leave the building. Since they had picked the cow up to where her feet no longer touched the floor, there was little that she could do except to struggle and bellow her displeasure.

The stairs, like those in all schools, went half way down to a landing where it reversed direction before going the rest of the way to the first floor. This is a safety feature to prevent kids from falling down more than half a flight of stairs in any single accident. When they reached the landing and put the cow down so they could rest a bit, she immediately climbed back up the stairs to the second floor. The second time they carried her down, they knew enough to tie her firmly to one of the banisters before they let her feet touch the floor.

The barnyard smell still hung heavy in the air when the Superintendent launched an all-out investigation to find the culprits who committed the great cow caper. Figuring that it must have been someone on the football team, he began grilling them one at a time. He would call one of the players into his office, browbeat and threaten him for half an hour before finally letting him go. When he ran out of football players without finding the guilty party, he started questioning the oldest boys in school first, working downward toward us. A lot of people were suspected of having done the dirty deed and rumors flowed almost as thick as what the cow had left on the floor. Fortunately, the school's homecoming game and Thanksgiving holidays interrupted his search to the point that it was finally forgotten before he got around to questioning us. Had he done so, we would surely have been found out because there was no way that we could have kept a straight face while protesting our innocence.

## Chapter 16

### THE TIME WE FOUND THE DEAD MAN

There was an old grain elevator down by the railroad tracks which had been vacant for as long as most of us kids could remember. Except for the court house, it was the biggest structure in Stinnett, standing around eighty feet tall and covered with rusting corrugated tin. It was rather a scary place with gaping windows in the headhouse and there were even rumors that it was haunted. To add to the illusion that it was occupied by ethereal beings, bats could be seen flying in and out of the out of the open windows each evening. On the back side of the building, next to the rusting tracks of the unused siding, a flexible iron spout which once funneled the grain into the boxcars swung in the wind like a huge elephant's trunk. When the winds were especially strong, the rusty spout would creak and groan as it clanked against the iron side of the building.

Before the dust bowl days came along and wiped out all the farmers, a long line of trucks loaded with wheat would line up at the elevator each year during harvest time to be unloaded. Moving the grain around in the place was accomplished by a huge conveyer belt which lifted the wheat from the pit under the scales to the top of the elevator where it was dumped into one of the four grain bins which made up the basic structure of the building or else funneled directly into waiting railroad cars for shipment to mills in Amarillo where it would be ground into flour. The conveyer could heard all over town as it ran twenty-four hours a day during harvest season. Now, all that came or went from the building was pigeons during the day and bats at night.

Next to the elevator was a huge, round metal tank. It had been used to store excess grain during harvest season until it could be loaded into boxcars for shipment. It was painted a dull black, which made for an excellent place for us kids to write dirty words with chalk. Thankfully for everyone concerned, this was many years before the advent of spray cans and gang graffiti.

When the original owner went broke at the beginning of the great depression, the bank repossessed the scales used to weigh trucks. They ripped them out, leaving a huge hole in the middle of the floor. After the scales were gone, various vandals and thieves came in and took just about everything else of value from the place. Not only had they made off with all the electric motors, belts and pulleys; they had taken all the switches, light sockets and even ripped out the electrical wire and sold it as scrap copper.

Evidently, because the place was so dangerous yet so attractive to kids, someone tried to keep people out by nailing boards over the doors and windows on the first two floors. However, for boys with their natural ability to get themselves into trouble, this posed only a slight problem. It came as great news one day when a couple of the older boys told us that they had discovered a way to get into the place. They had removed the bolts from a small hatch in the side of the tank, opening a hole barely large enough for a person to crawl through. In the middle of the floor of the tank was a square opening into a tunnel leading directly into the pit beneath the scales where the trucks dumped their loads. At one time, a conveyer belt for transferring grain from the tank to the elevator ran through the tunnel, but it was now gone. To get into the main structure of the elevator, one had to crawl into the storage tank, drop through the hole into the tunnel and crawl about a hundred feet to where it opened into the elevator.

Even after you reached the end of the tunnel you weren't out of danger because it was a good ten foot drop to the bottom of the pit which was littered with scraps of lumber, broken bottles and other junk. A certain amount of light filtered down from the open windows in the headhouse, making the experience even that much more frightening. The secret of just where to put your feet and what to grab in order to work your way from the tunnel opening along the wall of the pit to a ladder which you could climb up to the main floor was passed from older kids to younger ones.

Once a way into the elevator was discovered, we started a secret club which, naturally, all the other boys wanted to join. In order to join the exclusive club, a new member had to go through an initiation of sorts. He had to go into the tank, crawl through the tunnel, climb a ladder inside one of the grain bins to the headhouse and wave to us from a window. My cousin and I were the first new members to go through the initiation, promoting us to a status usually reserved for boys at least two years older than we were. This made us very special in the eyes of all the other boys our age.

I don't really remember much about our initiation, probably because we were too scared for the real danger involved to register in our minds, but no matter how many times after that we crawled through the pitch-black darkness of the tunnel, it was always a scary trip. Rats were everywhere and you could hear them squealing as they scampered away. Occasionally, you would crawl right into a spider web in the darkness.

As scary as it was to get inside the old elevator, getting to the top was even more frightening and a lot more dangerous. When the place had been in operation, there was an electric lift to carry people up and down, but even if someone hadn't stolen the motor that ran it, there was no longer any electrical power to the place. The only way to get to the top now was to crawl through a small opening into one of the grain bins and climb a rickety ladder made by nailing boards across the studs in the wall. There was absolutely nothing to keep a person from plunging to the bottom should he lose his grip or if one of the nails holding the boards should pull loose.

If your heart wasn't already beating a mile a minute by the time that you reached the top, when you stuck your head through the small opening into the room at the very top, you would usually be met by a flurry of beating wings as the pigeons nesting up there tried to escape. At least the bats hanging upside down from the rafters slept during the day and few of them even took notice that someone was there. To my knowledge, no one ever fell while climbing around in the place, but it took several hours for some to work up the courage to climb back down.

Even though vandals had stolen just about everything else out of the place when it went

broke, they ignored the ratty old furniture in the back room and the roll top desk in the office. The desk was filled with canceled checks, weight slips and old letters but when I dug under the cushions in the old couch, I struck the mother lode. Along with a fountain pen, four pencils and a pocket knife; I found six pennies, two nickels, a dime, two quarters and a real silver dollar. Since this was during the depression, almost two dollars was more money than I had ever seen in all my life.

Bucky Dilt, who was with my cousin and me when I found the money, insisted that since he was president of the club, the money really should belong to him. I failed to see the logic of his idea but after considerable negotiation, we decided that the thing to do was spend it all at the drug store. We had strawberry sundaes, chocolate malts, vanilla shakes, root beer floats and coke fizzes until we were about to pop before it was all gone. Mr. Black became suspicious of three boys spending nearly two dollars on ice cream and called the sheriff to see if anyone had reported such a loss. By the time the sheriff got to our house to investigate the situation, I was so sick that I could barely talk. I convinced him that we had found the money buried in a coffee can but didn't leak the secret that we had been in the old elevator.

Somehow, the story got out that there was a treasure hidden in the elevator, but no matter how much we searched, all that we ever found were a few of the aluminum coins issued by the State of Oklahoma as a way to collect sales taxes. Since they were worth only a tenth of a cent each and worthless everywhere except in Oklahoma, people who brought them back across the state line to Texas usually used as washers under bolts. After all, washers were five for a penny and you could get ten of those things for the same amount.

The elevator had become the secret meeting place where most of the pre-pubescent boys of Stinnett gathered to do the pre-pubescent things that pre-pubescent boys do when they feel safe from discovery by adults. We practiced rolling our own cigarettes and then had contests to see who could inhale the most puffs before going into a spasm of coughing. We had contests to see who could pee the highest on the wall and who could fart the loudest. We measured ourselves to see who could produce the biggest erection, which naturally led to long discussions about girls and sex. We kept copies of The National Geographic with pictures of bare-chested native women as well as pages from the women's underwear section of the Sears catalog there. One of the boys even came up with a deck of cards with pictures of naked women on them. Life was good.

One day after school, my cousin and I headed straight for the old elevator. For some reason, we hadn't been there for several days and were anxious to get back to our secret hiding place. We crawled into the tank, dropped into the tunnel and sent the rats scampering into their holes as we made our way to the scale pit. We didn't have a care in the world as we climbed to the main floor and walked into the office, that is until we froze in our tracks when we saw a pile of clothing laying on the floor and a man asleep on the couch in the back room. Somehow, he must have found our secret way into the elevator and had taken possession of it. I don't think that we drew a breath until after we had scrambled back through the tunnel, out of the tank and were half way home. We didn't look back as we raced for home for fear that he was dead on our heels.

We told all the other boys about finding the man asleep on the couch and it was several days before any of us worked up the courage to go near the elevator again. We watched the place all one weekend without seeing a soul around, so my cousin and I decided to see if he was still there. We reasoned that the safest thing to do before going inside was to throw rocks at the sheet

iron on the walls to see if anyone responded. We figured that if there was anyone in there, they were bound to come out to see what all the noise was about. After we pelted the walls for half an hour without raising anyone, we concluded that he was gone and it would be safe to go inside.

Before entering the tank, I carefully checked the loose sand around the opening to see if there were any fresh tracks. Finding none, we went inside and crawled quietly through the tunnel to the scale pit. As I reached the end of the tunnel, I smelled a terrible stench. The place always stunk in some way; from rotting grain, rats droppings or an occasional skunk, but this was more like something dead. While I had smelled a number of dead animals before, this was totally different. As I poked my head above the edge of the scale pit, the stench became stronger. I could see the pile of clothes lying on the floor in the office just as they had been when we first saw them, but I couldn't see the couch from where I was.

When I whispered that the clothes were still there, my cousin refused to come out and started backing down the tunnel toward where we had come in. Even without his moral support, I had to see what was going on so I climbed out of the pit and made my way as quietly as possible to the door between the office and the back room. The smell was so strong that it almost gagged me. The door was about half closed so I peeked through the crack between the door and the frame. The man was lying in the same position on the couch just as he had been when we first saw him. A big rat which was sitting on his shoulder and chewing on his ear but it scampered away when it saw me. It finally sank through the befuddled mind of a twelve year old that the man was dead.

My cousin was waiting for me in the tank when I stuck my head out of the tunnel. "He's still there but I think he is dead," I told him.

"Think we should tell someone?" he asked.

"I guess we should, but if we do, we'll have to tell how and where we found him," I answered.

All the way home, we discussed whether we should tell about finding the dead man or not. It was finally decided that the proper thing to do was to tell someone. After all, the man was dead and being eaten by rats, and since we were the ones who found him, it was our duty to tell. We concluded that since my dad had been a Texas Ranger, he would know what to do about a dead man. All that I had to do was to work up the courage to tell him, which greatly relieved my cousin since he didn't have to share in the responsibility.

My dad was getting ready to feed the chickens when I got home and I went out to talk with him. Figuring out just how to go about it and what to say posed more of a problem than I had anticipated and as I stood there, scrubbing my foot over a nail sticking out of the wooden floor of the feed house, he sensed that something was wrong. He waited a minute or so for me to work up my courage and he finally asked, "Want to tell me about the dead man?"

"How did you know?" I blurted out before I could think of something more suitable to say.

"I could smell it on you," he replied. "I was around a lot of dead people in the trenches during World War One and you never forget that smell."

He listened carefully as I told him how we were able to get into the elevator and about finding the dead man in there and how rats were eating on him. When I finished, he told me to go take a bath and give my clothes to my mother to wash. I knew that the smell was pretty strong but never realized that it could permeate a person's clothing to the point that anyone near could smell him. He told my mother that he was going to contact the proper authorities about the dead man, got

in his pickup and left. When he returned later that night, he said that the Justice of the Peace had ruled that the man had evidently gone in there to get out of the weather and had died of natural causes. Then he added, "We also fixed things so you can't get back in that place. It's a wonder that someone wasn't killed climbing around in there."

That was all that was ever said about the subject but when we checked it out a few days later, we found that the cover had been put back on the opening into the tank and the bolts welded so they could not be removed again. I smelled a dead person only once since then and he was right, you never forget it.

## Chapter 17

### THE REVENGE OF OLD THREE TOES

Old Three Toes, as he came to be known, was a wily old coyote which lived on the Venable ranch where he was the nemesis and a thorn in the side of Jake Venable almost from the day he was born. Actually, he wasn't pure coyote but about half coyote and half dog. The dog half must have been some sort of a big black thing because while Old Three Toes had the guile and disposition of a coyote, he was nearly coal black except for his belly and at least twice the size of a normal coyote. During his long and notorious life, he was poisoned, shot, trapped and once hunted down and caught by a pack of trained coyote hunting dogs. Yet, each time he was always able to escape to continue the lifestyle of a rogue coyote.

Jake's first sighting of Three Toes was shortly after the mother coyote brought her pack of pups out of the den for their first look at the outside world. Jake immediately noticed that one of the pups was much larger and darker than the rest. Jake recognized that he was a half-breed coyote, one of the most despised critters in a cattleman's life. Half-breed coyotes have a reputation of being especially destructive to cattle. Jake pulled his 30-30 out of the saddle boot, took careful aim and squeezed off a shot at the black pup. The bullet kicked up a puff of dirt between his legs and taught him to never let a human get close again.

Jake set a couple traps near the place where had last seen them and baited it with a dead rabbit. When he came by the next morning, he found that he had caught the black coyote but all that he had to show for it was one toe. It had obviously been Three Toe's lucky day because he was lifting his foot just as the trap snapped shut, catching him only by a toe on his back foot. He immediately chewed himself free and escaped. From that day forward, he became known as Three Toes because of the distinctive print he left with his right hind foot.

Three Toes must have learned a lot from that first encounter with ranchers and their traps because no matter how hard they tried, no one was never able to catch him in one of those steel monsters again. In fact, it would appear that he liked to play tricks with them. He would leave tracks around the traps without stepping in one, then dig them up, turn them over and leave them on the top of the ground as if to taunt the ranchers.

Jake tried to poison Three Toes by putting strychnine in hot dogs and scattering them along



trails which he liked to follow. Three Toes swallowed one of the baited wieners but immediately got sick and threw it up before it could do him any real damage. After that, he would pass up anything which smelled the slightest bit suspicious and all that Jake ever killed with his poison after that was dogs and hawks.

Being the biggest and strongest coyote in the area, Three Toes soon had quite a pack of coyotes following him around. They could easily attack and kill calves and would even take on full grown cows if they found a lame one. It got to the point where Three Toes and his following were really putting a dent in Jake's herd. Not only were they killing his cattle, but they often came right up to his house to take chickens, pigs and even his cat. Every time that Jake found signs where something had been killed, he would also find those familiar tracks with a toe missing.

Jake always carried a Lever Action 30-30 Winchester in his saddle boot and one day he came upon Three Toes and his pack eating a calf that they had killed. Jake popped off a quick shot which took down one of the coyotes, levered another shell into the chamber and wounded another. Then he realized that while he was killing coyotes, old Three Toes was getting away. He took careful aim at the black leader and squeezed off a shot. Just as Three Toes was about to go over a hill and out of sight, he turned to take one last look and the bullet took off most of his tail. With nothing to show for his shooting ability except half a tail, he hung it from the rear view mirror of his pickup to remind him just how much he hated that old black coyote.

There was a fellow in Stinnett who had what he called coyote dogs. Actually, all that he had was a couple medium size mongrels and a big old yellow dog that would fight most anything. His usual way of hunting coyotes was to drive around with his dogs in a box in the back of his pickup until he spotted a coyote and then turn the dogs loose. The two little ones would chase the coyote until it got tired of running and turned to fight. Then the little dogs would stay just out of his reach until the big dog arrived to finish him off. Jake hired the man and his dogs to hunt down old Three Toes.

Everything went as planned. They spotted old Three Toes, turned the dogs loose and they took off after him. When the two little ones finally ran him to ground, they found that he wasn't nearly as easy to hold at bay as most coyotes. He turned on the two little dogs, killed one instantly and laid the other open so badly that he died before the night was over. He and the big yellow dog were about an even match and a pitched battle went on for several minutes. Things were turning in favor of the yellow dog when he made the mistake of clamping down on an ear, putting himself in just the right position for Three Toes to get hold of his throat. Even though the yellow dog was giving the ear a good chewing, he was rapidly running out of air.

Jake and the dog's owner arrived in the nick of time because the big yellow dog was fading fast. Seeing the men arrive, Three Toes released his grip on the yellow dog's throat to escape. In his death throws, the yellow dog hung onto the ear and as Three Toes bolted away, he left most of his right ear in the yellow dog's mouth.

Along about that time the government came out with a new gadget called a cyanide gun to help control the coyote population. It was supposed to be fool-proof. You attached the device to a fence post or to a stake driven in the ground, baited it with a piece of meat and removed a pin to activate it. They always put a large sign above the gun warning of its danger. When a coyote tried to get the meat, it would fire a cyanide pellet right into its mouth, killing it almost instantly. It would kill a coyote so quick that he usually got no more than a few yards from where the gun was

placed.

Jake obtained several of those lethal traps from the local Department of Agriculture Agent and set them in various places on his ranch. Sure enough, a couple days later, he found four dead coyotes but none of them were his old enemy, Three Toes. The black half-breed had found one of them but being wary of anything which even hinted of man, he had approached it very carefully. After sniffing around it for several minutes and finding no steel traps, he decided that instead of simply grabbing the bait and pulling, he would nibble it from the side. It fired, but instead of sending the deadly pellet into his mouth, it missed but the explosion hit him directly in the face, blowing one eye out and half blinding him in the other. Now, blind in one eye and nearly so in the other, poor old Three Toes was far from the coyote that he once was. He was now reduced to eating watermelons, scrounging through trash cans and raiding chicken houses like a common dog.

Jake forgot all about old Three Toes the day that a letter arrived from the Chevrolet Dealer in Borger telling him that the new pickup that he had been waiting for ever since the war ended had finally come in. Jake drove to Borger in the rattling old pickup that had barely made it through the war by being worked on at least twice a week. On the way there, one of the connecting rods began to knock even louder than usual and Jake feared that it wouldn't make it up the hill on the south side of the river. It gasped its last breath as he pulled into the dealer's driveway.

There it was. A brand new 1946 Chevrolet Half Ton Pickup, forest green in color and tires that actually had tread on them. Jake stepped gingerly on the starter and the engine purred to life. He breathed in the new pickup smell and ran his hands over the genuine imitation leather seat. It was the first new vehicle that Jake had ever owned and only by building bridges for the county ever since the war started had he accumulated enough money to buy it. The deal was made, the check was written, the new pickup filled with gasoline and Jake headed back to Stinnett with a song in his heart. Actually, the song wasn't in his heart but on the radio which he had to buy for five hundred dollars in order to get them to sell him the pickup. The government controlled the selling price on new pickups but not on radios. He drove all the way home at exactly 35 miles an hour because he wanted to break the engine in right.

When Jake arrived at home, his wife rushed from the house to admire the new pickup. She ran her hand over the simulated wood grain dash and Jake showed her how the radio worked. As Jake carefully wiping away some bugs that had splatted themselves on the windshield during the drive home, their admiration of the new pickup was interrupted by a commotion coming from the chicken house. They rushed to see what was the matter. There he was, old Three Toes, backed into a corner of the chicken house with a fat hen in his teeth. He was really a pitiful looking thing, scars from countless battles, blind in one eye, an ear missing and only a stub for a tail. He glared hatred at them from his one good eye. Jake closed the hen house door; he had finally captured old Three Toes. It was a red letter day, a new pickup and now he had captured his old enemy.

Jake got his 30-30 and as he took aim at Three Toe's head through the crack in the door, he was suddenly stricken with a better idea. Considering how much misery and money this old coyote had cost him, he wanted to extract more revenge than what simply pulling the trigger and watching him die would provide. He lowered the gun and went into the barn where he had most of a case of dynamite that he used to blast out rocks when he was building bridges for the county. He was going to send Old Three Toes to his maker in style. He got two sticks of the dynamite, a blasting cap and a couple feet of fuse.

Jake tossed a loop of rope over Three Toe's head, dragged him from the hen house and soon had him safely stuffed into a gunny sack. Then he loaded him into the back of the pickup and drove to the middle of his ranch.

Jake Venable was always the sort of person who got a rather perverse pleasure out of seeing things die, but this was going to be his crowning achievement in revenge. He used some electrical tape to firmly attach the two sticks of dynamite to Three Toe's back, then he crimped the blasting cap onto the fuse with his teeth and carefully inserted it into the dynamite. With everything ready, he dragged poor old Three Toes about a hundred yards from the pickup and lit the fuse. Two feet of fuse would give him close to one full minute to anticipate the end of his old enemy. He shook the rope off the coyote's neck and gave him a kick in the butt to send him on his way.

Old Three Toes leaped to his feet and took off as fast as he could run, except being able to see from only one eye, he was running in a big circle, kicking up a cloud of dust as he raced across the dry prairie. Poor old Three Toes had two thoughts on his mind, escape from his tormentor and find a place to hide so he could chew this infernal thing off his back. Suddenly, his one good eye spotted something big and green ahead, and it seemed to have just enough space under it for him to hide. Jake stood there dumbfounded as old Three Toes raced toward his new pickup and crawled under it. Suddenly, there was a loud explosion which filled the air with a cloud of dust, black hair and flying pickup parts.

## Chapter 18

### COWBOYS

Being right in the middle of ranching country, Stinnett naturally had its share of these rugged individuals who were so prominent in giving the Texas Panhandle its unique flavor. They were also some of the orneriest people around and an example of just how mean-spirited and ornery they were could be judged by what they found to be humorous and what they did for fun. In fact, for most of them, something couldn't hardly be any fun at all unless it put someone in the hospital or jail, or both.

Like the time that Old Man Ancel made the mistake of letting four of his cowboys go to Borger together to pick up some supplies. Any rancher with sense enough to get in out of the rain knows better than to send more than one cowboy to do most anything, especially if it involved a trip into town. As my dad used to say, "One cowboy will work, two cowboys will get drunk and three or more get drunk and start fights."

On this particular trip was Joe and Ben, a couple of Ancel's slack-twisted nephews who were barely smart enough to drive cows but not smart enough to stay out of trouble. There was also a teen-age drifter called The Kid who wandered in one day and Mrs. Ancel made the mistake of feeding him. As long as they fed him, gave him a warm place to sleep and didn't work him too hard, he saw no reason to leave. Just to keep them from getting into more than the usual amount of trouble or lost, Ancel sent along Curley, the only really good hand that he had. Naturally, with a nickname like Curley, he was bald as an egg.

They got to Borger, picked up the eight rolls of barbed wire, two bags of staples and a pair of post hole diggers at the hardware store. After that, they stopped by the feed store for half a dozen blocks of salt. With their shopping done in such quick order, they realized that if they got back to the ranch before dark, Ancel would put them to work building fence. Beside all that, it was a hot day and a couple cool ones down at the Wild Bull Bar would really taste good.

The Kid was too young to get into the bar so he had to stay in the back of the pickup in the parking lot. Every once in a while one of them would slip out the back door and take him a beer. As so often happens, one or two cool ones leads to three or four, mostly because the bar maid had the biggest pair of honkers that they had ever seen and each time she bent over to put more bottles

on their table, they got a close and personal view of her mighty mountains. By the third beer, what brains Ben might have had were in his pants and he had fallen totally in lust with her.

They were still going strong at midnight when the law required that the bar close. By this time Ben had become friendly enough with the bar maid to get a quick feel every now and then and was trying to talk her into going back to the ranch with them. She had more or less agreed but just as they were about to slip out the back door, her boyfriend came by to pick her up. He stood about seven feet tall, weighed three hundred pounds and had fists as big as hams. Curley hustled Ben outside just in time to save his life while Joe bought a fifth of Wild Turkey from the bartender to help them get home. They decided to take a shortcut by way of Plemons, even though it was probably ten miles further, and headed out.

Joe and Ben were in the cab of the pickup while Curley and The Kid were in the back, passing the fifth of Wild Turkey back and forth between them. Somewhere in the hills just south of the bridge over the Canadian River, Curley decided that it was time to process some of the beer that he had been drinking all night. He stood up in the back of the pickup and just as he got a good stream going, Ben spotted a skunk crossing the road and swerved to try to run over it, sending Curley into a half-gainer over the side. Ben missed the skunk but Curley landed right on top of it and the two of them went tumbling down the road together.

Later, The Kid said that the funniest thing that he ever saw was old Curley's bald head flashing in the moonlight as he did flip-flops down the middle of the road. What made it even funnier was Curley hanging onto his family jewels with one hand and batting at the skunk with the other.

The Kid started banging on the top of the cab of the pickup to get Joe and Ben to stop, but they thought that he and Curley just wanted the bottle back before it was their turn. It took a couple miles before he could convince them that Curley had fallen out. They thought about it for a while and decided that they probably should go back to look for him so they turned around and headed back as fast as the old pickup would run. As they topped one of the little hills, there was Curley, standing in the middle of the road and waving his arms. They were going so fast that they would have run over him if he hadn't dove into the bushes along the side of the road where the skunk had taken refuge. This was the last straw for the skunk and he let fly with his best weapon, hitting Curley right in the face.

They finally got the pickup stopped, turned around and here they came again. Their reaction time wasn't any better than the first time and they nearly got him again. By this time, Curley was convinced that they were trying to kill him so he decided to take his chances with the skunk in the brush along the side of the road. The skunk gave him a parting shot and headed for safer places. They finally had to get out and walk up and down the road, calling his name, to get him to come out of hiding.

They got Curley in the headlights of the pickup to see how bad he was hurt and as Ben put it, "He looked like he had been sacking cats and someone slipped him a wild one." He was pretty well scratched, skinned and beat up from one end to the other so it was decided they better take him back to the hospital in Borger. Curley was all bloody and stunk like a skunk so bad that they made him ride to the hospital in the back of the pickup. It must have been around two in the morning when the doctor finally got all the gravel, thorns and bits of cloth picked out of his wounds and mopped them with iodine. He declared that while he didn't have any serious injuries,

he had pavement abrasions over just about every inch of his body except for the part that he was holding when he fell out.

When they finally got back to the ranch, Curley was having a bit of a sinking spell so he stumbled into his house and headed straight for bed without saying a word to his wife who was still waiting up for him. Joe and Ben, being the good buddies that they were, told his wife that he had been trying to ride a bad horse and it threw him and dragged him all over the place, including right through a whole bunch of skunks. They told her that the doctor said he would probably be OK but he had a slight concussion and if he went to sleep during the next 24 hours, he probably wouldn't wake up again.

They all declared that the funniest thing they ever saw was the next morning when they went down to the corral and there was Old Curley, sitting on a bale of hay, covered with scabs from one end to the other, stinking to high heaven and swearing that he was married to the craziest damn woman alive. He said that he expected her to be madder'n hell at him for coming in drunk, but she had been so sweet and nice to him, except that she kept giving him black coffee, washing his face with cold water and wouldn't let him go to sleep.

## Chapter 19

### BOYS AND FIRES GO TOGETHER LIKE BOYS AND FIRES

There is the old joke about the boy who didn't know the difference between incest and pyromania, so he set fire to his sister. I'm sure that this is very close to the truth because as I was growing up, I had far more experience with fire than I ever did with incest; most likely because I didn't have a sister.

They say that man discovered fire at least half a million years ago which I am sure is probably true as far as the time, however I would bet that it was a boy and not a man who discovered it. Left to their own devices, in addition to the usual things like cigarette lighters, matches and the tried and true Boy Scout method of rubbing two sticks together; boys have been known to kindle fires with magnifying glasses, chemicals, wires heated with flashlight batteries, pieces of flint, grinding wheels, compressed air, and hitting toy pistol caps with a hammer. In fact, I'd bet that it was a boy who was the first person to pile up oily rags and cause spontaneous combustion.

In addition to the usual contents of their pockets, like marbles, nails, paper clips, string, washers, bottle caps and an occasional dead toad, the two things which one could always depend on a boy having was matches and a pocket knife. As we grew older, the pocket knife stayed but we progressed from matches to cigarette lighters, even though we didn't smoke. It seemed that at a certain age, whether he smoked or not, every boy had to have a cigarette lighter and anyone without one was considered to be socially disadvantaged.

World War Two and my cigarette lighter years came along at about the same time and while all service men carried genuine Zippo lighters, engraved with an emblem of their branch of service, we boys had to do with what we could find. Along with the war came a flood of empty .50 Caliber Machine Gun shells so quiet logically, the next step was for people to make cigarette lighters out of them. The lighter was fitted into the shell with a fake bullet to cover it. To use the lighter, you removed the cap and thumbed the little spark wheel to make it light. When you were done with it, you blew it out and put it back the bullet cover back on to keep the lighter fluid from evaporating.

As was the custom each Saturday, my cousin and I caught the bus to Borger to see the

movies. While we were waiting for the movies to open, we stopped by the drug store across the street for a root beer float. We had no more than stepped through the door when I noticed the display of machine gun bullet lighters in between the boxes of cigars and machines to make roll-your-own cigarettes. They were beautiful things, a full six inches of polished brass topped with a buffed aluminum bullet. To any normal person, they would have been far too big to carry around in a pocket. But to a wide-eyed boy, they were the ultimate in utility, the pinnacle of pulchritude, the answer to our fondest desires. We just had to have one. By pooling our money and doing without both the root beer floats and lunch, we had just enough money to buy one of those beautiful lighters, a can of Energene lighter fluid and still have enough left over to get into the movie.

I carried the can of Energene fluid in my pocket and my cousin carried the lighter in his. We knew that if an usher saw what we had, he would certainly confiscate it. As soon as the lights were out, we had the lighter out to look at it as best we could in the dark. Naturally, the first thing to do was fill it with fluid. My cousin held the lighter upright and I squeezed the can to soak the cotton stuffing with fluid. A .50 caliber shell is so large that it took almost a whole can of Energene to fill it. The only way we could tell in the darkness that it was full was when the fluid ran all over my cousin's hands.

Now, when a boy has a lighter, there's only thing to do with it, and we all know what that is. My cousin thumbed the little wheel, silver sparks shot out, the wick flared and so did his Energene-soaked hands. He let out a yell, dropped the lighter between the seats and dashed for the rest room to put the fire out. The lighter started rolling under the seats toward the front of the theater with its flames getting bigger all the time. People were jumping out of the way as I ran along beside the errant lighter, trying to step on it each time it passed between one row of seats and the next.

The projectionist saw the flames, shut down the projector and turned up the house lights. Two ushers came running, followed closely by the manager, the lady who sold tickets and two girls from the popcorn stand. As the lighter rolled from under the last row of seats, one of the ushers captured it with a mop and the other dumped a bucket of dirty water on it.

By the time that the manager had finally figured out that it was only a cigarette lighter and not a dangerous shell of some sort about to explode, the fire department and three policemen had arrived. My cousin had doused his flaming hands by sticking them into a toilet and the only visible damages were badly singed eyebrows.

The manager grabbed me and my cousin by the collars and bounced us all the way up the aisle and out the front door, all the time yelling something about what he would do to us if we ever came back into his place again. Not only did we not get to see the movie, we didn't even get our lighter back.



## Chapter 20

### SLICK AND BUBBA

Every town produces at least one and occasionally, two really dim bulbs but it seems that Stinnett had a whole family of them. No one was sure whether it was due to a freak of nature or a thin gene pool, but the combined IQ of the Dawson family was about equal to an average toad.

Slick Dawson was born Joe Ed Dawson but as long as I had known of him, he was called Slick. I don't know how Slick got his nickname because by even the most liberal standards, he was as dumb as a pile of rocks. The law was acquainted with Slick by the time he was six years old and anytime that a really stupid crime was committed around Stinnett, the sheriff knew exactly where to go for the culprit. Slick was around fourteen when he made his first trip down to the State Reform School and became a regular visitor there until he reached eighteen and old enough to be sent to the pen at Huntsville for his next stupid crime.

Slick had barely turned eighteen and was involved in his first session of swamp reclamation down at Huntsville when Bubba came along. Bubba wasn't really Slick's younger brother as most everyone thought, but either his nephew or more likely his son. No one was ever sure who belonged to who in that family. Seems that Slick's younger sister, Roshana, had turned up a little bit pregnant just after she turned fourteen and was shipped off to live with relatives in Sallisaw, Oklahoma until the problem resolved itself. Strangely enough, the day Roshana returned home, her mother announced that she had just delivered an eight pound boy even though she had never looked any more pregnant than a fence post. Naturally, since that boy was the second son in the family, by normal Texas tradition, he was forever called Bubba.

During the times when Slick wasn't busy making license plates down at the state pen, he and Bubba were as inseparable as two peas in a pod. Bubba always thought that Slick was the smartest person in the world, which should give you a good idea of his level of intelligence. After seven or eight years in school, Bubba had made it all the way to the fourth grade. When he didn't show up for the beginning of school one fall, all the teachers celebrated. Actually, the reason why he didn't show up that year was because he had graduated from public school to reform school.

Bubba finally reached his eighteenth birthday and by law, he had to be released from his third trip to reform school. At about the same time, Slick convinced the parole board that he was a

changed man and the let him out after serving one year out of a three year sentence for stealing hogs.

Slick had a job washing dishes at the City Cafe while Bubba stood around the back door, scratching himself and trying to figure out some way to get into trouble. Buster Kent, who owned the cafe, wouldn't let Bubba inside after he stole a ham and two pies out of the walk-in cooler. Bubba had gone up north of Darrouzette to work for his Uncle Dan during harvest but the uncle had caught him stealing Aunt Lil's egg money and sent him packing three days after he got there.

Then, like a flash, Bubba had an idea. He and Slick would rob the bank at Darrouzette. It would be easy pickings. The bank was next door to the blacksmith shop where there were all kinds of tools that they could use to break through the wall into the bank. Once in the bank, they could use the cutting torch in the blacksmith shop to cut through the vault door. What made it an even better idea was the fact that there was no sheriff in Darrouzette and no one lived close enough to hear them.

It didn't take more than a few minutes for Bubba to convince Slick what a great idea he had. The mere fact that Slick thought that Bubba had a good idea was ample proof that Slick hadn't learned anything during his four trips down to Huntsville. It made perfect sense to them, banks had money and they needed money, so rob a bank and they would be in high cotton.

Slick quit his job at the cafe, drew up his wages and they hopped on the northbound Trailways bus which came through just before noon. Slick barely had enough money for two one-way tickets but that would be no problem once they got hold of all that money in the bank. The only time that the bus when past Perryton was when there were passengers going further east. The bus driver grumbled about having to drive that extra 30 miles. It was getting along toward supper time when they got off the bus but they had no money for food. Slick, being the crafty person that he was, said he would get them something to eat.

He walked into the cafe, asked for a job washing dishes and was hired on the spot. The guy who owned the place needed the help because he was having to do the cooking, wait tables and wash the dishes. Instead of Slick doing the smart thing, which was beyond his abilities anyway, and washing a few dishes before he asked for food, he waited until the owner turned his back, grabbed two steaks off the grill and ran out the back door. If the owner hadn't been so busy, he would have gone after him with a meat cleaver. Slick and Bubba ate their steaks and hid out in a vacant building until the cafe, which was the last place open on main street, closed at nine and the town became quiet.

Getting into the blacksmith shop was simple even for them. They stuck a stick through the crack between the two back doors, lifted the bar and slid them open. Once in the blacksmith shop, they found all sorts of sledge hammers to pound a hole through the hollow tile wall with and were inside the bank within a few minutes. Standing in front of the huge steel vault door, they realized that getting into it was going to be somewhat more difficult.

Slick had seen blacksmiths using their acetylene torches for cutting and welding but had never done so himself. He knew that working the lever on the side of the carbide generator had something to do with it so he pumped it several shots. He could hear bubbling inside the big tank and figured that it was ready to go. Turning on the oxygen tank and getting the proper flame needed for cutting steel was way past his abilities. However, with a bit of tinkering, he finally got a huge yellow plume of flame coming from the torch. It was also producing a cloud of black smoke

and big blobs of soot which floated down and coated everything around. While Slick was working on the vault door with the torch, Bubba rummaged through the bank president's desk. He found about a dollar in change, a book of stamps and a box of cigars. He pocketed the change and stamps.

Slick played the flame on the combination knob for a while and even though it was hot enough to burn the paint, it certainly wasn't hot enough to melt the steel. After about an hour, the acetylene tank ran out of carbide and the flame went out. All that they had to show for their efforts was a coating of black soot about a quarter inch thick on everything in the bank, including themselves.

Having failed to get into the vault through the use of modern technology, they turned to a more direct approach. They decided to knock the knob off with a chisel and sledge hammer. Slick was holding the chisel and Bubba swung the sledge. It was never known whether it was the smoke, soot or just bad luck, but on Bubba's first swing with the sledge, he missed the chisel and hit Slick's arm just above the wrist.

Slick didn't have to be a doctor or even an idiot to figure out that his arm was broken and he rapidly lost interest in any further efforts toward getting into the vault. Bubba found a coat hanging in a closet and made a sling for Slick's arm and they were about to leave through the hole in the wall when Bubba decided that they had to have something to show for their efforts. He raced back to the desk and grabbed the box of cigars.

Slick's arm was throbbing like a robin's butt in a snowstorm as they stood in the middle of the deserted main street trying to figure out what to do next. Unfortunately, they never planned more than ten minutes ahead and it was now nearly midnight. Suddenly Bubba had another great idea. "Uncle Dan's place is only four miles north of here. We can walk out there and steal one of his trucks to drive home," he said.

"Couldn't we just stay there with him for a while?" asked Slick.

"I don't think so," replied Bubba. "When I left, he said that he'd shoot my ass if I ever came back. We'd better just steal his truck and get out of there without getting caught."

Uncle Dan and Aunt Lil were gone somewhere and the house was locked tight as a jug when they got there. The only vehicle on the place that would run was an old farm truck with no windshield or door glass. The right door was missing and the left one welded shut. It didn't need a key, just twist a couple wires together under the dash and it would start. Before they left, Bubba climbed through a back window to see if he could find anything worth stealing. The egg money jar was empty but he found a whole ham in the ice box. Since they were both hungry as wolves, he took that and they headed home.

There was no muffler on the old truck and it would wake the dead as it bellowed along. If you got faster than about twenty miles an hour the front wheels would begin to shimmy so bad that you could hardly keep in on the road. It had only one headlight which pointed off to the right and up at an angle which lit up nothing but the tops of trees.

The old truck was almost out of gas by the time they got to Perryton where the Town Marshall spotted them draining the hoses on the pumps at the Phillips station. Since he was simply a night watchman and didn't carry a gun, he watched as they siphoned some more gas from a truck at the elevator and then headed west out of town. He called the Sheriff 25 miles away at Spearman and told him that they were headed that way.

The Sheriff and three deputies had armed themselves with shotguns and were waiting behind a roadblock they had set up across main street with their police cars when they came clattering into town. Bubba brought the old truck to a stop in the glare of four spotlights.

"Get out real easy with your hands in the air," came a gruff voice of the Sheriff from behind the spotlights.

Slick was having quite a sinking spell by this time and getting caught by the law seemed to be one of the better things that had happened to him since this whole thing had started. He started to slide out the right side of the truck with his good arm over his head when he felt the muzzle of a shotgun against the side of his head. "I said both hands in the air, Black Boy," said the voice with a nudge of the shotgun for emphasis.

"I can't raise the other one, it's broke," moaned Slick.

At their trials in Federal Court where they were charged with attempted bank robbery, taking a stolen vehicle across state lines and theft of postage stamps, the sheriff testified, "The first time I saw them in that rattle-trap old truck, I thought I had me a couple black boys. They wuz sittin' there black as tar, eatin' ham and smokin' cigars. They looked like a pair of owls that had been struck by lightnin'."

If they ever got out of the Federal Pen, they never came back to Stinnett.

## Chapter 21

### The Wild Man Of Poker Flats

While I never knew my grandfather Foreman, from the stories I've heard, he must have been a very stern person who ruled the family with an iron hand which grabbed whatever was handy to give one of his kids a good thrashing. Few of his ten kids stuck around home past the age of about fifteen before leaving. It seems rather strange because just as he would get one of the big enough to become really helpful around the place, he seemed to make things so difficult for them that they would leave.

The year was 1905 and my dad had just turned thirteen when he and his father had their final falling out. My dad said that after his father went to sleep, he stuffed whatever he could into a pillow case, took the best horse on the place and left home in the middle of the night. He, like most of his older siblings, never returned. He sort of bounced around the country for about a year before finding his way to where his older brother, George, was working as a cowboy for Chester Peek. Peek lived in the town of Panhandle but ran cattle on several small ranches scattered across the plains. One of his cow camps was about thirty miles to the east at a place called Poker Flats. There wasn't much there, just a windmill, a catch pasture and a half-dugout for the hired hand to live in.

While the closest town was thirty miles away, there was a constant flow of people traveling by on the wagon trail that came out of the Oklahoma Territory, went through Amarillo and on westward. The windmill acted as a magnet that attracted people traveling in either direction to stop and spend the night. Furnishing the weary travelers with water was no problem, but in those days when people were far more obliging toward others in need, one simply did not refuse a request to "borrow" something. Today, when someone asks to borrow something, we expect them to return it. That was not the case in those days, it was a nice way of asking for something without calling it a gift.

First, they would come to the dugout and ask if they could camp next to the windmill, followed by the next request to turn their livestock loose in the catch pasture. There was plenty water for everyone but before long, the extra load of stock grazing in the catch pasture would eat all the grass and George and my dad would have to take down the barbed wire, pull up the posts and move the fence to new grass.

As soon as the travelers had turned their stock loose in the pasture, unloaded their kids and

set up camp, they would discover that they were out of matches, tobacco, sugar, salt, flour, lard, coffee, firewood or whatever and head back to the dugout to "borrow" a little of it. Since Mr. Peek furnished all the supplies for the camp, George didn't mind sharing if he had it. Even then, their generosity caused them to come up short of food a lot of the time.

The real problem was firewood. There wasn't a stick of wood anywhere near the camp so when they needed firewood, they had to ride about five miles, chop it and haul it back on horseback. To a cowboy, chopping wood is one of those things which he had rather eat a bug than do.

George and my dad decided that the only way to stop the drain on their firewood and other supplies was to discourage people from camping there so they came up with a plan. Late one evening a wagon loaded with furniture, chickens, cow, goats, wife and kids came creaking to a halt next to the windmill. As the milk cow and three goats they were leading joined their horses at the water tank, the man came to the dugout to ask if he could camp there. My dad was outside and told him that it would be fine and suggested that they not only turn their livestock into the pasture, but also pull their wagon in there.

It was getting close to dark when the man came back to see if he could "borrow" some coffee for breakfast. My dad asked him to come down into the dugout and he would get it for him. As the man descended the dirt steps into the dimly lit room, there was George, stark naked, hairy as an ape and chained to the leg of the bed. He was sitting on the floor, muttering some sort of intelligible gibberish and making little piles of dirt with his hands. When he saw the man, he uttered a low growl, leaped to his feet and lunged at him. The chain around his neck jerked him to a stop just before he reached the man's throat.

The poor man scrambled back up the steps in terror. My dad came out and told him that the man in the dugout was his brother and that he had gone crazy a few weeks back. He said that he was keeping him chained up until the ranch owner came out and then he would send him to the insane asylum in town. To add emphasis to the story, my dad pointed to a dead horse about a hundred yards away and told him that George had killed it with his bare hands. The horse had actually been struck by lightning.

As soon as it was good and dark, and the man had told his family the story about the crazy man chained up in the dugout, my dad started yelling for help. When the man came running, my dad told him that George had escaped and they had to catch him before he got away and did something real bad. They especially had to keep him outside of the catch pasture and away from the man's wife and kids. My dad said if you got hold of the chain, he would usually calm down and you could handle him.

My dad started in one direction and sent the man in the other. Naturally, George was waiting for the man and took after him in the dark, growling and rattling his chain. George chased him one lap around the catch pasture, handed the chain to my dad and he chased him for another one. They took turns chasing the poor man around and around the catch pasture until he was about to drop. Finally, my dad yelled that he had caught George and had him under control.

When it was light enough to see the next morning, the man and his family were long gone. As the man moved westward, he told everyone that he met about the crazy man that killed horses with his bare hands and how he and his family had barely escaped with their lives. The people he told made a wide circle around the windmill and kept going when they reached it. Naturally, they also told everyone that they met about the crazy man and with each telling the story got bigger and

better. Within a few days, the story about a wild man running loose and killing animals and people had spread for miles in both directions. It had certainly cured their problems of people stopping and asking to stay there.

When Chester Peek heard that there was a wild man chasing and killing people at his ranch, he got a couple deputies to go along for protection and headed out there to see what was going on. When they told him what they had done, he failed to see the humor in it and fired both of them.

## Chapter 22

### STRAP ON YOUR PISTOLS AND LET'S GO FEED THE COWS

When my dad left home at thirteen years of age, he headed west to get as far from home and an abusive father as he could. The first place that he stopped for more than a night or two was a ranch in the breaks of the Canadian River west of Roy, New Mexico. It was late spring and they needed all the hands that they could find for cutting, branding and shipping the cows that didn't drop calves that spring. He had never worked on a ranch before but at least he had his own horse and saddle which was a definite plus when it came to landing a job as a cowboy. If you had your own horse and was smarter than a cow, you were quality material for a cowboy.

The rancher, who had no boys of his own, took a liking to my dad and decided to keep him around after the summer work was over and he had let the rest of the cowboys go. He also noticed that my dad didn't have a coat of any sort so the next time that he went into town, he bought him a heavy Pendleton coat. It was a beautiful thing, pure wool with black and red stripes across it. It came well down over the hips and had a large collar which could be pulled up around your ears to keep out the wind and snow. My dad thanked him for it and hung it up. Since the summer sun was still beating down on the red limestone rocks, making each day as hot as an oven, he failed to see the real value of the coat.

One of the other cowboys working there had a matching pair of nickel plated .44 Caliber Colt pistols in a hand-tooled belt with holsters that tied down to the legs. The loops around the belt were filled with ammunition. Real gunfighter stuff. Now my dad, like any other red blooded thirteen year old boy who had read hundreds of those dime novels about western gunfighters, instantly fell into a fit of avarice, greed and cupidity to own those pistol. The longer that he saw those pistols hanging on the wall, the more that he would have gladly traded his soul for them. Since the owner of the pistols already had a soul, as jaded and soiled as it might have been, he didn't need or want another one but he did recognize the potential warmth, comfort and value of that Pendleton coat.

After a certain amount of negotiation, a deal was struck between the two. When the cowboy drew up and rode away, my dad had that pair of pistols strapped around his skinny hips and he had the Pendleton coat strapped behind his saddle. The rancher took notice of the situation but didn't say a word.

Summer waned into fall with its balmy days and crisp nights. The cattle had all been moved



from the high country into the canyons for the winter and the summer crew was gone. With no one else in the bunkhouse, the rancher had my dad had move into the main house. Life was good; the rancher treated him well, there was little work to do and the rancher's wife was a good cook.

One morning they woke up to a howling north wind, snow about six inches deep and getting deeper. One look outside would convince a person that the only change the weather might take would be to turn worse. After breakfast, the rancher pulled on his coat and gloves, pulled his hat down low and said, "OK, Foreman, strap on your pistols and let's go feed the cows."

## Chapter 23

### THE HAT

To a cowboy, a hat is not only fully equal to a good horse in value and importance to him, but also rates well above the other necessities of life like boots, whiskey and women. It protected him from the sun, warmed his head in the winter and kept the rain from going down his collar. It was a bucket to bring water to his horse, a fan to nurse a campfire to life and could be used to trap a rabbit for dinner.

There is an old saying that one can tell the size a rancher's spread was by the size of the hat that he wears, however there is also the opposite saying which referred to someone as being all hat and no cows. There were also a few rules of propriety which cowboys had to observe. You should always remove your hat for a lady but not necessarily to eat and never wear a bigger hat than the boss.

A person could tell how the cattle business had gone during the past year by looking at the hats that ranchers were wearing. If it had been a particularly good year, they bought a new hat. If the year had been only fair or even worse, they wore the same old hat for another year. After all, a rancher could hire a cowboy for a full month for the price of a good hat. It was claimed that the big packing houses in Kansas City and Chicago would always check with the John B. Stetson Company to see how hat sales were going in order to estimate how many cattle to expect.

My Uncle George was working on the Coble Ranch and as fall was approaching, the cowboys began to discuss what they would give to Mr. Coble for Christmas. He was a good man to work for and they wanted to give him something rather special. It was finally decided that if they all kicked in a dollar each, they could buy him a new Stetson hat. George was going to Panhandle for supplies so he was given the money and told to order the best hat that he could and have Mr. Coble's name stamped in gold on the sweatband. It usually took a couple months to get a personalized hat from the factory in Missouri so they wanted to get their order in early.

George placed an order for the most expensive hat that Stetson made, the 24-X Beaver Boss of The Plains. This particular style of hat was the biggest and most impressive ten gallon hat that they made. It later became the hat that Tom Mix wore in the movies. Mr. Coble had a rather small head and wore a six and seven-eighths hat. I'm not sure when George's rather odd sense of

humor kicked in on this deal, but he also ordered an identical hat in his own size, seven and a half. He asked that "W. T. Coble" be stamped in gold on the sweatband of both hats.

When the hats came in, George took the size tags out of both hats, turned the small one over to the cowboys to give to Mr. Coble, then hid the big one that fit him. On Christmas morning, the cowboys presented the hat to Mr. Coble. It hadn't been too good a year so Mr. Coble had resigned himself to wearing his old hat for another year. This made the gift even more special to him. He had never owned a Boss of The Plains hat before but had always wanted one. He wore the hat all day and when it was time for bed, he carefully placed it back in the box that it came in to protect it. A new hat to a cowboy is like a new car to other people, they dread the day when they put the first mark on it. Only after it has been used to beat out a grass fire, rained on several times and stepped on by horses do they mold it into the familiar shape of all well-worn cowboy hats.

When everyone had gone to sleep, George quietly traded his big hat for the small one and waited for the fun to begin. After breakfast, Mr. Coble got his hat out of the box and put it on. It dropped down over his ears like a tub. He didn't say anything, just checked the sweatband to be sure that it was his hat then stuffed tissue paper around the sweatband until he had shimmed it down to his size.

That night, when he had put the hat away, George moved the tissue paper from the big hat to the small one and put it back in the box. The next morning, the hat sat on top of Mr. Coble's head like a teacup. He pulled the tissue paper out and it fit properly again.

George played the hat and tissue paper trading game for about a week until one morning when Mr. Coble was in an especially bad mood and it all came to an end. He tried to put the small hat on with the tissue paper in it. He let fly a stream of cuss words as long as a well rope, ripped out the tissue paper, slammed the hat to the ground and stomped it until it was flat as a pancake. Then he picked up the battered felt Frisbee, punched the crown back into some semblance of its original shape with his fist and jammed it on his head.

Having finished with his fun, George never traded the hats again. A month or so later, George wore his pristine Boss of the Plains to a barn dance where everyone admired his good taste in hats.

## Chapter 24

### THE FIRST BAPTIST CHRUCH

Yes, I do know how to spell church! You will have to read further to understand how this became not only Stinnett's first church but also its first official typographical error.

When Old Man Stinnett platted his new town, he set aside land for a school, the court house and a city hall, but being an atheist he never considered the thought of dedicating land for a church. It wasn't until after he died and Lawyer Tate got hold of all the vacant property was land donated for a church.

Signal Hill, which had by this time become a ghost town, had a number of buildings whose owners had simply walked away with no intention of ever retiring. Several men from Stinnett went over there, jacked up one of the old dance halls, hitched about twenty mules to it and dragged it five miles to its new location in Stinnett. It was to become Stinnett's first church. While they were at it, they also moved a smaller house in and set it next to the church to become the parsonage.

Fred Yont, who ran the Foxworth Gilbreath lumber yard and was the local jack-of-all-trades, offered to repaint the old sign which read "Jake's Place" with the name of the new church. I don't know if there was ever a meeting, a vote or even a discussion among the elders of the city to determine what denomination the new church would be, but since most of the people's ideas of religious doctrine were based on biblical stories about lambs, burning bushes and grape juice instead of wine in the communion glasses, it just naturally became a Baptist church.

Fred arrived one Friday morning with his ladder, brushes and cans of paint. After painting the front of the building white, he carefully laid out the letters for the new name and went to work. I suppose that when one stands too close to anything, it's difficult to get the full picture, but when he was finished, the building had become the FIRST BAPTIST CHRUCH. It was Sunday morning before anyone noticed the error and by that time the paint was dry and nothing short of a new paint job would correct it. Fred concluded that since he had done the job for free and all the correct letter were there, although perhaps not in the right order, he saw no reason to do it over.

Stinnett didn't have a regular preacher and had to depend on the services of various men of the cloth who happened to stop by there on their way to somewhere else. With a free place to live and a standing invitation to dinner at the table of one of the members, many of them tended to stick

around for while. I don't remember this particular minister's name but he will forever be known as Preacher House Top.

The house that they had moved from Signal Hill to use as the parsonage wasn't all that great a place to live but it hadn't cost them anything either. Since the members were far more interested in buying a piano and building seats and a baptismal for the church, little thought was directed toward improving the condition of the parsonage. One Saturday it came a good rain which lasted well into the night. On Sunday morning, the preacher didn't deliver his usual sermon on Hellfire and Brimstone, but he did come down very hard on rain and having to sleep in a soaking bed. He ranted on for a full hour about the deplorable condition of the roof on the parsonage and demanded that the congregation do something about it.

On Monday morning, he found four bundles of shingles, a sack of nails and a ladder on his front porch. I suppose that Preacher House Top figured that fixing his own roof was beneath his dignity because when some of the people stopped by to help, the shingles and ladder were still there but he wasn't.

During its days as a dance hall, the building would easily hold sixty or seventy people standing up and dancing belt buckle to bellybutton, but as a church, its maximum capacity was no more than a couple dozen if they wanted to sit down during services. Even as small as Stinnett was, the church tended to be standing room only for Sunday services. The preacher at that time was well aware that people sitting down have a much harder time evading the collection plate than those standing up because they are free to move out of the way when it comes their direction.

He dedicated himself to convincing the people of Stinnett that they needed to build a new and bigger church. He preached a long and monotonous sermon on building a new church, using various metaphors and passages from the bible about building things to make his point. After about an hour, he figured that everyone was adequately soaked in both religion and enthusiasm so he was ready to hit them with the big gun. He pounded the pulpit and shouted, "All that it will take to build a new house where God can dwell is for just one man to have the courage to pick up his hammer and nail up that first board."

In the back of the room, someone who obviously knew more about carpentry than symbolic rhetoric spoke up in a loud voice, "Hey Preacher, what's he going to nail that board to?"

## Chapter 25

### GET RICH RAISING LABORATORY MICE

At least that's what the advertisement in the Grit Newspaper said. According to the ad, all that you had to do to get rich in almost not time at all was to order a breeding pair of white mice for only \$5.00, let them do what mice do naturally and then sell the results to laboratories which were just waiting to give up to \$1.00 each for white mice for research. Not only that, but they gave you a double-your-money-back Guarantee of Results. There was no way that we could fail to make big money.

I had tried selling Chverine Salve to get a 22 rifle. I never did sell enough to get the rifle, but we still had at least two dozen cans of the stuff that my dad had to pay for. I tried selling magazines but never sold a single one. I might have been able to sell a subscription to my aunt, but my cousin was trying to sell them too and she had to buy from him. I even tried selling garden seed, but found that you could buy the same stuff at the hardware store for half the price. The trouble had always been that during the depression no one had any money to buy much of anything, especially what I was selling. This was different, those big research laboratories had lots of money and were anxious to buy every single mouse we could produce.

My cousin and I scrounged up and sold deposit pop bottles, scrap iron and feed sacks for nearly a week before we finally accumulated the required five dollars. We rushed down to the post office to get the money order and send off for our breeding pair of white mice. Then there was that long, agonizing wait for them to come in at the depot. In those days, everything alive that needed to get somewhere in a hurry, like baby chicks, baby pigs and bees was shipped by railroad express. As soon as we got out of school each day, we rushed down to the depot to see if they had come in. Then we would go home and build mouse cages to house our budding enterprise.

One day it arrived, all the way from Kokomo, Indiana, the little box containing our pair of breeding white mice. It was a small box, about the size of a brick, with several holes punched in it to let in air for our mice to breath. We shook the box and heard them scamper around inside of it. We carried our package home and released our mice into the cage that we had built for them. At first, all they did was sit there, blinking their beady little eyes. We must have watched them for four hours as they huddled in a corner. We began to wonder if they were ever going to do anything

in the way of making little mice.

Since the mice didn't seem to be doing anything interesting, we spent our time reading the little book of instructions on feeding and caring for the mice. The book also had the names and addresses of half a dozen research laboratories which bought mice for research. There was also a copy of the Guarantee of Results or double-our-money-back, printed on parchment paper with a gold scroll around the edge. It was a beautiful thing; looked like it should be framed and hung on a wall.

The next day, they were eating grain, drinking water and scampering around the cage when we came in from school. Two weeks later, one of them began to look like she was going to have little mice and a week after that, she gave birth to six tiny, pink babies. As soon as those six were large enough to sell for two dollars each, we would have our money back and a seven dollar profit. We were in the laboratory mouse business.

Well, not really just yet. The instruction book said that to get the maximum return on our investment, we should keep all of the offspring during the first six to nine months to build up a large breeding stock. We spent the next eight months carrying grain, pouring water, building cages and watching our breeding stock get so large that we couldn't count them all.

Now was the time for us to cash in on our investment by selling a couple hundred of our mice. We had already picked out the bicycles, radios, rifles, and camping gear in the Sears Roebuck catalog that we were going to buy just as soon as the money started rolling in. We carefully wrote letters to all the laboratories listed in the book and mailed them. In no time at all, orders would start pouring in and we would be rich. Three of the letters were returned undelivered because the places were no longer in business or unknown. One sent a post card saying that they did not buy mice and there was no reply from the other two.

I took the Guarantee of Results or double-our-money-back to my dad to read. Since it was obvious that we could not sell the mice, we wanted to at least get double our five dollar investment back. My dad read the guarantee carefully and said, "They guarantee that the mice that they sent will breed and produce more mice, not that you will be able to sell any of them. Looks like you boys have been cheated out of your five dollars and have a whole bunch of white mice on your hands."

We thought about our business reversal for a while and decided to dump the whole thing--and that is just what we did. We opened the cages and turned about a thousand mice loose. My dad didn't consider our method of going out of business to be the smartest thing that we had ever done, especially since every time he went to the barn, white mice were swarming everywhere. The white mice mated with the regular mice and soon, half-breed mice spread all over town. It took several years for every cat in town working overtime to finally bring the mouse population back to a reasonable level.

## Chapter 26

### THE GRADUATION

It was the middle of May in 1947 and the end of my tenure at Stinnett High School. I had made it through twelve years without ever playing a down of football. The coach said that the reason why I wouldn't play football was because I was too lazy to train, but the truth was that I never found a good reason for me to put myself in a position to be jumped on by 250 pound farm boys from Morse and Spearman who wore overalls and chewed Red Man Tobacco.

When they added up the grades and credits to see who would and who wouldn't graduate, they found that the Class of 1947 would be made up of five girls and two boys, the smallest graduating class in the history of the school. It was a given fact that Laura Parker would be the Valedictorian because I don't think that she ever made less than an A-Plus on anything from the first grade on. The real shocker came when they found that I was the Salutatorian. I don't know whether that revelation came as a bigger surprise to them or me. I didn't think that it was possible for someone to goof off more than I had and still make grades high enough to graduate, much less be second in my class.

Mrs. Sword, who had taught English for the past twenty-five years, was in charge of our graduation speeches. She told Laura to talk about looking forward while I was to cover the opposite view, looking back at the good old days. Apparently she felt that I couldn't screw up what had already happened. We wrote our speeches, she read them and re-wrote them. She finally dumped everything that I had written and handed me a speech to read. She told me to memorize it before Saturday night.

Saturday night came and the seven people of the graduating class of 1947 sat in the front row of seats with our parents. We wore our caps and gowns, our fathers wore their Sunday suits and our mothers wore their best dresses. Various aunts, uncles, cousins and other people who had nothing better to do that night sat behind us.

Everyone who was connected with the school in any fashion sat on the stage. Even Mr. Foster, the janitor, and Mr. Dobbs, the bus driver, had a seats on the stage. The Graduation ceremony finally got under way. The Preacher prayed then Mrs. Weaver played the piano. The Superintendent talked, the Principal talked, the Coach talked, Mrs. Sword talked. Lawyer Tate,



who was the keynote speaker, talked and talked and talked. The speeches must have gone on for an hour before they finally got around to calling our names and handing out the diplomas. Everyone applauded as we accepted the fake rolls of paper tied with a ribbon and took our seats on the stage with the teachers. Laura gave her speech, filled with clichés and platitudes. She sounded just like Mrs. Sword had written it--which she had.

As I walked to the podium, I fully intended to give the speech that Mrs. Sword had written for me. It would have been easy, there was a copy of it laying on the podium in front of me in case I forgot my place. I went through the usual recognition of the various people on the stage and my parents sitting in the audience. I looked down at the speech and something sort of snapped in my mind. I simply could not deliver this pile of crap. I looked out over the audience and gave what is probably still the shortest graduating speech ever given.

"Mrs. Sword told me to talk about looking back at the good old days. She even wrote the speech for me to give. The good old days for those of us who are graduating tonight include growing up during the worst depression in history, living through the worst war in history and Eleanor Roosevelt. As far as I'm concerned, the good old days are all ahead of us. I don't think that there is any way that we can screw up things any more than they already are, but I'm sure that some of us will try. I don't know where the rest of you will go from here, but I will begin by going out the door."

As Mrs. Sword and the rest of the teachers sat there in stunned silence, I turned and walked off the stage, followed by the rest of the graduating class. We left the gymnasium through the side door and I haven't returned for nearly fifty years and if Mrs. Sword was still alive, I'm sure that she would be happy if it stayed that way.