

# Tall Tall Tales

*Collected and adapted for telling by Chuck Larkin*

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# Pop Corn, On Being Poor, And Fog

Traditional Story from the Website of Bluegrass Storyteller, Chuck Larkin

I remember the time I came home from school, about the middle to late thirties. I was about seven years old. When I walked into the house, I heard my Daddy yelling out, "Chuck we are going to be riiich, riiich, riiich!" "Daddy I do not know that word 'riiich.' They haven't taught us that word in school." "Son, the word rich is the reverse of poor." "Daddy what is 'poor', and how are we going to get riiich" "Son, we are going to raise pop corn!" "Pop" I said, "what in the world is pop corn?" Dad looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, laughed and said "Son I don't know either. It's some kind of corn that people in town cook, it turns white and they eat it."

What is interesting about this story is that back in those days, I did not know I was poor. We were living in the great depression at the time, but everybody I knew lived the same way. All your food, you raised on the farm. Animals for meat were raised on the farm, but were traded to the city people for staples like sugar and salt. We ate wild game that we trapped. Bullets for guns cost money, so very few people could afford to hunt. The Anderson up the road were so poor they had no clothes all. It's the truth all they wore were oak leaves. I remember I was getting ready for the first grade before I received my first pair of knickers. Knickers were britches that came just below your knees and you wore them with long socks.

When I was little, I had a baseball cap. I would wear the hat and look out the window. All the neighbors thought I had clothes on like everybody else. I did not even have oak leaves. When I went to school with my new britches, we did not have smooth plastic chairs like today. We sat on wooden benches filled with splinters. You know how boys wiggle and squirm. It wasn't long before the wooden seats would wear a hole in the seat of your knickers. When you got home your mother made you stand on your head so she could sew up the bottom of your britches. That's why so many old men my age do not have any hair on the top of their heads. They wore it off standing on their heads so their moms could sew up their trousers.

Of course, that's not the only reason some men are bald. The Lord only made so many perfect heads the rest had to be covered with hair. When you see a real handsome man without much hair, you'll know the type I mean. Some men read too much and think too much and their brains expand from the effort and push the hair out. When you meet that type, you'll notice they have a fancy way of talking. Some men have mange. You will usually see dogs following them around. I have heard that some people sleep too close to the head boards, and they rub off their hair turning over at night. Today, you can't tell that I do not have any hair on the top of my head. I use an old country formula. Every morning, I take one drop of the essence of horserad-

ish in sassafras root tea. Mix in about an ounce of green persimmon juice and a good dollop of alum powder. I rub the mixture on my bald spot. Now I will not lie. The mixture does not grow hair, but it will make the sides pucker up all day and keep the bald spot covered.

Poor has it's limitations. One Thanksgiving, we had one baked sparrow stuffed with collard greens. That was the year we ate collard greens breakfast, lunch and dinner, week after week. We ate so many collard greens that when we went out to play, Momma tied kerosene rags around our ankles so the cut worms wouldn't eat us down. Another Thanksgiving we had a meat ball with a feather stuck in it. I remember the first time I saw a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. They call them KC restaurants now. We were so poor that all we got to do was to lick the grease of the fingers of the customers.

During the Depression, we did not have any cash money to buy things like coffee. When we had coffee, we would boil the coffee grinds in a pot on the stove over and over again until the coffee grinds bleached out white. A lot of Georgia farmers did the same thing except they would take the bleached white coffee grounds and bag them up. Then they shipped the coffee grounds up to the Yankees and sold them for grits. That's why to this day Yankees do not like grits. Our family just pored on some milk and wild honey and ate the white coffee grounds for roughage.

We did not have any shoes. We painted our feet and laced up our toes. My sister painted her feet white with red and blue stripes on the sides. I asked her what she was doing. She told me she was going to sneak into school with white shoes decorated with the red and blue stripes painted on her feet. I said, "what will you call shoes that look like that?" She said sneakers, and now you know the rest of the story.

I mean we were poor. Once lightning burned our chicken coup down back in '36. We had just spent our last nickel building a roof over our well. We could not afford to build a new chicken coup. My job, at dusk every night, was to go out and turn the chickens that were roosting on the lip of the well. That's poor.

I remember when my uncle Tom Hicks over at a nearby farm started eating lightning bugs and cracked corn. We asked Ms. Addie his wife if it was a problem. Ms. Addie told us "no, it turned out to be a blessing, because Uncle Tom had started laying eggs that glowed in the dark." She had been selling the glowing eggs to the power company in town.

The first piece of white bread was given to us by the Salvation Army. In fact, my family used to get care pack-

ages from Alabama. My Momma was smart. She started a small home business. She made us some pants with rubber pockets so we could carry and sell soup door to door to our neighbors. Mama expanded the business by taking in washing and keeping it. The used clothes business did all right. We were so poor on the farm that once when I threw an old soup bone to our dogs, one of them signaled for a fair catch. That's being poor.

One Sunday, some of our relatives arrived at our house after church, for dinner. My Momma did not have any food in the house. All she found was one long green bean. Momma boiled that green bean and tied a two-foot long piece of string to one end. We all sat around the table and took turns swallowing that green bean, then you would pull it up by the string and pass it down the table. I never forgot that day because my cousin Elton bit the string and I missed my turn at lunch.

We even decorated a tree stump that year for Christmas. Times were still bad when apple season arrived. For breakfast we would eat dried apples. At lunch we would drink some water. By supper we would swell up so much we could hold out from eating until the next day's breakfast of dried apples.

In town, our credit was so bad the stores wouldn't even take cash money. I know you probably won't believe this, but I was 19 years old and in the Navy before I found out grits weren't meat. Poor, I was three years old before I found out Alpo was dog food. I still wake up sometimes half asleep and fight my dog over breakfast.

One time, during the depression, I remember my Momma using the butcher's apron to make soup. In fact, my parents were so poor they only had one wedding band. They used to take turns wearing it. I remember my daddy being offered a hundred-pound sack of potatoes for five cents. All he could afford to do was to go around and holler "ain't that cheap, ain't that cheap!" Fact is, our house was so small and the rooms so narrow the dog had to wag his tail up and down.

Once, I opened a road side stand. I had sandwiches for sale in order to try to make some money. My first customer asked me what kind of sandwiches I had. I said, "possum sandwiches."

The man made an ugly face and said, "yuck, I'd rather eat a dog!"

I replied, "I reckoned it depended how you were raised. Me, I'd rather eat possum than dog." That reminds me. In, I think it was '38, our fire department in Pocomoke got a Dalmatian dog to ride the fire truck so they could find the first new fire hydrant. But Pocomoke was so poor the Dalmatian

only had one spot.

There were advantages sometimes from being poor. People have asked me about how I learned to be a storyteller. Well, the truth of the matter is this. Back in those hard times, when we kids were sick and all bound up. I think the word today is constipated. My Momma could not afford fancy laxative medicine. She would put us on little potty chairs and tell us ghost stories. That scared and cleaned us out the same time!

Even the ground on our farm was so poor that rabbits had to pack a lunch to cross it. The ground was so dry that it had these large cracks. Our hogs were so thin we had to tie knots in their tails to keep them from falling down into those cracks. In fact, the ground was so poor that the preacher would sprinkle baking powder on a grave during a funeral so the person could rise on judgment day. You had to put fertilizer on the telephone poles too in order to talk over the telephone wires.

Well anyway, my dad explained what popcorn was and we planted five acres. That's about the size of somewhere between two and three city blocks. Pop corn growing in the field looks like a regular field of sweet corn. Just looking at corn growing in the field, you can't hardly tell the difference. Before the pop corn was full grown, we had problems. The heat in the middle of the day was so hot that little pieces would pop. Our mule was pulling a weeder one day. She saw so much white popped pop corn that she would not leave the barn without both her winter blanket and her ear muffs. Finally, the pop corn was ready and we pulled all the ears off the stalks and stored them in our barn. We had a huge, round shaped barn the size of a basketball court and about just as high covered with a round tin roof. We filled that barn right up to the ceiling with ears of pop corn. We made one awful mistake. This being our first time to plant pop corn, we did not know that you had to shuck the ears of corn before you put them into the barn. Shuck means to pull the leaves off the ears of corn.

It was hot that summer. I remember going outside and having to carry an umbrella. The flies were falling out of the air from heat stroke just like rain drops.

On the fifth of July it began to rain. It rained for three weeks and not one drop touched the ground. The rain turned to steam. That wasn't the worst part. The steam turned to fog so thick that if you were caught in it, you almost drowned. The fog bank hung from about eight feet in the air down to about two feet above the ground. Either you swam along the top or you crawled on your tummy on the ground underneath. After three weeks, I noticed that the trees and the crops in the field had stuck their roots up out of the ground and into the air to get some water.

During the middle of this fog experience, our Pa asked us to finish putting the shingles on the east side of the barn. He had cut up a garden hose about four feet long. We could tie and hold one end of the hose in our mouth with the other below the fog and breath while we worked.

The fog by then was so thick, you had to reach out and pull open a crack. Step through quickly then hold the crack open so that the next person could step through. Then they would open and hold the next split place for you. It was slow moving around outside but we did the job. The only problem was later when the fog finely cleared. We had nailed the shingles 12 feet past the end of the barn. I know that is hard to believe but we had nailed the shingles on the fog without realizing it. That is thick fog.

Skippy Romancer, our mail carrier, had been away from home when the fog came in. When he got back to his place, he drove out on top of the fog over to some cleared land he owned and planted thirty trees. Later after the fog was gone, he found the trees all laying on the ground. He told us how hard he had worked digging holes to plant the trees. He did not know he had driven over on top of the fog and dug in a fog bank so thick he never touched the ground!

Toward the end, things got really difficult in the towns because we could not move the crops from the farms into the towns and cities for the people. Food shortages began to become a problem. The Army Corps of Engineers hired lumber jacks from the North West. They come into the South and cut the fog up on the roads and highways. Sections of fog were stacked on the side of the roads just like cord wood. Now, I know there are some doubting Thomas's reading or hearing this, but I have evidence. There were places where the wind had blown that fog 30 or 40 feet into the air just like huge snow drifts. By the time that wind drifted fog was cut and stacked on the side of the road the piles were mighty high. After several months the stacks of fog settled into the ground. Except where the fog was stacked so high that, even after settling into the ground, it never dried up. That's where the fog left permanent soft spots. You have seen the signs, but probably did not know what they meant. The next time you are driving in the Southeast, look for the state road department signs that say BEWARE SOFT SHOULDERS. I ain't telling any fibs. I was there.

Let me get back to the pop corn experience. The wind was blowing through the barn. The sun was beating down on the round tin roof. At noon time, for lunch, we could eat a hot dog or hamburger raw, go outdoors and in twenty minutes it would cook in our stomach. It was flat out hot and dry. When I say it was hot and dry, that's exactly what

I mean. It was so hot we made ourselves Duck necklaces. Take a piece of four foot cord. Tie a stick to one end and a small piece of greasy fatback pork to the other end. Drop it on the ground near a mess of Ducks. They run in and the first one will quaff down that piece of fatback. The pork being lubriciously slick will slips out the back end. Then the pork is devoured by another feathered friend. Stop when you have four to six on the cord. Untie the stick and fatback and tie the cord ends together. Drape as a necklace and the Ducks will fan you cool with their wings. It's great in hot weather.

Meanwhile, the ears of corn began to dehydrate and shrink up some. The corn husks turned brown. Instead of being hard packed the ears of pop corn became loose packed. The wind blowing through the old barn caused the ears of pop corn to rub against each other. Rub your hands together. Do you feel them getting warm? That is called friction. I had just stepped outside our cabin when I heard a snap, crackle and pop! I turned toward the barn. BAA-WOOM! The barn blew up! The tin roof looked like a giant Frisbee flying out into the woods. Rising from the walls of the barn was a humongous, fantastically huge, whopping column of white popping pop corn. The column was as big around as a school building! The column rose up above the giant oak tree. You may not believe this, but in fact, by the time the column stopped rising, it took two people to see the top and that is really high.

The wind started blowing the white popped pop corn off the top of the column. Next the white popped pop corn began to sprinkle down over the East pasture. We had ten of the most wacky, dotty, sappy, foolish cows you have ever seen. The pop corn started to fall on them. Those silly cows had never seen white popped pop corn and thought they were in the middle of a snow storm blizzard. It's not funny! Seven of those crazy cows froze to death and the other three gave off ice cream for the next six weeks. If I hadn't a seen it myself, I would never have believed it.

There's more to this story though. The second world war was getting closer, and there was a shortage of metal, including tin. My Daddy went out in the woods and found the barn's tin roof all squashed up. He hitched the mule up, dragged the tin home and put the tin into a huge box. We shipped the box of tin to Mr. Henry Ford for scrap metal. You know, to help with the war effort. About a year later we received a letter from the Ford Motor Company that said they had not been able to puzzle out the problem. They thought it was a model-T, but they weren't sure. If my dad would send them the model name and year of the car, they thought they could rebuild it.

AND THESE ARE TRUE STORIES.

# The Electricity Elixir

I never will forget the first time my folks took me to town. I was being rewarded for not forgetting my chores like every evening to turn the chickens around roosting on the lip of our well. Pocomoke was small but I did not know it then. I found out later, that my folks had to gear down the Model-T when they reached Market street. But that first day, sakes alive, I was flabbergasted! I had never seen people! Oh, I knew the Scott family's farm was on the west side of our farm and my great step-grandmother's farm was on our east side but beyond their farms were woods and I had never been through the woods. I was only knee high to a grasshopper. I was all a flutter looking at the people. That fateful day, I learned a great lesson of life. People watching was even more fun than baiting a line with a piece of corn and chicken fishing off the back steps. If you never tried this first take and run the fishing line through a small hole in a kernel of corn. Sit in a barnyard and cast your line. Bless your heart but that is fun! I mean chickens will flat out give you a tussle. In those days we had fun! Sailing bucket lids. Making balloons out of onion sacks. Trying to remove hub caps from moving cars. There is more to country life than observing grass grow and people watching has it all beat. After all one out of three people, look weird.

That day I remember standing catawampus to the river and watching this traveling medicine man. He had a flatbed wagon with an electricity machine sitting up on the top. Now you need to understand no one had seen electricity then on the farm or in town. Electricity came into rural America through the rural electrification program. We had batteries in the automobiles and in our radios so people had heard about electricity and they were afraid of it. Sakes alive, no one wanted an electric pole near their house because of all the strange illnesses it would bring. When the first electricity was wired into houses no one would leave anything plugged in they were afraid that stuff would leak out and ruin the floor.

There I stood enthralled, gazing at 200 farm families. I had a smile on my face as big as a wave on a slop jar. All at once the medicine man began to talk about the wondrous healing qualities of electricity. He pointed to a man on crutches and offered him a sample. I looked at the man when he walked up on a crutch with a busted leg in one of those old time casts that came up to his hips. He drank a sample glass of the electricity the medicine man poured from that electricity machine, busted off that cast, shook his leg once or twice and walked and then he did a little buck and wing dancing. A lady named Ms. Lauren Leigh Roberts came over in a wheel chair and was introduced by the medicine man and she drank a glass of electricity and stood up and walked and I admit she was a bit shaky, but she walked! Next was an old world war one veteran who

said he was passing through town and wanted to try that cure for his war wound. I could see where he had his right hand shot off in the war. He climbed up on that wagon, drank a glass of electricity and we all stood transfixed in disbelief, gaping in amazement, as a new hand grew up out of his sleeve, right before our eyes. Seeing is believing. That was the end of the free samples but after that every farmer there was pulling rumples up paper dollar bills out of their bib overalls and they were buying bottles of electricity. I was only six years old but I knew right then that if I ever took sickly I was going to use an electricity cure.

Well it was about seven years later I took sickly for the first time. I thought I was going to die I was so sick. I mean I was awfully sick. It was a ghastly experience. I had fallen in love for the first time and oh, doesn't that make you sick. Every time it happens it makes you sick. I still think that some day they will find love sickness comes from a virus and find a better cure than getting married. Years later, I found this out. If a woman takes a piece of unwrapped candy and holds it up under her arm pit until it is good and sweaty, wraps it back up and gives it to a man he will flat out fall in love with her. Doesn't work in reverse. I learned that from the old south Georgia traditions but also found that the practice was used in the old Pennsylvania Dutch traditions and my research found variations of that trick in other cultures too. The only reverse trick I know is how a boy can catch a woman. He has to learn to play the old jaw harp real well. That was known all the way back in the 13th century when jaw harp playing for a while was illegal.

I always wondered if that candy trick had been used on me. I was so sick I really, really thought I was going to die. I couldn't talk about it because nobody runs around saying, "I'm in love, I'm in love" like some fool. What was worse, I was in love with an older woman, which is no big deal now but in the old days that was serious. Even more noxious I was in love with a married woman. You all do not even know what that signifies because today it just means you have to wait for a couple of years but when I was young people stayed married for ever! What is worse and worse, I am still embarrassed to even to tell you now. I was in love with my school teacher. Being in love with your school teacher is a scourge that dethrones reason fills you with misery, shame, hopelessness and pitches you into the pits of degradation and despair. Then, I remembered the electricity cure!

I had a problem. We still did not have electricity on our farm nor in town and the man with the electricity machine had gone on. Well I thought and remembered electricity comes from nature and in a storm there is a great deal flying around in the lightning bolts. I just needed to catch a lightning bolt like Ben Franklin had done with his kite. I did not have a kite but I did manage to live another three weeks

## The Electricity Elixir

Traditional Story from the Website of Bluegrass Storyteller, Chuck Larkin

until one of the summer lightning storms came in. No rain just heat lightning snapping throughout the sky. I went out behind the barn where I wouldn't look like a silly fool. For two hours I ran around trying to catch a lightning bolt. I got so dried out and parched my tongue was hanging down around my knees.

Suddenly I saw a bolt heading toward me. I ducked my mouth under and I caught that lightning bolt! Do not ever do that!!! That lightning bolt threw me 22 feet through the air, ripped all the clothes off my body, took my shoes off, turned them inside out, crisscrossed them and stuck them back on my feet! Even laced them up but tied a knot

so tight I had to cut my shoe laces to get my shoes off. Swallowing a lightning bolt is like drinking liquid fire! You may not believe this but for the next three weeks I ate all of my food raw! It was cooked well done by the time it hit my stomach! That bolt's electricity burned all the way down through my body and turned my toe nails red, white and blew! I was a little skinny fellow until I swallowed that lightning bolt and that thing blew me up and I have never been able to get down to average size. Oh I still wake up at night thinking about that pain. But I will tell you one thing else. It was 24 years before I ever fell in love again.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

# Hot, Dry, Cold and Windy

I got mean and nasty by being raised along the Nasawango creek. That is a sorry place. Summers so hot that the birds would have to use pot holders to pull worms from the ground. I remember once seeing a stump in the field pull itself out of the ground, and on its roots crawl over under the trees to cool off. I've even seen the shade move under a tree in the middle of the day to cool off. Have you ever seen any thing like that?

This is true. Once I looked out in the pasture and our cow, Boots, in the middle of a hot June day, was laying down on her back. It was so hot she was giving herself a milk shower for relief. Now isn't that just udder-ly fantastic when you think on it!

One summer back in 1937, it was so hot and dry that when you went fishing and pulled a fish out of the creek, the fish were covered with ticks. Most of that summer the fish swam around in the dust on the road in order to stay away from the boiling water. Toward the end of that summer, the hot and dry weather was turning the creek water into steam. The ticks and flees got so thick in the creek the State Health Department had to come out and spray. I know that is hard to believe, but that is only the half of it. I'm not telling any lies. The fish were sweating so much out swimming in the dust that the roads turned muddy.

I remember one summer's full moon my buddy Frederick and I went down to the pond frog gigging. We were after frog legs. When they are fried right they taste just like chicken. When we got to the pond we found that the pond was dry from the heat. We decided to come back the next day when the old bull frogs could not hide and collect all we needed. The next day around noon we got back and found all the frogs laying around dead. It had got so dry that the poor little frogs' skin began to shrink and they couldn't close their eyes or wiggle. If you don't close your eyes and sleep, you die. We gathered up a dozen or so in our tote sacks and carried them home. When we harvested their frog legs and loosen the skin, their eyes would snap shut. Next thing I knew they fell asleep and started snoring. We felt humiliated. We got the family together with some soft pine wood and started whittling prosthetic wooden legs. My uncle Dan, an old time watch repairman gave us a box of tiny watch springs. We loaded those springs into the wooden legs. By the time the frogs woke up, we had already attached their new prosthetic legs. The frogs loved the fancy prosthetic legs. They could jump up to 35 feet, and you know how frogs love to jump. Afterward, when the dry season passed, every time the cows and horses came to the creek or pond to drink, the frogs would hop up on their backs and take a ride. Later, they started their own rodeos and races. I admit that was strange. I do not talk about it much though, because from rodeos and racing the

frogs took up gambling and drinking. The drinking is what caused their downfall. A drunk frog is a careless frog. You just can't drink and jump 35 feet without having accidents. They were crashing into each other, crashing into trees, even going out on the highway and playing chicken with the cars and trucks. A drunk frog just can't time a jump over a semi-tractor trailer and hope to survive. It was sad and gruesome to behold.

They all turned into road kill. To this day I will not eat frog legs.

In town, during the summer, the drugstore had to put rubber bulbs on the end of the thermometers to keep them from blowing up and popping in the heat. You know how mercury in a thermometer rises when it gets hot. With rubber bulbs on the top, the thermometers would swell up like little balloons. I knew some fellow named Bret Roberts, you couldn't find a more decent person. Well, Bret figured out how to put some mercury on the bottom of his shoes. That way, when he went over to the sunny side, he'd rise up and not have to walk around things! He could walk as straight as the crow flies. He walked everywhere. He always said that everything was within walking distance if you had enough time. When he wanted to, he'd cross over to the shade and come back down. He fixed up a half dozen pairs of boots and bucket bottoms with his secret mercury formula, and started a small painting contracting company. The company did well. Later, Bret told me that the local hardware store manager had written the company that made ladders about this new product that just might cut into ladder sales. The ladder corporation bought him out for enough money that he and his entire painting crew retired. Apparently there is more money in selling ladders because, like yourself, I've never seen his formula on the market.

Some summers were bad hot and really dry. It would get so dry, we would throw a bucket of water into the air. The water would ball up and form a crust thick enough to bounce. That is how we learned to play basketball. We tried kicking one once. We were playing pick up soccer. Old Don Green kicked that water ball so hard it busted into about a dozen tennis balls.

Dry! Let me tell you. One Saturday when I was in town, I watched six fire hydrants playing black jack to see which one was going to win the next dog that walked by. It was so hot and dry that the Baptist had to baptize by sprinkling and the Methodist were using damp wash cloths. That's a fact. I remember my neighbor Bill Pusey was walking down the road. One little drop of rain blew in from I do not know how far off. Well that drop of rain hit Bill on the forehead. It surprised him so much he fainted! We had to throw two buckets of dust on him to bring him around. And that's the truth.

It was so hot that summer that our chickens started laying hard-boiled eggs. It was normal in the average summer to feed the chickens cracked ice to keep the eggs from being soft-boiled, but that summer it did not work. I recall once walking over to my grandmother's house with my sister Barbara Anne. We had some turnip greens sitting on our heads like hats for shade. It was so hot the next thing we knew we were sweating pot liquor, and I want you to know I tasted it, and it was good too! Tasted like chicken broth.

If you think it was hot in the summer, let me tell you about cold weather. A normal winter night along the Nassawango creek would be a seven-dog night. That is the number of dogs you needed in bed to get through the night. I've seen it get so cold at night that I would snuggle between two blocks of ice for insulation. I remember one morning I was walking down to the barn, and it was so cold my shadow froze to the ground. That is why to this day my shadow is so seedy and ragged looking. I've even seen it get so cold that the flames in the fireplace would freeze up solid. My Momma would take that frozen fire, break it off, grind it up and can it. We would use that frozen ground up fire like hot pepper on our food year-round. And that ain't no lie.

I remember one winter I looked out the window, and our two Beagle hound dogs were out in the snow. It was so cold they had jumper cables on a bunny rabbit trying to get him started so they could chase him. In November the earth worms would come up out of the ground, climb the trees and steal the coats off the woolly worms before they went back under ground for the winter. In town during the winter, the winos would beg for a hug and the flashers would just describe themselves. Oh I know that maybe you do not believe me. But you can just ask anyone who lived along the Nassawango creek in the '30s. They'll share their own similar experiences and assure you that I was and still am, open, forthright, candid and I have never told a lie.

One winter my sister Barbara Anne was helping me with some chores down at the barn. It was so cold that while she was telling me a story, the words would come out of her mouth about a foot or so, freeze up and hang in the air. After we finished the work I walked around and picked the frozen words out of the air and put them into a basket. I carried the basket into the house and thawed the words out and listened to the great Jack tale called Soldier Jack. My sister could tell a story.

That winter, I boiled water on the stove in a bucket. Then I would run the bucket of hot water to the barn for the mule and cow to drink before it would freeze. One morning, I was carrying that bucket of boiling water down the step and when I hit that cold air, I looked down and could see ice forming on the top. I hit that ice with my fist to break it and keep it from setting up too deep, and do you know that ice was still so hot it burnt my hand! When I say, it was cold I mean it was cold.

I guess the worst part about growing up along the Nassawango creek was having to go out to the barn early in the morning, before the crack of dawn, to hand milk Boots our cow. Misery is pulling your gloves off your nice warm hands and grabbing hold of a cold, cold, cold cow. There was no electricity and no heat in those old barns. I will never forget the morning when I put my nice warm hands on that icy cold cow. She turned around and looked at me and said, "Oooh, ah, yeah, that feels soooo goood!" Now I thought that was cold until but I have even seen it so cold I had to use a pair of pliers to milk. You would get one squirt and before it hit the bottom of the bucket it would freeze up solid. I would break off those frozen squirts of milk, stack them up like firewood and carry them into the house. Sometimes I would lick one of the squirts. Now that was better than ice cream.

During the winter of 1938, Bill Thompson, who lived up by the headwaters of the Nassawango creek, made an appalling mistake. Every time his candle flame would freeze up, Bill would just pop it off and throw the little piece of frozen fire out of the window. That was a serious mistake. When the warm spring weather came and thawed out the little frozen candle flames they set three thousand acres of woods on fire on both sides of the creek. We came out all right, though. We were down stream. Actually, we came out really well. We gathered 300 pounds of smoked fish from the Nassawango creek that year. And that's a fact. I'd walk on my lips before I'd lie about something like that.

Later when we moved to town, I thought things would get better in the winter. I was wrong. In town I had to get up every morning and help my dad push our house down the street to jump start our furnace. Then I had to go out and chop our dogs free from the fire hydrants. In 1937, it was so cold our local 33-degree Mason dropped to 15 degrees. Like I said, that kind of life will make you pesky mean.

AND THAT'S A TRUE STORY

# Aloysius (Rocky) The Rooster

I thought I would tell you about one old Easter tradition. When I was a young child, we children would be given a baby duck or baby chicken as a present on Easter morning. You probably won't believe this, but the little ducks and chickens were dyed different colors. I always got one that was either blue, red or green. Those were my favorite colors. It's a good thing they did not have tie-dyeing in those days. It was an interesting experience for a child to go through. The baby chicken would arrive Easter Sunday morning and by Wednesday you would be planning their funeral. They did not live long! I recall one Easter, I received a biddy. That is what we called a baby chicken. I was seven years old. This time, my biddy lived past the three days all the way up to seven days. Now I had a house pet. That meant I needed a name. I did not know whether the biddy was a rooster or a hen. We were an Irish family, so we picked an English name. I gave the biddy the name Aloysius, which was a name I thought was either male or female, rooster or hen. That was a mistake. Aloysius grew up to be a Rhode Island red rooster. They are a feisty tough breed and the name Aloysius turned him into the meanest rooster alive. When he was grown, he thought the name was too sissified, and he was right. If you called him Aloysius to his face, he would shred the britches right off your legs and run you into the house until you apologized. He was ferocious and tougher than woodpecker lips. When he was grown, we nicknamed him Rocky.

Rocky was so mean that every fox, weasel and hawk in the county moved out. The last time a pack of wild dogs came on the farm, Rocky herded the pack into a circle. He backed the dogs into each other so fast they knocked themselves silly. They also left the county with their tails between their legs. I've even seen storm clouds go around our farm in order to avoid Rocky. He was a terror.

Let me tell you what he did in 1938. My great-grandmother was an Agribusiness farmer. She had a bottling plant about 200 yards up the creek in the woods where she prepared a beverage called Spring Day. One good, big sip and you wanted to lie down and daydream. The young people from town used to come out to her farm and play a game. About six would sit in a circle and pass a pint of Spring Day around the circle three times while taking a small sip. Then one would get up and leave the circle and the rest had to guess who had left. What happened in 1938 was Rocky found some of my great-grandmom's corn mash Spring Day beverage in the barn one night. I do not know how much he drank, but he staggered out of the barn at 4:30 a.m. as drunk as a skunk and started to crow cockle doodle do. It scared the sun so bad it came up an hour early! That was the beginning of daylight saving time. This is true. I was there.

Rocky became very famous. In fact, two boxing champions, when they were young, had heard about how mean and tough that Rooster was and decided to use the same nick name. Rocky Marciano became a heavy weight champion and Rocky Gratiano became a middle weight champion, (just before the second world war) and as boxers they were mean and lived up to that rooster's name: Rocky. You're probably wondering how a rooster became so famous. Rocky the rooster became a famous sportsman, or sports rooster, as the case may be. He loved to hunt and fish any type of sport. We went to town once and watched a rodeo. Rocky crowed over the riders on the bucking wild horses. After we got home, he took up hare bare back riding. He had to use the wild rabbits for his broncos. In the evening, about dusk, Rocky would go out to the meadow and fly up on a low branch. He waited for a wild rabbit to come walking out of the woods. Oh, you should have seen him. Momma had made him a little western style outfit with a vest so his wings were free and it had silver trimmings. He had chaps for his legs and a tiny cow boy hat that tied under his chin. Rocky would swoop down and sit on the shoulders of a poor rabbit and scare the stuffing out of them. They would leap into the air, twist and turn and do every thing they could to buck him off. I'd be calling out one grasshopper, two grasshoppers etc. until I reached ten grasshoppers, or ten seconds. Then, if he had not been bucked off, he would turn the rabbit loose. His rooster leg spurs helped him in holding on, because he did not have a hand to hold on the rope like the cowboys have. He did hold one wing up in the air when he was riding, just like the cowboys. He was something else.

When folks would come out to the farm from town to go quail hunting. They would hire Rocky and Sally, our gray mule, from my Dad, who was their manager. Sally loved to hunt. Rocky and Sally were hunting partners. Sally would race around a field until she spotted a bevy of quail. Now, a bird dog will stop, point its nose at the birds, lift up one front paw and hold its tail straight. Not Sally the mule. She would stop and freeze, lift her tail, bend the tip of her tail and point it at the quail. Rocky would be riding on Sally's back. Rocky would jump down and the two would herd the quail across the field and run them down into a rabbit hole. Rocky would keep them in by holding his wing over the hole. Sally then would pump her tail up and down twice and waggle the end to signal the hunters to come on out. When the hunters were ready, they would shout pull. Rocky would whip his wing back and let one quail fly out and up for the hunters to shoot at, unless they were really good shots. Then they would tell him how many to release at one time, usually no more than two or three. I know some of you do not believe me, but I was there. I even went over and looked down the rabbit hole they used for their

quail hunting. I remember that if a hunter missed his shot, Rocky would get so mad he'd be on the verge of x-rated speech. Sally would glare, lift her tail, turn her back to the hunter and bray hee haw, hee haw, hee haw. I remember once when the Governor and some other important people were there. The Governor missed both shots! Rocky and Sally both turned and gave them a raspberry "thruppppp".

In fact, that style of hunting became so popular that several people tried to train other mules and roosters without success. Finally, somebody invented a spring loaded machine to throw round clay birds up into the air for hunters to shoot at. That is how the sport of trap shooting got started. That's a fact. Go check it out. I should know, I was there.

I would guess that fishing was Rocky's best sport. Rocky would team up with Sally, who would rather fish than hunt anytime. They loved to fish together! Rocky first would pick up a branch in his beak, trim it out a little bit and fly down to the back of our garden. He would stick the tip of the branch down into the honeybee hive and sop the end with wildwood honey.

You probably wonder why the honey bees didn't attack. Well they knew Rocky and knew he was their protector. When ever a black bear would sneak into the garden to steal honey. Our dog Rosie would grab a stick and start hitting the bear from the back while Rocky would fly up on the bears back and start hitting the bear over the head with his fighting stick. Bears never came back twice.

Back to fishing. Rocky would then fly up on Sally's back, and the mule would wade out into the creek. The rooster would guide Sally so that she was lined up just right for their type of fishing. Sally would lift her back right leg and hold it up and stand still as a rock. Rocky would lean over her backside and wave the honey tipped end of the branch slowly over the water in front of that raised hoof. Trout fish love flies. In no time at all the honey tipped end of the branch that Rocky held in his beak would attract a mess of black flies. A fish would leap up to get a fly. Rocky would signal with a tap of his foot. Sally would pop the fish with her hoof, knock them through a thorn bush so fast they would come out cleaned and flayed on the other side. I was there. I have seen it happen. The flayed fish would fall into a kudzu woven fishing basket. Later the two would bring the catch up to the house and swap the trout fish to my Mom for cracked corn, which both loved to eat.

Sally that gray mule was something else. When I was a child, if you stamped 10 gray mules you could get a wish. It was not easy, gray mules were rare. You stamp by first pointing your thumb at the mule, lick your thumb, rub your thumb on the palm of your hand and make a fist and hit that

wet spot. I got married the first time that way six months after I had stamped ten gray mules. That is what I had wished for. Gray mules are even more scarce today.

I have to tell you at least one story about Sally. Her favorite sport was to stand still when a big black horse fly would land on her back. I mean she would not even twitch. When the horse fly relaxed and leaned over to take a bite. Sally would jump side ways so fast the fly would drop straight to the ground and knock themselves silly. It was funny to watch. I was there. I laughed every time I saw Sally, do that to a fly. It surely did cause some problems though. You see, Sally wore big old iron horse shoes. Now, we had many flint rocks in the soil. Sometimes when Sally would jump the iron horse shoes would kick up a spark off the flint rock and start grass fires. That is dangerous on a farm. The smoke from the grass fires did keep the mosquitoes down. Oh yes, we had some big mosquitoes. One night my brother and I were going down to the creek to do some frog gigging in the moon light, when we heard voices. We peaked around a tree and saw two mosquitoes with a cow they had stolen. One was saying we better eat this one fast before a big mosquito comes and takes this cow away from us. I was there. I heard them. Once I was walking in a patch of trees our Aunt May had bought for a farm. I heard this noise, turned and saw the biggest mosquito I had ever seen in my life coming at me. I started running. About the middle of the parcel of woods, I jumped behind a huge white oak tree. The mosquito ran his proboscis right through the trunk and two feet out of the other side. I grabbed a rock and hit that needle nose and bent it over so he could not pull it out, then I ran. I got out of that patch of woods just in time! He was so mad he knocked down all the trees in that five-acre wood with his wings before he starved to death. My Aunt May thanked me for clearing the field for planting, and told me she got enough bones out of that mosquito to build a fence around the field. I believed her. I saw it. I was there. As I was saying, we did have some fair to middling mosquitoes. Still, you just can't have a mule starting grass fires. It is dangerous.

My sister Elizabeth, smart as a whip, solved the problem. We had about a dozen ducks on the farm. Elizabeth trained the ducks so that the ducks took turns with at least two ducks always following Sally the Mule. Whenever Sally would kick up a grass fire, the ducks would run in and stamp the fire out with their big flat webbed feet.

On a farm, you solve one problem you start another. The ducks, like people, organized themselves into a union and demanded Firefighter's hats. Where are you going to find a firefighter's hat for a duck? The Sears Roebuck catalogue did not carry firefighter's hats. Well, I told you Elizabeth was smart. She took pecan shell halves and

painted them red. The ducks just loved the red pecan shell firefighter's hats! You should have seen them strut around the farm when they were on duty.

One sad episode I recall about Rocky was the time my mother had finished cooking corn on the cob and threw some scalding hot water out the window. Rocky was right underneath. The hot water hit him square. He disappeared into the hen house for three weeks. When he came out the boiling hot water had blistered every feather off his body. I think Rocky was the only nude rooster I've ever seen. Mom made him a pair of bib overalls because she did not think it was right to have a naked rooster in the barn yard. The only problem was that Rocky always had problems trying to get the galluses unhooked on those bib overalls, especially when he was in a hurry.

Later in life Rocky, like a dog, took up chasing cars. Unlike a dog Rocky would catch the cars and stack one up on top of another. He did not even care if the drivers got out or not. One day on top of a stack of five cars, was a 1946 Studebaker. People hated the first Studebaker cars. On the road you could not tell which way the car was going. The front looked just like the back. The old timers said that kind of car would cause accidents. Today they all look like that, no wonder we have so many accidents. The Studebaker fell off a six high stack right on top of Rocky and squashed

him flatter than a one-sided pancake. That is thin. It was a day of mixed feelings. We arranged for Preacher Dry Fry to render the funeral oration. Rocky in spite of all his mean, vexatious behavior, was like a member of the family.

My Mom warned Preacher Dry Fry not to use his berthing name Aloysius, which was a sissy name. To this day, I believe if he had grown up with a regular name he would have been a regular rooster. After all, it was the stories that people used to tell about what Rocky did if you called him Aloysius that led to that country hit song titled A Boy Named Sue.

Preacher Dry Fry almost did really fine at the memorial service. A big crowd turned out. They came to see how Preacher Dry Fry was going to live up to his motto. He always found something good to say when he was burying a scalawag, reprobate like Rocky. How was he going to say something good about such a cantankerous, mean, ornery rooster like Rocky? Well, toward the end, Preacher Dry Fry said that Aloysius sometimes wasn't as sorry as he was at other times. The crowd broke out in applause. Preacher Dry Fry did not realize he had slipped up and called Rocky Aloysius. Ever after that, we were haunted by a poultrygeist.

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