

*Bellpoint Boy  
With Cheeks Of Tan*

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# 1

Folks in Bellpoint wished he was dead - or gone out west - or locked up in the State Penitentiary. Old Ned Smith was a bad one. He called everyone around here, "Those dab-nabbed - no good - goody-two-shoed Bellpoint bastards." As you can plainly see - Ned was never one to keep a civil tongue in his mouth. Old Ned wallered in evil like a hog in slop - meaner than the Kaiser and tougher than a two-dollar steak. Wasn't really old - mind you. Skin got wrinkled like a corrugated road from robbin' poor people. Takin' from honest folks ain't as easy as you think. It's twice as hard to be a thief as as it is workin' for an honest wage. Ask any used car dealer or real estate agent.

Most Ohio folks never heard of Bellpoint. Isn't big enough to be a city - a town - or even a village. Bellpoint doesn't have a village green or 'nough boys in upper school to make a nine man baseball team. Old Ned Smith cased every one of Bellpoint's fifteen houses. Planned on robbin' 'em all - like he did the general store and the poor box at the church. Wasn't as hard to do. You could walk from Mill Creek Bridge to the top of the hill at the other end of town in less than a five minutes.

Some towns have all the luck. Take Columbus. It became the State Capitol and it's not more'n thirty miles south of Bellpoint. A not too bright land speculator - Jim Kookan tried to sell over a hundred lots in Bellpoint, but frontier folks knew better. They wouldn't buy and the bottom fell out of land prices before the Civil War. First of all - the Scioto River had too much fall. No way you can navigate a boat on rocks - mud and over rapids. So - Bellpoint never

was more'n a one horse crossroads. If it'd been larger - Old Ned's take would've been too. He'd a-gone south and I'd never got in trouble. Much as Ned hated folks in Bellpoint - he hated me more.

First time I ever laid eyes on Old Ned he was sittin' in front of the general store - jawin' away to any fool who'd listen, "Don't anybody around here make good whiskey anymore. Not like I used too. This stuff barely makes my eyes water. Wasn't always like this. I did what I pleased until that smart aleck - goody-two-shoed Sheriff got elected. Him and his kind cost me a bunch of money. He shut down the best moonshine operation in the State of Ohio." Now I'm getting ahead of myself again. Forgot to tell you who I am. I'm Johnny Ropp. If you lived here - you'd a-known that. My troubles began before World War II. Can't remember - was it 1938 or 1939. Doesn't really matter - both those years were mostly the same. Old Ned and German Jerry were leanin' against a shade tree in the side yard of the general store - tryin' to sober up. Will - Jake and me spotted 'em on our way to Church. We crossed over to the other side of the road after Jake - he's the Preacher's oldest boy - whispered, "Stay away from those two - there trouble."

Just melted into the last pew - next to Will and Jake. Hot - hotter than I could remember. Not a breath of air and the sky was - you know - humid summer hazy. Even when you stood still it stuck to your skin like a wet wash cloth in the mornin'. Grandmother wasn't keen on me playin' with Will and Jake. Thought they were a bit too wild. Haven't met a preacher's boy who wasn't. But - their arrows were only slightly bent. Normally I'd go to Sunday School, but when I woke up late like today - Grandmother made me go to Church. Not that I didn't believe. I'd read my Bible, but when I had to listen to the same old stories over - over - and over again. Well - you get my drift. If you don't understand a



Bible story the first time around you deserve to be punished by repetition. We didn't listen to the preachin' in church. We shared comic books. Snuck 'em into our Hymnals. With our heads down reading - made us look real religious. If we didn't have any comic books - like this mornin' we'd whisper about going on adventures - fishin' - huntin' crawdads - swimmin' - things like that.

Mother sent me to Grandmother Mac's in Bellpoint from our home in Osborn each summer. I'd spend two weeks with her and one week at Grandfather Ropp's farm across the river. Wasn't sure if it was Mother's vacation or mine. But - there couldn't be a better place in the whole wide world to spend a summer day than Bellpoint - or on my Grandfather's farm. Better than going to camp, but I'd never been to camp - so I don't really know. Need money for that.

Now about me. Don't like to say too much. Isn't polite to brag on yourself - so I won't. I'm average - not tall - or short - just about right. All my parts work - feet touch the floor and hands reach my mouth. Grandmother Mac always said, "Johnny - you can't sit still for one minute. You're as fidgety as a puppy with a waggly tail." She's right - I was always fidgetin' away in Junior High. I'm at that 'tween stage. Too young to chase girls - not that I'm don't want too - and too old for children's games. My hair is average. Not yellow or brown - sort of dirt-sandy. If you saw me in a crowd - you wouldn't. I'd blend right in. Now - I'm not a genius, but I do pride myself in havin' more'n an average share of smarts. I know 'nough not to drink creek water less than two-hundred yards upstream from a dead horse and not to pee in our swimmin' hole.

Its got to be hot and humid. My mind is wanderin' all over the place. Sunday School lasts an hour. Church is longer. And Will's Dad can carry on for an hour or two and

sometimes more. And by the time he finishes grace at dinner it's time to cook supper. You might not be from Ohio. We call lunch - dinner and dinner supper here. Makes sense to us. Noon time is our main meal. Farmers like to stoke their furnace at noon when they have work to do. Must have drifted off - daydreamin'. Will got my attention whisperin', "Johnny - are you here or somewhere else." Sitting in the back pew with sweat dripping down on my ears - between the heat and Will's Dad droning on - and on - and on it's hard for anyone to pay attention. Will elbowed me in the ribs, "Are you awake?" "I am now. Is your Dad finished?" "Won't be long. We're about to sing again. Want to hunt crawdads up Mill Creek after dinner? Too hot to play ball." "I'll stop by after we eat." "If my Dad is still saying grace - wait for me down by the river."

Couldn't hunt crawdads along the Scioto River. It ran muddy and deep 'cause Columbus built O'Shaughnessy Dam for drinking water. Backed the river up clear past Bellpoint. Grandfather Mac said, "We could walk across the Scioto - from rock to rock all winter long - before those city folks built their dam." His favorite fishin' hole is right below the dam's spillway - where water comes crashin' down. He'd fish for largemouth bass there. Scared the dickens out of me. I'd dream about the dam bustin' open in the middle and water come flowin' out after me. I'd run and run, but that water kept on comin' - closer and closer. Always wake up before it got me. But - I'd worry about that dam all next day. If it wasn't for the Columbus Zoo and Grandfather's fishing hole - I'd never go near that dam. Wasn't allowed to swim or float on the Scioto. Grandmother let me fish from the bank down the lane - when she had a mind too. Mill Creek was shallow enough. Our swimmin' hole was up the creek on the east side of a cement bridge to the Old Mill. All that was left was a foundation across a crumblin' cement bridge - built in the water and not wide 'nough for a car.

Will poked me in the ribs again with his elbow, "You ain't sleeping, but you sure ain't here. Sermons over. We can sneak out the front door while everyone stands up to sing." So we did. Runnin' uphill toward Grandmother Mac's house. Will and Jake live across the road - on the other side of a lane. I didn't dally. Grandmother Mac came home right after teachin' Sunday School to cook Sunday dinner. Grandmother's Sunday dinner had to be the best meal of the week. Aroma of chicken fryin' in her skillet was enough to make me forget about staying outdoors to play. Didn't have to ask a boy around Bellpoint what running around like a chicken with its head cut off meant. Grandmother wrung a rooster's neck right after she came back from Church. It was plucked - split into parts - covered with salt - pepper and flour and in the skillet before you could say Jack Robinson. Grandmother used the drippins' to make gravy for mashed potatoes. And she didn't make me eat anything green when she cooked on Sunday. Eating one of Grandmother Mac's Sunday dinners had to be the heaven Will's Dad preached about.

I ate my dinner in the kitchen - before the grown-ups. Wasn't any room for me at the table and I was always in a hurry. Winter - Grandmother made Postum and milk. I'd pretend I was drinkin' coffee. Not today - too hot for anything, but a glass of ice cold milk. I waited until Grandmother removed the food she kept warm on the Cast-iron range - carryin' it to the dining room - before edging my way along the wall to the back porch screen door. Grandmother saw me out of the corner of her eye, "Where are you going - young man?" "Will and Jake and me are goin' to hike up Mill Creek to catch crawdads for Grandfather Mac's bait bucket." "Be careful around those Preacher's boys. I know they go to Church, but those boys can be a bit wild. Don't go near the river." "Yes Ma'am." "And be back in time for supper." By this time - I was halfway out the screen door, "Yes Ma'am - I'll be back in time for supper."

I ran across the road - downhill on the lane to Will and Jake's house. Slowed down as I got there. Too hot to keep on runnin'. Snuck up on their front porch and peeked in through the screen door. Their Dad was still saying grace. Made me wonder if Will and Jake ever got a hot meal. Will noticed and nodded with his head toward the river. I waved and pointed in the same direction. Tiptoed off the front porch. Didn't want to get caught. Their Dad would make me come in and listen to his prayers. And then - with a captive audience - he'd go on - and on and on.

Wasn't more'n a hundred yards from Will's to the Scioto River. I skipped along kicking up dust all the way downhill. Stopped short when I saw a large carp sunnin' near the river bank in the shallows. I whispered, "You're mine." Sat down - took my shoes off - waded in after it - movin' real slow like. I'd never caught one in my hands - not ever, but today might be the day. Old carp was sunnin' near the surface - hangin' there motionless. Carps are slippery, but fun to catch. I didn't know anyone who would eat one - or catfish. Now there's a fish I'd leave alone. Not with an ample supply of largemouth bass and crappie to fry. Trying to catch a carp was the fun of it. Couldn't tell if this one was sound asleep with his eyes open or awake - starin' at me. I moved closer. That 'ol carp was soon going to be mine. I took a close look at him - bent over - ready to pounce. Will came up behind me and shouted, "You're not supposed to be wadin' in the river." Darn carp woke up - rolled over and turned tail - splashin' water and mud all over my rolled up pants. Took off faster than a largemouth heading for deep water with a hook in its mouth. I turned around, "Darn you Will - you scared my carp away. Had to be over ten pounds. I almost had him." "Just as well - carp ain't fit for dog food. Lets go up Mill Creek." "Where's Jake?" "Got caught smokin' a cigarette in our outhouse before dinner. Has to stay home and weed the garden. Where's your bait bucket." "Left it in

Grandfather's front yard. River sure is warm. Wish we could swim here." "Only around the edges. Colder than a well digger's butt - two feet down."

I pulled my sneakers on over mud still dryin' on the bottom of my feet and tied the laces. We ran up the lane to Bellpoint Road - stoppin' only for Grandfather's bait bucket. Too hot for that kind of foolishness - so we quit runnin'. Strolled downhill toward the general store - kickin' stones along the edge of the road. Hard to pass by the general store without stoppin'. The aroma of hot fresh baked bread - cookies and chocolate were driftin' out the screen door. We couldn't stop - we were flat broke. Checked our pockets - hopin' against all odds - a nickel might be balled up inside the bottom lint.

Leanin' up against the big elm on the south side of the general store - was the same two mean looking shade tree mechanics we'd seen on our way to church. Store's garage mechanic was under the hood of a flatbed Ford truck. We didn't say a word, but we sure did walk fast - just short of runnin'. The ugliest one spit out a stream of tobacco juice, "Just where do you two young 'uns think you're going? German - wake up. Lookie' here - we got ourselves two fuzzy faces to play with." German rolled over and moaned, "Stomach hurts - Ned." I looked at Will - he looked at me and we both took off runnin' toward Mill Creek bridge. If we got caught - Ned and his friend would rub our noses in the dirt. Turned the corner at the bridge and slowed down to a crawl - kickin' stones on Old Mill Road on our way upstream. Will whistled, "That was close. Don't ever trust Old Ned and his friends. How far upstream you want to go?" "Swimmin' hole by the Old Mill." "Creeks still up. We can go swimmin' if we want too." "Skip rocks on the way up?" I picked up a flat rock and skimmed it over the surface of the Mill Creek. Wasn't how far it went that counted - it was how many times it

skipped. My best throw skipped a dozen or so times before we got tired of it. Will - he was better at this game. Livin' along a river he had more practice.

Will took off runnin' - takin' a shortcut across green moss still slick from morning dew towards the old concrete bridge. He slipped and bounced - and bounced - and slid along on his bottom right toward the creek. He tried to sit up and stop, but that didn't work. All it did was make him tumble - head over butt into the creek. Came up sputterin' water and a-shoutin', "Christ all Friday!" Me - I was bent over double in laughter, "Bouncin' across that moss - you looked like a Keystone Cop chasin' after criminals!" "Damn you - Johnny. Quit your laughing and help me out." "Push off the bottom with your feet and I'll pull." Will was about halfway up the bank - when my feet slipped out from under me and I rolled cattywampus on top of him into the creek. We both came up laughing and sputterin'. I looked at him - he looked at me and we both said, "Might as well go swimmin'."

I took off after my bait bucket before it floated away downstream while Will swam over to the concrete bridge, "Got to strip down to our underwear so our clothes can dry out. Mom will tan my hide good if they're wet when I get home." I swam back toward the bridge - bait bucket trailin' behind." Creek water was just right - not too hot or too cold. We bobbed around - jumped off the bridge and had a gay old time until we both got wrinkled up like a pair of prunes. Wasn't much of a swimmin' hole, but then neither one of us was much of swimmer. Least the water was clear - though we couldn't see bottom. Made sure I didn't get any in my mouth. Will didn't climb out to pee. He apologized, "Don't worry - it'll float away." "Just make sure you pee downstream of where I'm swimmin'." I pulled myself up on the bridge for the last time, "Sun's gettin' low and we haven't looked for crawdads." Will looked at the sun - almost on top of the trees, "Must be

close to four o'clock. Damn - my clothes are still damp. Should have turned 'em over." "They'll dry on our way home." Will began jumpin' up and down, "Look on my back. I've got something crawlin' there. See what it is." "Quit jumpin'. Hold still while I take a look." "Well - what is it? Feels like a some kind of worm." "Can't be - it's only a leech. Won't hurt you." "Get it off me before it sucks all my blood out." "You got a match?" Will handed me an almost empty tin box of safety matches. I struck one on the side of the box, "Lucky your tin matchbox is waterproof. Hold still - so I won't get burn your back." I placed the flame near enough to the leech - so it fell off, squirming. "You got it off?" "Careful - or you'll step on it." "Sure can't feel their suckers when they latch on to you. Damn thing would have drained all the blood out for sure. We better get a move on if you want to fill your bucket before supper."

We tied our sneakers by the laces - hung 'em around our necks and walked downstream. Stayed in the shallows near the bank - turning rocks over - lookin' for crawdads. I asked Will, "What do you know about those two shade tree mechanics we saw outside the general store?" "No-good moonshiners from down Dublin way." "Where's that?" "A-ways south of the dam on the west side of the Scioto. Dublin has a reputation for harborin' layabouts and ne'er-do-wells. The ugly one chewin' tobacco with only one front tooth is Old Ned Smith. He's the leader. The sleepy one is German Jerry and there's another - One Eyed Jack. About as mean and lowdown a gang of thieves as you'll find in the State of Ohio."

We picked up twenty - or so crawdads - coverin' 'em with wet river moss. Will held up one. It was squirmin' between his fingers, "Won't catch me eatin' one of these things." I poured in enough creek water to wet the moss down, "My Uncle Bus says folks south of the Ohio River consider them good eatin'." "Only thing a crawdad is good for is to catch fish

- or drop down a girl's back. Now if we could train 'em to eat leeches they'd be all right." "Bass like 'em and we eat bass - so they can't be all bad. Hope those two moonshiners are gone. I'm too tired to be chased after." "We can cut across the field behind the general store." Didn't bother to flick off the mud caked on our pants. It would fall off as we walked. Our under shorts were soaked, but that was one of those things we had to put up with. Wasn't proper to go skinny dippin' alongside a road. Never know when a nosy girl might come along and laugh at us.

Dust was just hangin' there - in the hot humid air along Mill Creek Road - makin' a hazy backdrop to the elms linin' the creek banks. A gift from a Model A Ford Roadster that passed by earlier - on its way to Ostrander. Didn't bother us. Dust blended in with the dirt on our clothes. Hardly anything was paved - except the main highways - like Route #42. Dust and mud were part of summer. The hotter it got the more dust we had. When we were in sight of Mill Creek bridge I opined, "My Uncle says hardly anyone lives south of the Ohio River. Too hot. Never cools down enough. Be like this all year round. July and August are hot enough here in Bellpoint. No way you can cool a house down in summer - unless you own an ice house. Heat our homes in winter, but there's no way to cool one down. Bellpoint has the Scioto River and Mill Creek. Can't be any place better on earth than here." Will laughed, "I liked it more when you were daydreamin' in Church. Never heard so much hogwash in all my life." "I've never been south of the Ohio River. Fact is - I've never seen it." "And I've never been south of Dayton - where you live." "I live north of Dayton in Osborn." "Well your dead wrong - has to be a million folks livin' south of the Ohio River. We fought 'em in a war. Don't you remember? Isn't that the same Uncle who said you can cure pneumonia by riding a horse at a gallop naked in the snow?" "No that was my Uncle George. Uncle Bus is the smartest man alive. He's



never wrong. And Uncle George is right - too. Ridin' a horse naked at full gallop forces air into your lungs - so it has to be the best cure for pneumonia. And Uncle Bus is right about not many folks livin' south of the Ohio River." Will laughed, "And those that do eat crawdads?"

Will and me cut across the field behind the general store - not about to take a chance at runnin' into Old Ned Smith and his gang from Dublin. Crossed back over to Bellpoint Road behind Grandfather Mac's. Will wasn't about to let me get the last word in about the best place to live, "My Dad says the best place is up north on the banks of Lake Erie. Stays cool all summer and the water is clear enough to drink." "Never been up there, but I hear it gets mighty cold in the winter and freezin' cold when the wind blows across from Canada. But - I'd like to see it. Got to be as big as an ocean." "I'd like to travel south and make you eat your words along with a bunch of crawdads. Ain't nobody alive would ever eat a crawdad." We walked the rest of the way in silence. It wrapped around us like dust wrapped around the trees along the creek. We'd had our say and we were done with it.

Truth was - Will and me had run out of things to talk about. I'd been in Bellpoint for almost two weeks and my stay was close to over. In a few days I'd cross the Scioto and live at Grandfather Ropp's farm. It was time to leave. Grandmother Mac had seen enough of me and she looked like she needed a rest. Figured that was why Mother always seemed happy when she dropped me off in Bellpoint. Grownups are a curious lot. Always kidding, but if you didn't take them serious - they get irritated. But - not Grandmother Mac. She had a big heart and took good care of me. Didn't make me eat green things - most of the time - or beets. Can't stand the taste of beets. Cold and slimy. Just the thought of eatin' one gives me the shivers.

As we walked down the lane toward Grandfather Mac's house - I asked Will, "Can you come outside after supper?" "Not on Sunday. Our evenin' prayers run right into bedtime prayers. I'll stop by after breakfast." Supper was worth comin' in early for. Left over fried chicken - mashed potatoes - gravy and angel food cake. Only prayers we said were grace before supper. Grandfather Mac kept ours short and to the point. After supper - Grandfather adjourned to the parlor and smoked a cigar - or sometimes a pipe. Sunday night we all stayed in and listened to his favorite radio program - *One Man's Family* - a Carlton E. Morris production. The grandfather on this show made deep guttural sighs when things weren't right - which was most of the time. Didn't care much for the program - so I occupied myself by countin' each one. Last week he got up to ten - a new record. Maybe tonight he would break it. Even though I didn't care for this program - I like listenin' to radio. Almost as good as goin' to a movie. With radio - you could see people and action inside your head - as you wanted to see them. Movies - what you saw was all you'd see. Radio is like reading a book, but someone else is reading it to you.

All the men in my family rest after supper. Didn't want to get athlete's heart. If you started work too soon after eatin' a big meal - your heart would swell up - so big it'd pull you over. Didn't want Will to get the best of me - so I asked Grandfather, "Do folks live south of the Ohio River?" "Millions - Johnny. We fought a bunch of them in the war." "Do they eat crawdads?" "Love them down there. Call them crayfish. Your Uncle Bus has been pulling your leg again - hasn't he?" "Yes Sir." Well - Johnny - one of your Great Grandfathers fought alongside Sherman as he marched through Georgia. He said it was one of the most beautiful places on earth - before we burned it down." "Why did we fight 'em." "Had too - they started the war. And when it was over - so was slavery."

After *One Man's Family* came *Jack Benny's* radio show. Now I liked Jack Benny. He was really funny. After it was over - I stretched - stood up and looked over at Grandfather. He was sound asleep. He'd never get athlete's heart. Wandered out of the den - through the dinin' room to the kitchen. Grandmother was finishin' cleanin' up after supper - wipin' off the kitchen table. Workin' after a big meal and gettin' athlete's heart must be for men only. Grandmother worked harder than any two people I knew. I tripped over the sill on my way to the kitchen - stubbin' my toe. The swear words flew out of my mouth like they had wings of their own, "Christ all Friday!" Grandmother had me by the back of my neck - over the sink and a bar of lye soap in my mouth before I could get, "Will taught me those words" - out of my mouth. She kept on scrubbin', "Young man - I don't care who taught you. You know better than to take the Lord's name in vain. Now get outside - sit on the back step and think about what you said. You better pray our Lord doesn't send a lightning bolt to strike you dead." "Yes Ma'am."

Don't let anyone tell you that soap is tasty - and lye soap? It was still burnin' my tongue. Grandmother knew how to nip a problem in the bud. After she finished swabbin' my mouth out with lye soap that evenin' - my goodness was the strongest words I'd use. Worse yet - runnin' off my mouth almost finished my friendship with Will and Jake. And that wasn't the end of it. Grandmother said I had to go to Sunday School and to Church for as long as I stayed with her. Spent the better part of an hour tryin' to rinse the taste of lye soap out of my mouth at the backyard pump. Bein' told to sit with nothing to do is too hard - so I decided to inspect the pump. Had a can of water to prime it - so its dry piston would seal and draw water up. Move the pump handle up and down and water rose up from below. Flowed out the opening - cold and pure - on the hottest of days. Back porch step was hard - so I leaned against the walnut tree.

The odor was faint, but it was there for all to see and smell. The pride of Bellpoint - Grandfather Mac's big red brick outhouse. Everyone in Bellpoint had one, but nobody had an outhouse like Grandfather's. It was solid an oak tree. Had four holes - beginnin' at baby size - workin' up to one you could fall through. Fancy - each hole had a hinged wooden cover to keep the odor in. And if that didn't work - there was lime to sprinkle over - afterwards. Had a water closet back home in Osborn. Couldn't hold a candle to Grandfather Mac's outhouse. It stood alone outside - solid brick and special. Even had a grape arbor coverin' the walk to it - to provide privacy. Didn't make much sense to me. Every house in Bellpoint had an outhouse - wasn't any runnin' water. Not even at the school - or the general store. And I didn't mind walkin' through his arbor. Grandfather Mac's brick outhouse and a cold nor'east gale made runnin' outside to go to the bathroom in the winter an adventure.

Past the outhouse was a large lot where Grandfather grew vegetables - when he had a mind - too. Liked growin' things that vine - like pumpkins - tomatoes - cucumbers and squash. Out past the lot was the outline of an old rut road - made there before the turn of the century. Hard to imagine what Bellpoint would look like with another row of houses. Knew it wouldn't be the same. North of the outhouse was his dusty old livery stable. Opened on the lane that went past Doc's and the Preacher's houses - all the way down to the river. Before automobiles became the rage - Grandfather Mac kept his spring wagon here. He would hitch up his pair of horses - believe they were Morgans and drive to Ostrander. Picked up goods for his general store at the train station there. When trucks began to deliver goods - he sold his store and his horses, but kept his wagon and buggies. Buggies were up on the top floor of the livery stable. On the ground floor was his Plymouth Roadster. That's my favorite car of all. I got to ride in the open air in his rumble seat. Uncle Bus had a

Chrysler Roadster which was almost as much fun. My father had one of those fancy Chrysler Airflow four doors - with a back seat and roll up windows. Fine for winter - or when it rained, but in the summer - I'd take a rumble seat and ride in the open air anytime.

I stood up - dusted myself off and walked toward the back porch. Ran my tongue around the roof of my mouth. Lye soap taste was almost gone. Felt like I'd been outside forever - might even be an hour. Maybe Grandmother's lye soap would be back on the sink and she would forgive me. I opened the screen door and peeked in. A glass of milk and a plate of cookies were waitin' for me on the kitchen table. Grandmother looked in from the parlor, "Are you all right - young man?" "Yes - Ma'am." "You're to stay away from Will and Jake until I talk with their father. Wash your hands before you go upstairs to bed." "Is it all right if I climb up to the top floor of the livery stable tomorrow mornin'." "Yes, but be careful. No ones been up there for years." Grandmother didn't have to worry about me gettin' into trouble - not with Will and Jake anyway. After she talked to their father - I'd either get beat up or they'd have nothin' to do with me. Oatmeal cookies are not my favorite. Rather have peanut butter or chocolate chip, but after lye soap - these were delicious. I swallowed the last drop of milk and climbed the back kitchen stairs to my bedroom.

Grandmother and Grandfather slept downstairs. I could sleep in any one of the four bedrooms upstairs. I always chose Uncle Bus's bedroom. A glass case with high school track medals was on the dresser. He had State Championship medals in Pole Vault - Shot Put - Discus and Javelin. I could look, but wasn't allowed to touch. Next to the glass case was a large basin and a ceramic pitcher filled with water. Wasn't sure if it was to wash up in mornin' or at night. Didn't matter - I didn't use it or the thunder jug

under the bed. Wasn't really a jug. It was a chamber pot with a lid. I washed up at the cistern pump in the kitchen and went outside to the outhouse. Pulled the covers to my chin and began countin' mildew spots on the ceilin'. Was all the way to sixty six when my eyelids closed.

Woke next mornin' to the coo of mournin' doves. Don't ever remember hearin' their coo anywhere else - except along the Scioto River. Mornin' along the Scioto would make anyone want to sing. Knew I was late - so I hopped out of bed and pulled on my clothes fast as I could. Left everything untied - tripped over my laces comin' down the back stairs. Had to hurry. Maybe I could convince Grandfather Mac to go fishin' when he came home from work. The lingerin' aroma of his pipe was all that remained in the kitchen. He was on his way to work. Grandmother was in the back yard usin' the same lye soap she stuck in my mouth last night to wash clothes. She had an old fashioned mechanical washin' machine - didn't use electricity - crank turned the paddles. I was happy she was - wearin' shorts wasn't my cup of tea. Couldn't climb in 'em without skinnin' my knees.

When Grandmother had her back turned - I ran past her - through the arbor to the outhouse. When I came out - she was gone - so I went back inside for breakfast. Washed up at the cistern pump in the kitchen. Made sure I didn't get lye soap anywhere near my mouth. As I wiped the water off my face with a towel - Grandmother opened the screen door and called, "Johnny? Oh - there you are. You slept in this morning. There's pecan roll and milk on the table. When you're finished - come out back and we'll talk." I tried to answer, but couldn't. My mouth was full of pecan roll. Pecan rolls aren't easy to describe. They have to be experienced. The roll part is usually so dry it has to be washed down with milk and the caramel part sticks to your teeth like glue. Can't be chewed or licked off. Had to wait for it to wear

off. I drank all except the last half inch of milk. It was full of wash-back. My best friend at home - Slick Willy warned me not to drink it, "Don't dare do that - Johnny. Stuff is full of spit and slime. Don't ever want to swallow wash-back." I made sure Grandmother didn't see me pour the dregs down the cistern drain. I had to rinse the sticky caramel from my hands and mouth. Didn't use soap. Once a day is enough and after last night - be awhile before I could get soap anywhere near my mouth. Slick warned me and Jonsey not to use too much soap and water, "Skin will fall off if you wash your body too often. Wash with soap more than three times a day and your insides will spill out through the worn spots and ooze out all over the floor." I wasn't sure Slick was right, but I didn't want to chance it.

Grandmother was busy pulling wet clothes through the wrangler on her washin' machine. Now - a wrangler isn't a cowboy takin' care of horses. Wrangler on a washin' machine is rollers that squeeze water from clothes before they're hung out to dry. I made sure I didn't slam the screen door this time. I asked, "Can I help? I can turn the paddles if you want." "Not now - there'll be plenty of work for you to do when you're a little older. I talked with the Preacher a few minutes ago. You can play with Will, but try not to pick up any of his bad habits." I wasn't going to run down the lane to Will's house. Might get my head knocked off - so it didn't matter to me, "Yes - Ma'am." "Remember - stay off the river. Not a safe place to play. Make sure you're back in time for supper." "Yes - Ma'am. Would it be all right if I pack a lunch later on? Saw a big carp yesterday." "If you're going fishing - stay on the bank."

I ran to the livery stable and climbed the wall ladder up to the top floor. Wasn't at all like the haymow on Grandfather Ropp's farm across the Scioto. His were full of hay. This one was full of carriages and cobwebs. It'd been

a few years since anyone had been up here. In the far corner set a two seat surrey with black fringe around the top. In front of the surrey was a pony cart. And in front of it - filling up half the floor was Grandfather Mac's spring wagon. Along the walls were sleigh bells - harness - reins and horse collars. Dust covered everything. Took one of the buggy whips down from the wall. Switched it back and forth - then smacked it against the surrey. Dust flew every-which-way, but mostly in my nose. Sneezed six - or seven times before I got control of myself. Returned the buggy whip to its peg and climbed into the front seat of the surrey. Pretended I was holdin' the reins of a pair of midnight-black Morgans - drivin' down Bellpoint Road to the general store. Climbed down and jumped into the pony cart and closed my eyes. I was holdin' the reins of a brown and white Mustang pony - just like Little Beaver's - Red Rider's side kick.

In my daydream I was halfway to Ostrander - when Will called up from below, "Come on down - Johnny. I promise not to beat up on you, but Christ all Friday - what did you say to your Grandmother? My Dad climbed all over me this mornin'." "Those swear words you just said - and I'm not allowed too." "Christ all Friday?" "Stubbed my toe on the door sill to the kitchen and those words popped out of my mouth like they had wings. Mouth still tastes like lye soap. Are those swear words?" "Don't think so. Jake picked 'em up from friends who go to Saint Mary's Catholic School - the one in Delaware. We shoot baskets with 'em at Bellpoint Gym most every winter weekend. Thought it was pretty neat - better than swearin' - not damnin' anything. We can shoot baskets if you want too." "Is there a basketball?" "Sure is - leave a couple there all the time. Still hopin' one of us will grow up and be a star like your Uncle Bus." Didn't know he was a basketball star. Knew he ran track, but basketball? Seems like all he's interested in is restin' after dinner - so he won't get athletes heart." "He led Bellpoint to two



state championships. Had less than nine boys in high school and he won the state track meet all by himself. What's an athlete's heart?" "Exercise too soon after dinner and your heart will grow twice its normal size. Gets so big it'll pull you over or explode." You sure your not riding a horse naked in the snow - again? Trying to cure pneumonia?" "You might be right, but I'm not taking any chances." "You're the one who said no one lives south of the Ohio River." "Okay - okay I was wrong - I'll give you that. But - Grandfather Mac says everyone down there eats crawdads."

I climbed down out of the loft and Will and me took off down Bellpoint Road to the one lane bridge across the Scioto. A rusting hulk - it replaced the covered bridge that was wiped out during the last flood - long before O'shaughnessy dam was built. We were careful when we walked along the side of the bridge. Stayed away from the edge. Didn't want to trip and fall over the side. Bellpoint School was across the river - high up on a hill - less than half a mile above the bridge. Same school building my Mother and Father went too. Hadn't changed a whit. All twelve grades were in the same building and it still had less than nine boys in high school. Grandfather Mac taught when the school was behind the Church - on this side of the river. He'd still be teachin' if it wasn't for the County Clerk. Teachers were paid at the end of the school year. When he rode his horse to the County Courthouse - Clerk didn't have his pay. When he received his pay a month later - Clerk told him not to spend it all in one place. Grandfather quit on the spot - borrowed money and opened a general store. Sold it when his customers drove to Delaware in their Model T Fords. Sure wished he owned the general store today. I'd have my fill of candy and cookies and Orange Crush.

Bellpoint School looked impressive - up on the hill over lookin' the river - placed there to stay high and dry when

spring floods came. The old school was made out of wood. Bellpoint School was made of old brick - like Grandfather's outhouse. When we were even with the end of the bridge - Will ran on ahead, "Race you to the school." I took off runnin' - passed him and he didn't catch me until I was inside the front door. Out of breath - we stopped and looked at the silver trophies inside the large glass case. Will said, "Large ones are for the State Basketball Championship. Bellpoint was the smallest school ever to win - anywhere. Came in second - once. Can't see how - we have the smallest gym in the County. It's so small the over and back line is at the top of the foul circle. Ceiling is barely four feet above the top of the backboard. When your Uncle Bus played they shot everything with two hands - underhanded. Get kicked off the team if they shot with one hand above the waist." "Must have been like indoor football." "It was rough. Jumped center after each basket. But - the rules allowed for two fowl shots even if you made a basket. That kept the fowls down."

We picked two basketballs off the rack at the end of the gym and began shootin' at the west basket. I hit the ceilin' five straight times before I adjusted my arc. The backboards were right against the wall - so we couldn't shoot lay-ups runnin' straight on. It was fun runnin' up and down the length of a short court. Made me feel like a varsity player. It wasn't long before I discovered why we were the only ones here. It was hot. My clothes were soaked clear through to my skin. We both stopped at the same time - pantin'. Will asked, "Have you had enough?" "You betchum' - Red Rider. Where can we get a drink of water?" "Out back at the school pump." We placed the balls back in the rack and went out back. Will primed the pump and pumped enough water to fill two cups. We drank and splashed water on our faces to wash the sweat away. He filled the primer can with water - so the next person could get water from the pump.

Will and me ran to Bellpoint Bridge. I stopped, but he scrambled down a bramble filled bank to a rickety old row boat hidden deep in the brush - and turned around. "Found it last week floatin' near the bank. Pulled it up here. May look old, but she's water tight. Come on down and help me launch her. She's safe. I checked her out from stem to stern." "Does it have oars?" "Does a fish have scales?" I ran down the bank and pushed while Will pulled, "How did you get it up on this bank?" "Came out of the water real easy. You keep on pushin' and I'll keep on pullin'." I pushed as hard as I could and it finally broke free. Will yelled, "Damn! My shoes are full of water." He pulled himself over the side. I jumped in over the stern. Will was in command, "Grab an oar and we'll row her to the other side." We sat next to each other and began rowing in circles. Took awhile before we got the hang of it. We rowed straight across and then north along the other bank to the lane behind Doc's house. Wasn't easy going upstream, but we made it. Will rowed downstream from the lane until we were behind Doc's house. Got it halfway out of the river without much effort. Didn't want anyone to know we had a boat - that's why we hid it behind Doc's house. Will sat back down inside the boat, "What do you want to do this afternoon?" "You got a boat and I got fishin' gear. I'll meet you here with my fishin' pole in twenty minutes." "Your Grandmother won't let you float on the Scioto." "Not if we don't tell her. Besides - we just rowed across the river and lightnin' didn't strike. We'll be okay as long as we don't tip her over. Current isn't bad. We can row up river without much trouble." "Don't say one word about this to your Grandmother. If you do - she'll tell my Dad and all hell will break loose." "Do you think Jake can go with us? Plenty of room." "Can't - he's still in the doghouse for smokin' in the outhouse."

I snuck in the front door - so Grandmother wouldn't find out I was back for my fishin' pole and Grandfather's bait

bucket. Saw her through the kitchen window - hangin' clothes on the line. Washin' clothes was an all day job with an old fashioned washin' machine - hangin' clothes out to dry. I made two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and grabbed a handful of oatmeal cookies. Filled a mason jar with water and placed everything in a brown paper sack. Opened the screen door to the porch and tiptoed out to get my pole and bait bucket. Should have known - Grandmother had eyes in the back of her head. She turned and waggled her finger at me, "Be back by supper time - young man and stay off the river. What's in your sack." "Cookies and sandwiches." "Don't let them set in the sun - you'll get the cramps."

Looked inside the bait bucket to see if the crawdads had survived. They had. When the light came in as I lifted the lid they scooted around - tryin' to hide under the river moss. Felt sorry for 'em. Bad enough that they had to dodge raccoons - carp and catfish. Soon they'd have to dodge a largemouth bass. I walked down the lane - my hands and arms full. Will was all ready sittin' in his rowboat - waitin'. He waved, "Jake stepped all over himself. Dad caught him smokin' again. Jake found a cigar butt next to where your Uncle Bus parks his roadster. Bad enough he got caught, but This time he's sicker than a dog. You know Jake - he's got a wooden head." "Where is he?" "Paintin' the white picket fence behind the Church. Place your gear under the back seat and help me push her into the river." "Stay put. Don't need your help." I untied the boat from the tree - grabbed the pointy end and pushed. Will used the oars to turn it around so the back end was near the bank and I threw my gear in and climbed over the transom. I asked "Where's your fishin' pole?" "Didn't bring it. I'll row - you fish. I've had enough of it for awhile. I live on this river. Fishin' gets to be old hat. Won't miss doing it until I'm stuck behind a desk in school. I'll drift downstream while you wet your line. What are you fishin' for?" "Largemouth bass."

## *Scioto River*

Will let the boat drift away from the bank, "Too hot to catch bass. This time of day they go deep. You'd be better off fishin' for crappie - or sun fish." "Have to throw 'em back in. Bass is the only fish Grandmother will cook. Sure you can handle this boat?" "River's low and current's slow. We're headin' downstream - let her drift." "Old bridge sure looks different from underneath. Looks like a giant metal erector set." "I'll drift her close to the bank. Shade from the trees will give you a better chance to catch bass. Fish ain't stupid - 'cept for carp - the rest like shade. Did you bring along enough food? Didn't want to go inside and get caught. Not with fence paintin' going on." "Made you a sandwich and oatmeal cookies." "Better keep 'em under the seat. Sun will make 'em go bad."

We drifted south on the Scioto - past the mouth of Mill Creek. Mostly farms and pasture land. Houses were built high up on the hillside above the river. The big flood in the Twenties cured anyone from building near the banks. Not even a barn was built along the river. So we were pretty much alone - out where no one would notice - so no one could tell. Let my line drift off the back. Couldn't let it go too deep or it would snag on an underwater log. Wasn't any rocks to speak of. Scioto River was mostly mud south of Bellpoint. Will kept busy keepin' us close to the bank and I kept busy catchin' sun fish. Caught more'n a dozen. Threw 'em all back in. Will was right - too hot for bass.

Will turned our boat toward the west bank, "I'm hungry. Goin' to pull into that little cove so we can get shade. What kind of sandwich you bring?" "Peanut butter and jelly." We polished 'em off - washed the crust down with water and began to chew on oatmeal cookies. I wondered, "Can't get my mind off those two shade tree mechanics. You know - the ones

that teased us yesterday afternoon. When we ran away - the ugly one." "That's Old Ned Smith." "He pointed at us - made an evil sign with his fingers. Are we in for it?" "Chased after Jake and me a dozen times this year, but we got away. What scares me is him sayin' all the time he'll feed us to his devil's helper. Calls it *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing.*" "You never mentioned that before." "Too scared." "What about Dublin?" "No one in Bellpoint ever talks about it. Has to be the devil's hideout. Make a lot of moonshine in those hills above the Scioto. Some say Old Ned is still makin' it." "Anything else?" "That he's made a pact with the devil. Wouldn't pay for us to take him on or make him mad at us." "Don't plan on doing that. Do you want to row back?" Not thinking about how far we'd floated or how much work it'd be to row back against the current - Will answered, "Let's drift. Plenty of time to row back. If we turn around in an hour - we'll be home in time for supper."

Rowed downstream under the bridge north of the Girls Industrial Home. That's a fancy name for a young girl's prison. The sun's shadow was about one when the first bass struck my bait. Will edged his boat out so I could fish in deeper water. Neither one of us noticed the current pickin' up. Caught a second largemouth bass and hooked it onto my stringer with the first one. Both were over two pounds and keepers. Wasn't long after that - the sun took its toll. We both leaned back and closed our eyes. It was a tossup as to which one fell asleep first. Wasn't any doubt about who was the first one who woke up. With the Scioto at midsummer low - our rowboat slipped under the guard wire stretched over the river above the damn - put there to keep fools like us from going over the top. I woke up to a whoop - holler and, "Christ all Friday! We're goners!"

Those were the last words I heard. The noise of fallin' water blocked out every other sound. Lucky for us the river

was low. Our rowboat slowed almost to a stop when she scrapped her bottom on the spillway - then we picked up speed - like a roller coaster goin' off the topmost part of its track - whistlin' like a greased pig - all the way down to the deep water pool below the dam. We skipped across that pool like our rocks skipped across Mill Creek - yesterday. Didn't have time to think about why we were still alive and upright. But - later when this was all over - I figured it was the low amount of water spillin' over the dam that saved us. I can tell you - I breathed a sigh of relief when I found the bait bucket and my fishin' pole floatin' in the bottom. But - both oars were gone - floatin' ahead of us over white water rapids. Still had two bass attached to the stringer hangin' over the side. I let 'em go. The spillway scrapped their scales and after a ride like we had - they deserved to be set free. I emptied out the bait bucket and began bailin'. Will was hanging on to both sides, "Christ all Friday! Watch out - white water ahead!" I looked up, "My Goodness!"

I dropped my bait bucket and held on with both hands. Front end of our boat went up - then just as fast - down. We spun around in a half-dozen circles like a Whip-O-Whirl ride at a carnival. Went through the lower rapids backwards - so I couldn't tell how we survived. Came to an end - below the rapids on the west bank of the Scioto. Whistlin' through rapids made a ride over the dam feel like a Sunday stroll. I helped Will pull the rowboat up on the bank, "We look like two drowned rats." "Better take our shoes off and drain the water out of 'em." "Can't go barefoot climbin' the hill to the road - too many rocks." "What about my rowboat?" "Ain't no good without oars and there's no way we can carry it back. Pull it up as far as we can and cover it." "Might be able to borrow a wagon." "It slides pretty good over these rocks." We moved it fifteen feet up on the bank and covered it with branches.

## Dublin

I looked up and saw the back end of a general store. The sign was large enough to read half-a-mile away. Big as life - *Dublin!* I whispered, "Boy - are we in trouble" and pointed. Will looked up and moaned, "Holy Cow - are we in for it. Better hightail it out of here. Road goes straight through to Bellpoint." Will had his shoes on and was halfway up the bank before I could say, "You betchum' - Red Rider." I caught up with Will, "Maybe we can hitch a ride." "Right - It's a long walk back." "You should have thought of that when we were under the second bridge." "I was having too much fun watchin' you catch fish." No sooner were we out on the road when along comes a truck. Will waved at it. Went on by, but the driver must have had second thoughts. It stopped and Will and me climbed on the back.

We should have paid attention, but we didn't and it was goin' too fast to tell anyway. We were ridin' on the back of a flatbed Ford truck. Didn't get a good look at the driver. All we heard was, "Climb on back. Where you two young uns' goin'." We both shouted, "Bellpoint," but there was no way he could hear us over the roar of his engine and we were all ready flyin' up the road. Will and I hung on for dear life. I looked inside the back window. My eyes grew wide as two saucers full of milk. I grabbed Will and pointed, "Do you know who that is?" "Oh my God! It's Old Ned Smith! Are we ever in for it. Can't jump - he's doin' over sixty." Before we knew it - Old Ned turned off the main road and we were bouncin' uphill on a dirt lane - dust flyin' every which way. Will hollered, "Hang on - I think he's trying to kill us." Couldn't jump off - we were too busy duckin' tree branches and Old Ned was drivin' like the devil was on his tail. He slid to a stop in front of a run-down shack and me and Will tumbled off into the dirt. Got up and took off runnin', but two scraggly looking types grabbed us.



Old Ned opened the door to his flatbed and climbed down, "Lookie' here what I found along the road. Two fuzzy faces. Scrawny lookin' one is the Preacher's boy. Who're you - young un'?" "Johnny Ropp." "Well young uns' - meet German Jerry. He's the stocky one with the silly smile and One Eyed Jack. He's easy to pick out. Can't see through his eye patch. I'm your host - Ned Smith. Lock 'em up in the shed. We'll deal with 'em later. I'm thirsty enough to drink a creek and *The Big Hairy Red Thing* is gonna' wake up hungry enough to eat a cow. Where's my jug?" One Eyed pointed toward the porch. "Well - go fetch it while I check our still. Stole some supplies and tobacco. They're in the front seat. Break out our pipes - time to party."

German Jerry opened the door to a shed - more fallin' down than standin' up - shoved us in - slammed the door and braced a board against the hinge. There was an odor in here - almost knocked me down - a cross between sulfur and manure. We sat there - neither of us sayin' a word - lookin' out through the cracks - watchin' German - One Eyed and Old Ned sharin' pulls from a jug of corn whisky. Will - his head down in his hands said, "It's my fault - should have known it was Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. We're in a whole world of hurts." "Not if we can figure a way to get out of this fix." "They're going to have a go at us - aren't they?" "You can bet your life on it."

I sat there wonderin' what my hero - Tom Mix would do? Came to me right away - he'd think this problem through and then act, "Ned said *The Big Hairy Red Thing* was hungry enough to eat a cow." "If we don't get out of here - we're goin' to be its supper." "You've convinced me - lets see if we can find a way out." "Has to be a path out back of the shed. I can smell a whiskey still cookin'." "It'll be down by the creek. Need pure water to make whiskey. Wells around here have too

much lime." Will lit up, "And Ned's gang is too lazy to haul water." "If they're as drunk as they smell - they'll pass out soon. Front of this shed looks too solid. You go west - I'll go east and we'll meet in back." "Better get a move on. Old Ned's not only missin' most of his teeth - he's a might short on common sense - too." I held my nose and pointed toward a locked metal door in the dirt floor of the shed, "Ned must keep *"The Big Hairy Red Thing!"* down below."

Couldn't find another door - so we returned to the front of the shed. Peaked out between two warped boards to check on our jailers. They were sittin' on the front porch - legs hangin' over - smokin' pipes and drinkin' whiskey from a jug. They looked dirty - mean and ugly. Ned was gettin' louder and nastier with each pull from the jug. I nudged Will and whispered, "Were runnin' out of time and it doesn't look like they're goin' to fall asleep. What's plan B?" "Time to do have another look-a-round. Have to find a way outa' here." Couple of loose boards to the front." "Won't do - let's look out back again." We moved quick. Old Ned was beginnin' to squeal like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

I skirted past a stack of copper pipes and we met again - at the back of the shed. I asked, "Find a way out?" "No - how about you?" Nothin', but stolen copper pipe for their still. Did you hear the rumble from behind that metal door?" "See this chicken skin?" "Hello - this board shows promise. Damn shed is fallin' down. Ned's got it buttressed with two-by-fours." "Lets see if we can pry a board loose." Will tugged and I pulled until we pushed a board out. Wasn't enough space for us to crawl through - so we pushed the one below out - too. Will eased out - ever so slowly - head first - tumblin' to the ground and I followed after. We knelt down and pushed both boards back into place. Then we stood up and brushed off the dirt.

*The Big Hairy Red Thing* let out a roar that shook his metal door and rattled our bones. When I looked up - Will was halfway down the path to Ned's still. I caught up with him and we ran bent over - like rabbits runnin' from a hound - right past Ned's still. Didn't stop until we reached the creek. I grabbed Will's arm and whispered, "Lets talk this over. Does Old Ned have dogs?" "Get past the sulfur and manure aroma and his shed smelled of them. Must have them tied up - out back of his shack to keep 'em away from his hairy fiend." "Better walk down the center of the creek. They'll be able to track us if we don't." "That's a no brainer. Bramble's so thick on the banks - we couldn't begin to walk there. Tie your sneakers around your neck and we'll head downstream." Tiptoed into the creek. It was mostly rock bottom and shallow - not more than a foot deep. We walked in the middle until the bramble thinned out into rocks and pasture. Scrambled up the bank - dried our feet - put our sneakers back on and trotted along the bank toward the river road. Will tugged on my arm, "Hear those dogs?" "Yep - they're bein' fed to *The Big Hairy Red Thing* or chasin' after us." We took off runnin' toward the road.

Didn't stop runnin' until we reached the road. Will pointed north, "Lets get movin'." "Don't hear dogs and I need to catch my breath." "Can't stop now. Not if you want to live. We can continue walkin' this side of the river or cross over at the dam." "I vote to cross over. If Old Ned comes after us - we can stop at my Grandfather Ropp's farm." "What are you goin' to tell your Grandparents?" "Nothin'." "What about your fishin' pole and bait bucket?" "Oh boy! They're on the back of Ned's flatbed Ford truck. Am I ever goin' to get it. Spent the day on the river - where I wasn't supposed to be. Floated over the dam - which should have killed us. Got kidnapped by Old Ned because we hitchhiked - which I'm not allowed to do. And we were locked in a shed

and almost fed to *The Big Hairy Red Thing* - and who's going to believe that - and we're walking home from Dublin - where we're not supposed to go. Looks like you and me have hit the home run of trouble. Whatever we say - we're cooked - so I don't think I'll say anything. How about you?" "That's two of us. How about the bait bucket?" "Say I lost it - which is true and replace it." We walked and ran - walked and ran and walked and ran and ran some more.

Both of us heard the rumble at the same time. Neither of us hesitated - either. We jumped over the roadside ditch - climbed up the bank and tumbled over the hedgerow. Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck was comin' up the road. We hunkered down - layin' flat on our bellies. When Ned's truck was alongside - I peeked out through the branches. Old Ned was weavin' all over the road. One Eyed Jack was at his side and German Jerry was sleepin' on the back - like he had passed out. Thought I saw my pole and bait bucket leanin' against the back of the cab. Soon as I stood up to get a better look - Ned's truck hit a chuck hole - woke German up. He pointed and shouted as Ned's flatbed rolled out of sight. Will stood up, "What do you think? They comin' back?" "Might be, but Ned's carryin' boxes." "Must be deliverin' moonshine to the roadhouse on the other side of the dam." "Chance to get my fishin' pole and bait bucket back. You game?" "Ned's truck makes so much noise we'll have enough warning to hide." "We might come out of this trouble clean as a whistle." Climbed over the hedgerow - hopped over the ditch and ran down the road toward the dam.

We walked real careful like - approachin' O'shaughnessey Dam. Looked across the dam, but didn't see a flatbed. Tell you what - Will and me walked gingerly across the bridge over that dam. Stopped in the middle and looked at the spillway. Will whistled, "Don't know how we survived the fall." I looked down at the rapids, "Or the white water." Walked on

egg shells to the other side. Climbin' the road uphill from the dam - we stopped short. Old Ned's truck was parked in front of the roadhouse. Will held me back, "Take your time. We'll do it up brown." "Don't have time. Need to get my bait bucket and fishin' pole." "Don't hurry. They're most likely inside tryin' to sober up on hamburgers and beer." "Can't sober up on beer." "You and I know that, but Ned and his gang don't."

We hunkered down - keepin' Ned's flatbed between us and the roadhouse - scooted across the road into the parkin' lot without bein' seen. Snuck up on Old Ned's truck - keepin' one eye on the roadhouse door. I grabbed my gear - Will popped the flatbed's hood - removed the distributor cap - closed the hood and flung the cap across the road into the weeds. "That ought to fix 'em. No way they can come after us now." We took off runnin'. Didn't stop until we were a half mile north of the zoo. Didn't stop to rest - not even at Grandfather Ropp's farm. I told Will, "If we stop here we'll have a whole lot of explainin' to do. Way it is - if we get back before supper - we'll be home free." "Johnny - this is the best adventure I've ever had." "Only one thing wrong." "What's that?" "We can't tell anybody."

By the time we reached Bellpoint Bridge - it was gettin' on to six o'clock. Grandfather Mac - on his way home from work - drove up beside us in his Plymouth roadster. Stopped to pick us up, "Open the rumble seat - Johnny. Looks like you two fell in the river with your clothes on. Catch any bass?" My mind was racin'. I never threw bass back in, but I couldn't lie. "A flock of sunfish, but I threw 'em back in. Not much luck on this part of the river." This part was true - I just didn't tell the whole of it. "I'll come home early tomorrow afternoon. We'll go fishing at my favorite bass pool below the dam. You and Will go up Mill Creek early tomorrow morning and fill my bait bucket with crawdads."

Will and I doubled over laughing - out of relief - in the rumble seat. Grandfather shook his head and smiled as he slipped his Plymouth roadster into first gear." Will and me slumped down - felt like a bottle of soda water with all its fizz gone. We were asleep by the time Grandfather's roadster climbed up the hill to his home in Bellpoint.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Listen to your elders.
3. Don't get in over your head.

Trouble was - there was so much explorin' to do and so little time to do it. Wouldn't be long before I'd be an adult and what grown ups call mature. Bein' Mature meant bein' responsible. You know - not to do somethin' even if it was an adventure. Decided I'd just as soon be a boy. Wasn't ready for maturity. Not yet. Not when there were tree houses to be built and rafts to float.

## 2

### *Bellpoint*

Tired - you bet I was. I was worn to a frazzle - right down to a nub. Went to bed after supper and didn't wake up until ten o'clock next mornin'. Will and me went up Mill Creek carryin' a bait bucket and a bar of soap - knowin' it would take more than bobbin' up and down in our swimmin' hole to get that odor of *The Big Hairy Red Thing* off our skin. No one seemed to notice, but Will and me did. The lingerin' odor of sulfur and manure gave us the skin crawls. We filled Grandfather's Mac's bait bucket with crawdads - river moss and ran straight home with one eye open for Old Ned and his gang. Will was truly sad we'd lost his rowboat, but we both knew it was our fault. And I knew, but he wouldn't own up to the fact it really didn't belong to him.

Took all my willpower to keep my mouth shut about our trip over the dam. When I went fishin' with Grandfather Mac - funny thing happened when we put our lines in the deep water pool below the dam. He caught two largemouth bass with scales were scraped on one side. Now - all bass look alike, but this was more than peculiar. Tried to talk Grandfather into throwin' 'em back in, but he wouldn't have it, "These will be good eating - Johnny." Grandmother cut our bass into filets - after flayin' away their scales. She covered 'em with flour - salt and pepper - poured oil in her skillet and fried 'em for supper. Tender - Grandfather said they were the best fish he ever ate. Not me - I couldn't eat those bass - not after draggin' 'em over the dam. I had a bowl of cold cereal.

After Will and me had our run in with Old Ned Smith - all the games we played seemed pretty tame. So - nothin' much of interest happened the next day - or the next - or the next. Grandfather Ropp phoned after supper Friday night. Said I'd be in time to help with threshin'. I was goin' to bring in the sheaves. Wheat harvest time - now that's the best of times to be on a farm.

## *Concord Township Farm*

When Saturday mornin' came - I was up early - packed and ready to go - over the Scioto River and through the woods to Grandfather Ropp's farm. Grandfather Mac asked me to ride up front with him. I declined. He understood - a rumble seat ride was somethin' special to me. By the time he shifted into high gear - we were on Bellpoint Bridge - quick as a wink. Felt like a fool - couldn't help it. Had to sing,

*"Over the river and through the wood, To Grandfather's house we go."*

Don't know if these were the right lyrics and I didn't care. Seemed like it was the right thing to do - so I did it. No one was around to hear me - so I was the only one that knew I couldn't carry a tune worth a lick. It was warm out and the sun was goin' to bake my brains today, but when I closed my eyes I saw drifts of snow - flyin' horses pullin' a sleigh on a frozen river - trees covered with frost and the whole world winter white. Made me shiver. Grandfather Mac brought me back to my summer's day when he turned in the lane leadin' to the Ropp farmhouse. He stopped in front of the wheat bin - empty now - waitin' for harvest. He picked me up out of the rumble seat and gave me a Dutch rub before I could get away, "Won't be able to lift you much longer. Too hard on my back. How much do you weigh - Johnny?" "Eighty pounds." That was good news. Rubbin' his whiskers against my cheek was not my idea of a good way to say good-by. Grandfather admonished me, "Johnny - mind your manners. Don't use any of those words Mom said you picked up from the Preacher's boy - Will



isn't it?" "Yes - Sir - I'll mind my manners." After Grandmother's lye soap - wasn't a chance in hell I'd swear. Not for awhile - anyway.

While my Grandfathers were busy visitin' - I lifted my suitcase out of the rumble seat well. Grandmother Mac had cleaned and pressed everything. Didn't want Grandmother Ropp to think she hadn't taken good care of me. I ran to the kitchen door and right into Grandmother Ropp's arms. She took my suitcase, "Scoot upstairs and change into your farm clothes. You'll find a pair of bib overalls on your bed. If the pant legs are too long - roll them up so they won't drag in the dirt." She opened my suitcase and smiled, "My-oh-my - everything is so clean and pressed. Your Grandmother Mac is a certainly a good housekeeper." She followed me upstairs, "I'll put your clothes away - later." "Yes Ma'am." I waited for her to leave before I undressed and changed into my bib overalls.

Comin' up the farmhouse stairs reminded me of a pirate ship ladder - with all its twists and turns. Grandmother Ropp's farm house was built before the turn of the century. Her stairwell soared straight up - like a corkscrew - right up the middle. Top floor had five bedrooms and an attic. My bedroom was next to it. Two things made visitin' the farm fun - the attic and the barn - with its three haymows. Grandmother's attic was stacked high with Father's childhood books and toys. And his books were really neat. Full of stories about how Yankee boys beat up on the German Kaiser. Kaiser always wore a silver spiked helmet knocked sideways. And there were other books with all kinds of adventures and sport. Last time I was here - I looked at pictures. This time I'd read a few. I pulled on shoes - couldn't wear sneakers on the farm. Didn't tie 'em - candy was waitin' in the kitchen. Grandfather kept a white sack of dime store candy in the cupboard - over the refrigerator.

I bounded down the staircase - two steps at a time and ran into the kitchen. Grandmother knew where I was headin'. I stood on a chair and opened the cupboard door. It was there! I handed it to Grandmother. She held open the white paper sack, "You can have two, but that's all. Don't want to spoil your appetite for supper." I reached in and took two large orange slices. You know - gum drops - soft jelly candy coated with sugar. These weren't the hard - small ones made by machine on sale today. Why - each slice weighed almost a quarter pound. Always stuck to the top of my back teeth - like gum to a chair bottom. I sat down at the kitchen table and stuffed half of one into my mouth. Polished off the rest of it while I was tyin' my shoes.

Grandmother's kitchen was attached to the farmhouse like a shed to a barn. Had a slanted roof with windows all around to let the summer heat escape. Centerpiece was her eight burner - two oven Cast-iron range. In the winter she kept it fired up all day and night. Helped keep the farmhouse warm. Windows would frost over so you couldn't see out, but kitchen stayed toasty. Summer - Grandmother Ropp had to rise before dawn - so she could bake when it was cool. Saturday night - she'd fire up that Cast-iron range and the reservoir on the side would make hot water so we could all take a warm bath. Grandmother was busy as ever - churnin' cream into butter on the counter. Hard work when it got thick and began to set. I finished my last orange slice and ran for the screen door on the back porch. I cringed as the door slammed shut behind me, "Sorry Grandmother. I'll be more careful next time." She looked up smilin' - knowin' I wouldn't, "Mind that you do just that."

Grandfather's Border collie - Spot sat waitin' for me at the bottom of the steps. He jumped up - placed both paws in my hands - his tail waggin' in giant circles. I scratched him behind both of ears and took off rumnnin', "Come on Spot

- lets explore." He ran beside me - prancin' like a prince - happy to have someone besides cows to play with. Spot got named for the black hair coverin' his right eye. The rest of him was snowy white - after he had a bath. Right now he was mostly summer dirty. Barn doors didn't open out. They slid to the sides on tracks. I opened both - just a crack - so we could squeeze inside. Grandfather's hay wagon was parked inside - wheels restin' on a dirt barn floor. Sideboards were installed - so burlap sacks of wheat wouldn't fall off when harvest began Monday morning. I hoisted Spot up and we both sat on the wagon bed - my feet and his front paws danglin' over the side. Spot seemed to like sittin' around and daydreamin' as much as I did.

I could hardly wait for the threshin' machine to arrive. Its crew would fire up the boiler to power the steam engine. Clouds of black smoke would belch upwards into a hazy Ohio mornin'. Neighbors would arrive with pitchforks and wagons to haul cut wheat stalks to the thresher. The thresher's steam engine powered a giant wheel - which turned a belt that turned metal grinders with teeth separatin' wheat from chaff. Farmers would hold burlap sacks open under the exit spout to catch the wheat. Stalks would fly out the back - making a huge pile of straw for winter fodder.

You might not know about fodder. We spread wheat and corn stalks around our barnyard so cows have a dry bed to sleep and walk on. Webster says farmers feed it to domestic animals, but then - Noah never was much of a farmer. As the stalks decompose - they mix in with the manure. Gives manure substance - so it's easier to pick up with a pitch fork and spread on the fields. Grandfather spreads fodder on the floor of his stalls - so horses would have clean straw to walk on and sleep on. And horse manure is a whole lot easier to shovel - mixed with straw. Now if anyone says you don't know manure - you can tell 'em what for.

Spot rolled over - still asleep, "You must be dreamin' about gettin' free scraps at thresher dinner." It is more like a banquet than dinner - Grandfather borrowed long wooden tables from the Church and set 'em up in the yard - under our giant walnut trees. Come Monday - tables would be stacked high with pies - cookies - cakes and the other stuff. The other stuff was what I had to eat before desert - like baked ham - fried chicken - biscuits - gravy and fresh baked bread. Our front yard would be full of farm workers - millin' around - talkin' about the mornin' wheat harvest - or knee high corn by the Fourth of July - or horses and farm equipment. Sort of like a midsummer county fair without the harness races and amusement rides.

Spot nudged me with his nose. He was awake and it was time to move on. I hopped down off the wagon and raised my arms. He leapt in. Border collies are smart. A four foot drop can damage a pair of front paws. He jumped out of my arms soon enough. We checked the stalls. Horses were out to pasture. Grandfather didn't like to keep 'em in the barn when it got too hot. He had six stalls. First two were for harness horses and empty. Took care of those Morgans long after he sold the carriage and surrey. Used 'em to pull his one horse sleigh when there was enough snow. That was before they passed on several years back - natural. None of his horses would ever see a glue factory. The sleigh still hung in the back of his equipment shed along with the sleigh bells on the wall.

Grandfather had three haymows - one above the horse stalls - another from ceiling to floor - directly across and the third one - the back haymow - was over the cattle pens. Kept his Short Horn Durham bull in one and his Jersey milk cow in the other. Hay was packed in loose - so it would dry and not catch fire through spontaneous combustion. I wasn't supposed to go near those cattle pens - not since my best

friend - Slick Willy from Osborn came up with me this spring. He teased our bull with a long piece of straw until that Durham bull got so mad he came after Willy. Our bull jumped right through the wall mounted feed rack to get after Slick. Willy and me cleared a five foot wooden gate without touchin' the top rail. Grandfather didn't say a word about it. Knew we had learned our lesson. He did let us know about a cousin who was gored by a bull - one he thought was tame. Now that stuck in my mind. Between Willy and my cousin - wouldn't find me teasin' a bull.

Told Spot to, "Sit - stay here while I climb the ladder to the haymow." Climbed into the one across from the horse stalls. Now - there isn't a game that can be more fun than jumpin' into loose hay. I climbed up to the six-by-six cross beam and jumped - climbed back up and jumped again. Quit after the sixth jump. Haymow was gettin' hotter than I could stand - 'cause a midsummer sun was shinin' down on a tin roof. Climbed down the ladder real careful. Used to slide down off the hay - not anymore. Not since Grandfather told of a neighbor whose innards were punctured by a pitchfork doin' the same thing. Spot was waitin' for me - with his tail thumpin' on the dirt floor. He couldn't wait to get outside - away from the heat.

Grandfather's barn had two sheds. The one with the sleigh had a corn planter - wheat drill - plow and disc stored out of the weather. The other one was between the stalls and water trough. Inside was Grandfather's undertaker black Studebaker coupe. On the other side of the water trough stood a drive through tractor shed. On both sides of the shed were corn cribs. In the middle - an iron cleated monster of a Farmall tractor. It had huge metal rear wheels and small knife like front ones. I gave this tractor a wide berth - same as the bull. One of my twelve Great Uncles was run over by a tractor - just like this one. He forgot to

take it out of gear when he turned the crank to start it up. Doesn't pay to be absent minded around heavy equipment or large farm animals. Spot barked at me and nudged me toward the shed with the one horse sleigh.

I ran after him. Sleigh was still there - a might more rusty - hanging on the wall by its runners. The drill was toward the back - in front of the corn planter. You may not know what a drill is. It's an elongated box contraption - with a front lid for wheat - or oat seed and a back lid for lime. Rolls along behind horses - or a tractor on two giant wheels. A series of tubes on springs runs the length of it. When the wheels turn - the tubes move up and down drillin' wheat seed and lime into the soil. The fun of it is ridin' - standin' up on the back rail - smoothin' out the lime and wheat so they don't cake up. Grandfather Ropp moved the hay rake and cutter bar to the front. First thing we'd do is cut the wheat stalks with the cutter bar - then rake it into wind rows. Then we'd use the hay loader to lift wheat to the back of the wagon. When the wagon was full - we drove it to the threshin' machine. Once the threshin' machine boiler was fired up - it stayed in one spot. Wheels were only used to drive it from farm to farm. Spot looked up - barked and took off for the water trough. He was thirsty.

I ran after him. He was makin' a beeline for our moss covered concrete water tank. While he drank his fill - I kept right on walkin' to the tractor shed. The one with the drive through corn cribs. Inside the east crib was a corn sheller with a handle on one side and a counterbalanced wheel on the other. Once it got started - the wheel helped to keep it going. A real labor saver shellin' corn. I cranked the wheel and shelled six ears. Put the corn in my pockets - so much they bulged out. When Grandfather brought his horses in for water - I'd help lead 'em to their stalls. I'd try - one more time to make friends with Sandy and Clyde - two giant

Scot Clydesdales - like ones that pull beer wagons. Sandy was the frisky one. When Grandfather gave me his lead - I knew who was in charge. Spot pulled at my pants leg - he knew my routine - our next stop was the smokehouse - between the wheat bin and well.

Grandfather Ropp's smoke house was almost as rickety as Old Ned's shed. He had decided to let it go. When it fell down he'd stop smokin' meat. Wasn't cost effective to cure his own bacon and ham anymore. That might be true, but no one could cure meat that tasted as good as his. His sugar cure was a secret he wouldn't share - except with Father. I opened the door and smoke poured out. Spot was inside before I could stop him. I chased after him and closed the door. Four hams hung to one side and two slabs of bacon on the other. Smoke cured bacon was Grandfather Ropp's favorite. I grabbed Spot by the collar and opened the door. He didn't want to leave. Can't blame him. We both smelled of sugar cured ham. After I closed the door - Spot lost interest. He knew where I was headed - so he curled up on the back porch - knowin' he'd get his hind end swatted if he got anywhere near Grandmother's chickens.

Grandmother let her chickens roam, but they stayed away from the farmhouse. Rooster had his territory and Spot had his. Chickens weren't dumb - sunset they returned to roost in the hen house. A few laid eggs there, but most wandered to the haymows and sheds. One even laid her eggs on the tractor seat - so it paid to look before you sat down. Huntin' for eggs is like a pirate lookin' for gold. First place I'd look was the front haymows. Found a baker's dozen over the stalls, but were they ever ripe. Took one whiff and pitched them out the side door to the hogs. Found twenty-eight good ones. Twelve in the back haymow - fourteen under the drill and two on the Farmall tractor seat. Grandmother could use all the eggs I found when she baked tomorrow.

I'd explored all my favorite places by evening. It was time to do chores. I ran outside to help Grandfather lead his horses in from the field. Didn't have to walk them far. They were on their way home as the sun dropped over the barn. Sandy nudged my pocket. He could smell shelled corn. After he drank his fill at the water tank - he followed me into his stall. I gave him his fair share of corn and Clyde - too. After dinin' on grass all day - they were hungry for solid food. At the front of their stalls was a wooden trough for hay. In the front right corner was a small box for treats - corn - oats - or apples. Sandy and Clyde always checked that box - first. When we finished chores it was time to wash up for supper. Chores came first - supper second.

Grandmother didn't want to fire up her Cast-iron range in July's afternoon heat - so we ate cold leftovers - ham - potatoes - bread and butter. It was my lucky night - nothin' green. Grandfather was going to town after supper. Saturday - farmers parked their cars on Sandusky Street and gossiped about work - crops - weather - and trouble. He'd smoke his weekly cigar on the way to town and come home with the odor of smoke on his clothes. And a new white candy sack to put up on the shelf. Grandmother went along if she had shoppin' to do, but not tonight. When the evenin' turned cool - she was going to fire up the Cast-iron range and bake pie crusts. Gettin' meals ready for harvest took more than one day. She shooed me out of the kitchen, "Why don't you read one of your Father's books. There's plenty up in the attic." "Can I read at the kitchen table?" "Not tonight. I need the work space to roll out crusts."

I shuffled up stairs. Our attic door was only four foot high, but the steps inside led down to a land filled with mystery. Built over the winter pantry - the attic floor was five feet below the bedrooms above. Bookshelves covered all four walls - except for the door and one small window. Whole



place looked like a study for the seven dwarfs. Father's books lined two of the walls and pots - toys and stuff like that on the other two. I had a variety to choose from - adventure books - dime novel westerns of Remington's time - boy's books - history stuff - like Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders beatin' up on the Spaniards in Cuba.

I looked 'em all of over before selectin' one about a Yale football player. Cover showed him wearin' a turtle neck sweater with a big Y on the front. Carried a football - so round it looked like a soccer ball. I read the first twenty pages and was hooked. It was another turn of the century tussle between the heroes at Yale and bad guys at Harvard. Had to wonder why boys from Yale were All American heroes - with the strength of ten and the Harvards looked like Old Ned Smith's gang - 'cept they had clean clothes and all their teeth. These were my Father's books and he was a football coach, "Maybe he'll know why the Yales are always the good guys. Old Ned should have gone to Harvard."

Turned around to sit down on the steps and noticed a dulcimer on the top shelf. Laid the Yale book aside and took it down. Had twenty strings - going from short to long - over a polished curved wooden box with a hole in the middle. I tightened each metal string and tested it. No matter what I did - I couldn't get it tuned. After awhile I gave up and put it back on the shelf. I sat down on the top step and opened my book. The first chapter was about a poor boy from town who entered Yale. Wasn't soon before he was set upon by bullies from Harvard. Wasn't a fair fight. Four against one, but he put up a good show. I could identify with him. Ned and his gang came after me, but I didn't win out. Unless escapin' out back was winnin'. No - winnin' means teaching a bully a lesson and I didn't do that. One thing about boy's adventure books - I knew my Yale hero would come out ahead. The fun of it was findin' out how he was goin' to do it.

Don't know when I fell asleep. Grandmother woke me up when she tapped me on my shoulder, "Time to get up young man. You're just like your Father. He fell asleep reading in the attic - too. Wash up and go to bed." "Is Grandfather back from town?" "Came home an hour ago. Would you like a glass of milk? Dad brought home hot rolls from the bakery." "Yes Ma'am. I'll be right down. Can I give Spot a piece of ham bone?" "You'll spoil that Border collie. He'll be of no use on the farm, but go ahead. Hurry to the kitchen before the rolls get cold." I fell asleep readin' on the top step and didn't get more'n halfway through the first chapter. I stretched my arms over my head - turned out the light and closed the attic door. Goin' down a steep circular staircase when I'm half asleep - had to be real careful. Grandfather brought home caramel rolls - without nuts. I remembered Grandfather's rule - chores come first. So I took a piece of ham bone to Spot. He was curled up asleep on the back porch. Laid it in front of his nose, but all he did was sniff with his eyes closed. Satisfied - he curled up tighter. Spot knew his bone would still be there in the mornin'. Milk and hot caramel roll finished off a busy day. I washed up and peeked in the cupboard. Another white sack of candy was next to the one with orange slices. I opened the sack and took a whiff. Smelled like chocolate covered vanilla with cherries inside. Didn't take one - wasn't allowed to - not after brushin' my teeth and never this late.

Sunday on the farm is a day for rest, but there were still chores to do. Grandfather woke me early. After we watered the horses and turned them loose to graze - we walked to the east pasture. Pumped a metal water trough to the top for the beef cattle he had pastured there. After breakfast he brought out our fishin' poles. We walked down the lane and across River Road to the Scioto River. Fished along the bank until it was time for dinner at noon. Caught a mess of sunfish and two large carp, but we threw 'em back in.

Didn't go to Church. Grandfather and Grandmother Ropp had a fallin' out with the Preacher a few years back - so we didn't go. Wouldn't say why and I knew enough not to ask. All Grandfather would say was, "I can speak to the Lord well enough without that Preacher's interference." Afternoon - he rested in his high backed cane rockin' chair - listenin' to music on the radio. Grandmother was busy makin' fillin' for cherry and blueberry pies. She fired up hre Cast-iron range early in the afternoon and we had roast pork and potatoes for supper. Roast pork gravy is pure heaven. It would make a candy lover dare to miss desert.

After supper - I hightailed it upstairs to the attic and picked up my book. The boy hero was tryin' out for Yale's football team. He ran through everyone - without gettin' tackled - so they were going to make him a halfback. Yale played single wing offense - runnin' football. Quarterback called signals and blocked. Center hiked the ball directly to the runner. Fullback ran up the middle - right halfback ran left - left halfback ran right and everyone else blocked. When this book was written - at the turn of the century - football was closer to a rugby scrum. No helmets or pads. Football was a tough game for strong men. Halfbacks were heroes and all eleven men played both ways - not a game for sissies. Any boy worth his salt wanted to be a halfback. My Yale hero played safety on defense.

Grandfather called up the stairs, "Come down - Johnny. *I Love a Mystery* is on in a minute." I laid my book down and ran downstairs - two at a time. Jack - Doc and Reggie were climbin' a set of golden stairs far - far away in Asia. A climb fraught with danger and pitfalls. *Valse Triest* - echoed from our RCA Victor radio console - announcin' the beginnin' of another episode - sendin' shivers up my spine. Jack - Doc and Reggie were climbin' a golden staircase - high up in the

mountains near Tibet. Had to be fifty miles long. Tonight made the ninth week of climbin' and they were only halfway to the top. It was slow because of the spears and rocks thrown at 'em along the way by things not human - all covered with long white hair. Wondered, "Was Old Ned's *Big Hairy Red Thing* covered with long white hair?" *Valse Triest* and the announcer askin' us to tune in next week to another excitin' episode signaled the end of the show.

I ran back upstairs and picked up my book. The Yale halfback and his football teammates were goin' to get even with the Harvard bullies when they returned to New Haven. Got to the part where the whole team was singin' about poor little lambs goin' astray when Grandmother tapped me on my shoulder. She pointed downstairs, "If you're going to help thresh wheat tomorrow - you need your rest." I set my book down - markin' the page, "What time is it?" "Time for a young man who listens to too much radio to go to bed." "Why do they play classical music to introduce a radio program?" "Ask your Grandfather. He's the one who wastes his time listenin' to radio - night and day."

When I went downstairs to wash up - Grandfather Ropp was at the kitchen table drinkin' a glass of milk. He poured me a glass, "Understand your Grandmother says I spend too much time listening to radio. When you spend all day outside working - horses don't provide much entertainment. Radio gives me an opportunity to find out what's going on in the world. And it brings vaudeville right into our home. And it's all free." "But - why do they use the same theme music over and over to introduce programs?" "Reminds us to stay tuned in and tells us what program is going to be on the air. Music is an attraction - like a drummer in a medicine show." "But - why do they use classical music?" "Fits the program's theme. Jack Benny uses *Love in Bloom*. Amos and Andy - *The*

*Perfect Song* and the Lone Ranger has *William Tell*." "I see - *William Tell* is the Lone Ranger. When the orchestra plays that music - I see horses gallop and wagons rollin' in my mind." "There's one other reason they use classical music." "What's that?" "It's free." Grandmother interrupted, "Time to go to bed - young man. That's enough talk about radio. You didn't wash behind your ears."

Grandmother led me to the sink - pumped fresh water into a pan from the cistern and rubbed soap into a wash cloth, "Your Grandfather didn't tell you the most important thing about radio." I flinched when she scrubbed real hard behind both ears. She stayed after me, "Listening to too much radio will make your mind go slow and if you're not careful - it'll stop and you won't be able to think at all." She laughed at what she said and told me, "Now get up to bed." I wasn't sure if radio was really that bad for me. Grandfather Ropp said she worried about Father readin' too many dime novels. Said he'd lose his eyesight. With hours of radio to listen too and adventure books to read - I knew I was livin' in the best of times. Wasn't any war - least not here. 'Course those Germans were always fightin' someone.

I opened the bedroom window. Farm crickets were busy callin' to one another. Wouldn't keep me awake. In the mornin' I'd hear my favorite sound - the cooin' of mournin' doves. Grandfather's farm stretched all the way down to River Road. Columbus took land on the other side of the road when they built O'shaughnessey dam. So - we were on the outer limits of my favorite bird. I could hardly wait for tomorrow to come. Last year I was too small to help thresh wheat. Now I was big enough to ride on the wagon and handle a pitchfork. Crickets seemed to be shoutin' at each other. I tossed and turned and tossed some more. I was too excited to fall asleep.

Waited until my Grandparents closed the door to their bedroom. When I thought they were asleep - I slipped out of bed and tiptoed across to the attic and eased the door open - slowly and turned the light on. Closed the door behind me and opened my Yale book. Had to find out how my hero was goin' to get even. The book was just getting excitin' when I heard the door behind me open. Grandmother tapped me on the shoulder, "Young man - you're just like your Father. He used to sneak in here and read after we were in bed. Had to use a kerosene lantern back then. What's the name of the book you're reading." "The one about the Yale football hero." "That's the book that convinced him to leave the farm - go off to college and become a football coach. I'll tell you the same thing I told your Father when I caught him. Off to bed or I'll tan your hide - good." "Yes Ma'am."

Grandmother's voice was sweeter than the coo of mourning doves next mornin', "Johnny - wake up." I opened my eyes. "Better get dressed if you want to help your Grandfather with chores. Threshing machine will be here in an hour." I was out of bed and dressed in in a minute. Almost tripped over my shoelaces boundin' down stairs. Grandmother had eggs - bacon and pancakes waitin' for me on the kitchen table. Last spring her maple syrup was so pure it hurt the back of my mouth. Today's poured easier and tasted better. She looked up as I took a bite, "I added molasses. Had to stretch the syrup - so it'll last until sap is running next spring." "I don't mind. Like it better this way. Doesn't soak into my pancakes and it's milder. Pure maple syrup soaks through to the bottom pancake." "Slow down. Your Grandfather has to milk the Jersey first. He won't water the horses without you. Dad thinks your old enough to help bring in the wheat. I'm not sure. Mind you - when you're on top the wheat wagon - don't horse around and be careful when you're handling a pitchfork." I edged toward the screen door. "And don't slam the door."

Too late I was out the door and off the porch by the time it slammed shut. I could hear Grandmother say, "Just like his Father. Won't have a farmer with this one. Doesn't have the patience - none at all." I ran to the barn and pushed the doors open. Spot was sittin' next to Grandfather - lickin' his lips - watchin' him as he milked. Every once in a while - a stream of milk would come his way. Now about Spot - he was a frustrated sheep dog without sheep to herd. So he practiced herdin' Grandfather's cows. Cows would have none of it. Mind you - they tolerated him, but every once in awhile they'd get agitated and send a kick in his direction - or try to boost him with their horns. Spot was lucky he was agile. He had a lot of practice - jumpin' away from flyin' hooves. He barked at me and came runnin' over with his tail waggin' in circles.

Grandfather hung his three leg milkin' stool on the wall and handed me the pail, "Carry it to the kitchen. I'll wait for you to help me lead horses to water. You can harness Sandy and Clyde to the cutter bar." The milk pail was a little over half full. Grandfather's Jersey was about to dry up. Grandmother took the pail and poured it into a gallon milk can. Cleaned the pail with cold water - so the milk wouldn't stick. I carried it back to the barn and hung it inside the door. Grandfather was waitin' at the double door to the horse stalls - Sandy and Clyde's leads in his hands - ready to go, "Take their leads and water them while I get the harness ready."

I led - or rather they led me to the water trough. I stood to one side while they drank their fill. Clyde was as docile as could be. Sandy - who still thought he was a colt was frisky as a newborn. Boosted me in the rear twice with his nose - as I led them to the shed where the cutter bar was waitin'. Grandfather took their leads, "Better watch. They listen to me." I stood aside. Sandy and Clyde were eighteen

hands tall - huge Clydesdales. Took a real gee-hawer to handle these giants. Grandfather was the last of the gee-hawers in these parts. Now there I go again - most folks don't know what gee-haw means. Gee tells a horse to go right and haw - to the left. Giddy-up - with clickin' sounds is the command to go and whoa means stop. When your horses were treated right and well trained - didn't have to tug on the reins or use a whip. After awhile - horses knew as much about farmin' as farmers. I was too small to command a team of horses - or drive a tractor. Only things I was allowed to do was lift - haul and pump. Had to be content with tossin' sheaves of wheat from a wagon into the maw of a threshin' machine. Grandfather tested the harness to make sure Sandy and Clyde were comfortable. He sat on the cutter bar seat, "Think you're old enough to go to the east pasture and fill the water tank?" "Can Spot go along?" "Couldn't hold him back. Wheat's drying. Better get to cutting or we'll have a lot of folks standing around waiting."

Spot ran by my side with one eye lookin' back - tryin' to follow Grandfather. He wasn't keen about trottin' behind a cutter bar. Teeth and blades were razor sharp. If they weren't - it'd knock down more wheat than cut. I took off runnin'. Spot flew by me like I was standin' still. He was waitin' by the tank when I pulled up outa' breath. Cows had drunk the tank near halfway down. Had to alternate my arms as I pumped. Took over thirty minutes to fill it almost to the top. My arms were sore and I didn't feel like runnin' on the way back, but Spot egged me on. He'd found a sure loser and didn't want to let go. I would have none of it. I took my time walkin' back. Grass was still wet with dew. Have to dry before threshin' would commence.

As we turned the lane on our way back to the barn - Spot let out a bark and took off runnin'. The giant threshin' machine was comin' up the lane - steam comin' out its boiler



- black smoke billowin' from the stack and whistle blowin'. Neighbors were arrivin' from every which way on tractors - cutter bars - rakes and wagons. Our wheat harvest was about to commence. I was assigned to a fancy red wagon - one with balloon tires - pulled by a small Ford tractor driven by the neighbor's boy. Had a hay loader hooked on back to bring up wheat from the windrows. My job was to move the wheat to the front and make sure it was distributed evenly.

Wasn't hard work - movin' wheat around a wagon with a pitchfork. Ben - the neighbors boy was an expert. Drove slow so we wouldn't leave any wheat layin' on the ground. He drove to the threshin' machine with a full load, but we had to wait our turn. There were six wagons ahead of us. When he pulled into the second slot - I couldn't believe my eyes. One Eyed Jack and German Jerry were shovelin' coal into the boiler and Old Ned Smith was adjustin' the control valves. I jumped down - placin' the tractor between me and Old Ned. Ben asked, "Why'd you jump down? We unload in a minute or two." I whispered, "I'm hidin' from those moonshiners. Why are they tendin' boiler?" "Captain that runs the thresher hires 'em when he brings his machine north. No knows a boiler better than a moonshiner - except maybe a steamboat or railroad engineer."

When it was our turn to unload - I kept my back to 'em so they wouldn't recognize me. But - I just had to take a peek now and then. Threshin' machine is a modern mechanical marvel. Wheat comes out one end and straw the other. Steam hissin' - black smoke risin' - gears clankin' - men cussin' - whistle blowin' - it was like a Fourth of July celebration on Grandfather Ropp's farm. Ben and me used our pitchforks to unload wheat into the maw of the machine. Got the hang of it in a few minutes, but I could only move half as much as Ben. He was big and strong - like a human ox. When we finished unloadin' our third wagon - the dinner bell rang.

Ben didn't waste time drivin' up to the tables under the walnut trees in Grandfather's front yard. Put his tractor in high gear and darn near bounced me off the wagon. We were the first of thirty - or so farm hands to arrive. I ducked inside the house and waited until I could see One Eyed Jack - German Jerry and Old Ned. They were the last to arrive. Had to bank the boiler fire before they could leave. Ladies were busy settin' food out on the tables. Everyone sat down and took what they wanted - passin' plates around - country style. When the moonshiners looked like they were more interested in food than me - I sat down - as far away from 'em as I could get.

I loaded my plate with fried chicken - ham - hot biscuits - mashed potatoes and gravy. Washed it all down with hot coffee and lemonade made from real lemons and sugar. When Grandmother had her back turned - I snuck a mug of coffee from the thresher pot. Made me feel real grownup, but I didn't want to get caught. Grandmother said coffee would stunt my growth. Wasn't sure if it would - so I filled my graniteware mug half full of coffee and half full of milk and topped it off with sugar.

I was all by myself at the end of the table - on my second slice of cherry pie when I smelled somethin' - like a touch of sulfur mixed in with a whole load of manure. Looked up into Old Ned's grinnin' face - uglier than the devil with only one front tooth and tobacco juice drippin' down on his chin from the corner of his mouth. He put his face so close to mine - I was sure my pie crust would turn black. Old Ned grabbed the back of my neck and spoke in a tone of voice half growl - half mean, "I know where you live. You say one word about me lockin' you and Will up in my shed and I'll slice you into little pieces and feed you to *The Big Hairy Red Thing.*" Ned was gone before I could talk back - which was probably just as well. All I could do was stutter.

Old Ned didn't have to worry about me sayin' anything. I'd be in trouble at home if I did. I looked around to see if anyone noticed. Ben was stokin' food away - Grandmother was busy socializin' with the other ladies and Grandfather was waterin' his horses. I decided right there and then - it wouldn't do any good to worry about Old Ned. He couldn't get to me while I was stayin' at Grandfather Ropp's farm. If Old Ned had any smarts - he'd leave well enough alone. Now that was the error of my thinkin'. Old Ned never used his smarts for any, but an evil purpose. I had one out. Come next Sunday - Father was drivin' me back to Osborn.

Made six more trips - carrying wheat to the threshin' machine before we finished. Old Ned knew where I was - so I stopped tryin' to hide. Seemed like he was working himself into a real lather each time we unloaded. Face kept gettin' redder and eyes - squinty mean - real evil like. Old Ned was about to burst - he was so full of hatred. Must have figured out it was Will and me who disabled his flatbed Ford truck. As drunk as he and his gang were - they probably had to spend the night sleepin' it off on the back of their truck in the whiskey roadhouse parking lot.

I mentioned my run-in with Old Ned and his gang to Ben, but didn't tell him the whole story. Said they ran after us at the Bellpoint general store. Told him how we got even by removin' the distributor cap from Ned's flatbed truck. Ben laughed, "Serves 'em right for tryin' to mess with you and Will." He thought a minute - chewin' on a straw of wheat, "'Course that sorry lot has you and Will 'tween the rock and the hard place." "Old Ned is the first person I ever met who seems to get enjoyment from tormentin' other folks." "Ned's known for that. Fat's in the fire for you and Will. He'll keep comin' after you forever - unless someone else gets in his way. Best you can hope for is he'll find someone else to hate and get tired of tormentin' you. If I were you - I'd

stay out of his way." "Won't be hard. I'm goin' back home this weekend." "Don't count on it. Old Ned visits the Dayton area every now and then. Told me he has relatives down there." Ben wasn't much help. Now I had another whole set of worries. Threshin' machine pulled up stakes and was on its way to the next farm before sunset. Old Ned and his gang followed after it in their flatbed Ford truck. Guess he knew it would be our turn to help at the neighbors farm in the mornin'.

I tried to forget about Old Ned, but it wasn't easy. Doin' chores was a diversion. Helped Grandfather bed down two very tired horses. Ground six ears of corn for a treat. Had to come in from the side of their stalls and fill the treat box. Sandy's favorite trick was to pin me to the side of his stall - when I came inside it to feed him or clean out the straw. He was a real gentleman this evenin'. Even nuzzled me with his nose and let me pat his head. Didn't even try to step on my foot.

Spot was worn to a frazzle - from barkin' at all the strangers and that monster of a threshin' machine. He'd done his best to protect us. Couldn't get him to help me with the chores. Didn't even try to herd our cows. Spot was worn out and now that the commotion was over - he curled up on the back porch and went to sleep. I left him alone - didn't even try to wake him for supper. Grandmother served leftovers from thresher dinner for supper. Stuffed myself with cold chicken - mashed potatoes and gravy. Had to thank the Lord for answerin' my prayers. Didn't have to eat anything green. After dinner - Grandfather Ropp turned the radio on to his favorite comedian - Joe Penner - an old vaudevillian who carried a duck under his arm. His favorite punch line was, "Wanna' buy a duck?" Grandfather doubled over in laughter every time Joe Penner said this line. I listened and smiled, but didn't understand.

While Grandfather laughed and laughed at Joe Penner's radio vaudeville act - I wandered upstairs to the attic and opened my book. I sat on the top step inside the attic and read two pages. Had to rest my eyes - so I leaned back against the door sill and closed 'em. Grandmother's voice was the next thing I heard, "Wake up - young man. Let me have a look at those hands. My-oh-my - just look at those blisters. That's the last of threshing for you. Dad should have given you a pair of gloves." "I'll be fine by tomorrow mornin'." "And better the next day if you rest them. Come along with me to the kitchen. I have salve that might help." I followed her downstairs to the kitchen. Her salve cooled the blisters all right. Grandmother knew best. Couldn't handle a pitchfork with sore hands. She wasn't finished, "Take your shirt off and I'll give you a good scrub. You still have wheat chaff behind your ears. Can't have you going to bed this way." I'd done a man's work all day long, but now I was a boy again. If bein' a man meant hard work - blisters and a whole lot of worry - given a choice - life was a lot more fun bein' a boy.

I woke to the aroma of cherry pie - fresh from the oven. While I slept in - Grandmother was up - long before the crack of dawn. She played her Cast-iron range like a violin - one baked masterpiece after another. I tried to hide it - but she noticed my breakfast was two pieces of hot cherry pie and a glass of fresh cold milk. Grandmother didn't say a word - - just smiled. When she saw the shape my hands were in - out came the salve. She rubbe 'it in - along with a piece of advice, "You'll have to stay home today. I don't want you frittering away your time listening to radio. Read a book or take Spot for a walk. You can ride with me to the neighbors while I deliver pies and help prepare the tables for thresher dinner." "If it's all right with you - I'd just as soon hang around here. Ben and the other men will make fun of me - doin' ladies work."

I wasn't interested in listenin' to daytime radio - not at all. I couldn't stand the slow pace of the soap operas. Give me a *Jack Armstrong* or *Captain Midnight* adventure anytime, but not soap operas. Talk about repetition. Just thinkin' about listenin' to one hurt my brain. Almost made it out the door, but Grandmother hadn't finished her lecture, "I'll talk to your Mother about your listening to too much radio. Isn't right for a boy to fritter away his time like that. Can you imagine how much damage listening to nonsense will do to your mind? Now - get to the sink and brush your teeth before you run outdoors to play."

Barely made it to the barn in time to carry the milk pail back to the kitchen. Spot ran alongside - jumpin' up on me - tryin to get my attention. He was full of it. Got enough sleep last night to last him 'till noon. Got back to the horse stalls just in time to take the leads. Sandy and Clyde nosed my pockets for shelled corn, but I didn't have any. Made a mental note to shell some this evenin'. Sandy and Clyde could use a treat when they returned home from threshin' at the neighbors. After they drank their fill - I helped hitch them to the wagon. They were goin' to pull a wagon with sacks full of threshed wheat today. Grandfather finally had to give in. One team of horses couldn't pull a cutter bar - or a rake fast enough to keep up with a modern threshin' machine.

Grandfather released the hand brake on his wagon, "I'll have two spoiled horses on my hands after you return home. Take Spot with you to the east pasture and fill the water tank. It'll keep him from following me. Fool dog thinks he can herd cars on the highway. You'll find a pair of gloves hanging inside the equipment shed on the wall to protect your hands. Next time - remember to use them when you're doing farm work. City hands aren't used handling. a pitch fork." "I'd sure like to go with you. Will you change your mind?"

"Mom would never forgive me. Stick around the house and rest those hands." "Yes - Sir." "Get a move on or Spot will try to follow me." I patted Spot on the head, "Come on - Spot. You've got cows to herd in the east pasture."

I took off runnin', "Race you to the water tank." He flew by me with ears back and tail flyin' - runnin' ahead of me up the lane. When I turned the corner - Spot sat waitin' for me - tail waggin' - scratching behind one ear with his hind leg. He was barely out of breath, "Should've known better than race a Border collie." I scratched the ear that itched and jogged on. This time he showed pity. Stayed at my side - matchin' me - stride for stride. Pumped the tank almost full. Gloves helped a bit, but my hands were still sore. Spot edged out into the pasture. I hollered at him, "Stay away from those cows. We're not bringin' 'em home. Come along - we're done here." We both stopped at the turn and rested. I shaded my eyes and looked for smoke on the horizon and Spot sniffed - his nose in the air. Towards the south - black smoke billowed straight up into the mornin' sky. We heard the steam whistle and broke into a trot, but wasn't any use. We were too late. Grandfather's wagon was long gone. I stopped at the equipment shed and hung up my work gloves. Spot kept right on goin'. Laid down beside the two stone pillars guardin' the lane. He stretched out on his stomach - nose flat to the ground - waitin' for Grandfather to return.

I wandered over to the swing hangin' from a limb on the big walnut tree in the middle of the side yard. Rope was thick enough to haul a boat out of water and wooden seat had been worn into a comfortable shape when Father was a boy. At the top of my forward swing - I could look out on the Scioto River. I wasn't goin' anywhere near it - not after my run-in with Old Ned Smith and his gang. Swingin' was fun - even if it is kind-a sissy like. Grandmother opened the kitchen

screen door carryin' an empty egg basket, "Johnny - see if there are any eggs about." I waited until the swing stopped and jumped off, "Yes Ma'am." "With all the baking I've been doing - I have less than a dozen." I made a beeline straight to the hen house. With threshin' and all its commotion - chickens stayed away from the sheds and barn. Found almost two dozen eggs in their nests. Threshin' machine whistle must have scared eggs right out of 'em. Grandmother was pleased, "That's much more than I expected. Stay close to the house. I'll be leaving in an hour."

I wandered out to the barn and climbed up the ladder to the front haymow. Jumped off the crossbeam into the hay a dozen times, but it wasn't long before I lost interest. Then I climbed halfway up the windmill tower to see how far I could see. I looked south and saw black smoke, but couldn't see far enough to locate the threshin' machine. Metal rungs hurt the bottoms of my feet - so I climbed down and dipped my feet in the water tank. It was deep enough to bob in, but way too cold for my likin'. Climbed the steps to the back porch - two at a time. Grandmother was busy puttin' pies in baskets - so I climbed the stairs to the attic and opened my Yale book. At first it had been a fast read, but now it was beginnin' to drag a bit.

Couple of pages more - football season was in full swing in New Haven. That got my attention. My Yale halfback was scorin' touchdown after touchdown - savin' game after game. I heard, "Johnny" and set the book down. "Yes Ma'am?" "I'll be leaving for the neighbors in a minute. Will you help me carry baskets to the car?" "Yes Ma'am. If you don't mind - I'll stay here with Spot. The other boys will give me all kinds of teasin' for gettin' blisters on my hands." "All right, but stay around the house. And stay away from the river - not even to fish from the bank." I carried three baskets to the trunk of the Studebaker coupe.



Grandfather's Studebaker was so streamlined it looked like a bullet. Didn't have a back seat or a rumble seat. Though the trunk had lots of room in it. Grandfather Ropp wouldn't have any car, but a Studebaker. Even his wagons and sleigh were made by Studebaker - long before the Indiana car company began building automobiles. Grandfather's tractor would have been a Studebaker if they made 'em. Grandmother waved as she drove between the stone pillars without scrapin' either side. Grandfather would have been proud of her. Spot looked up as she drove away, but didn't bark or move. He put his nose back to the ground - waitin'. I called to him, but Spot wouldn't budge.

I went back inside - climbed the stairs and picked up my book. Didn't feel right readin' inside the house in daylight - so I took it outside and leaned up against the Walnut tree. Finished two chapters and was workin' on the next one when I heard the rumblin' of an engine I'd heard before. Got louder - sendin' chills up my spine. Had to be Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck comin' up River Road. Noise grew louder and louder after Old Ned's flatbed turned into our lane. I ran for the barn and hid behind the barn doors. Peeked out through a knothole. Ned's truck roared to a slidin' stop on our gravel. Out pops Old Ned - lookin' in the direction of our farmhouse. Ned strutted around his truck - meaner than a devil's helper and uglier than a mud fence. I figured he must have sneaked away while everyone else was sittin' down to thresher dinner. Spot was up on his toes - standin' guard between Old Ned and our farmhouse. Never saw a Border collie act like that - growlin' a growl lower than the rumblin' noise of Old Ned's truck. Made hair stand up on the back of my neck. Spot acted like he'd just as soon die as let Old Ned Smith get past him. Ned musta' known it. He turned around and looked toward the barn. When he began to walk in my direction - I hightailed it up the ladder - climbin' into the front haymow.

Next thing I heard was Old Ned shout, "I know you're here - Johnny Ropp. You left your book by the tree. You can run, but you can't hide from me! When I get hold of you - I'm gonna' feed you to *The Big Hairy Red Thing.*" I hopped across the hay toward the hole in the wall - leadin' to the back haymow. I could hear Old Ned huffin' and puffin' as he climbed the front haymow ladder, "I'm going to stick a fork in you and see if you're done - Johnny Ropp. No way you can escape me." I ducked through the openin' to the back haymow and didn't look back. The only way out was the door over the bull's pen. Ned was between me and the way I came in and the door openin at the top of the barn for the hay fork was too high for me to reach. My mind was racin' through half-a dozen ways to escape - comin' up empty. Then I thought, "What would my hero - Tom Mix - the world's greatest cowboy do? He'd stand up and fight for what's right. That's what Tom would do" Tom Might, but not me. I ran over the hay and jumped down to the floor - where the door opened over the bull's pen. I dug a hidin' place into the hay and covered the entrance over. Ned was jumpin' up and down all over the front haymow - makin' more noise than a herd of elephants. I could hear him grunt as he pushed his pitchfork into the hay - tryin' to impale me. Only folks I knew that used a pitchfork were farmers and devils and Ned wasn't a farmer. I knew I was in for it.

Ned came through the openin' to the back haymow - landin' so hard the hay moved. He must have lost his balance when he tried to stand up. Rolled off the hay and bounced on the floor in front of me. I learned a few new cuss words when he pulled himself up and looked out the hay door. Ned Smith had his back to me with a pitchfork in his hand. If I didn't come up with somethin' quick - I knew I'd be a goner'. Couldn't take a chance - not with him wieldin' that pitchfork like the devil with so little hay protectin' me. Then it came to me outa' the book about the Yale football player -

block and tackle! I flew outa' the hay real low like and hit Old Ned in the back with a runnin' block. Just like the Yale quarterback did who blocked for my halfback in the Princeton game. Pitchfork and a scream were all that was left in the haymow door where Ned once stood.

I rolled over and grabbed the handle of the pitchfork before the fork part came down on top of me. Edged over to the hay door and peeked down. Old Ned must have fallen ten feet. He was lyin' face down - on top of the gate guardin' our Durham bull's pen. He wasn't movin', "Fall either killed Old Ned - or knocked the breath out-a him." I peered down - all puffed up - mighty proud of myself. Ned's bones looked intact. Least none of 'em were stickin' out. Just then - Old Ned moaned and rolled off the gate - fallin' into our bull's pen. I got ready to run, "Old Ned Smith isn't dead - he was just knocked silly by the fall." Our Durham bull wandered over and looked down. Licked Ned in the face with his tongue and snorted, "Must of got a taste of chewin' tobacco up his nose. Probably wondered if Old Ned is good to eat - or somethin' to stick his horns into." I was bettin' on a-gorin', "Old Ned smells like sulfur and manure on a normal day - must be fierce now."

My brain finally got into gear, but it wasn't comin' up with any answers, "What should I do now? If I help him - Ned would just as soon kill me as look at me. Besides - I was the one who pushed him out the door." Fate - or luck - or an act of God took over. Old Ned moaned and came too - lookin' up at the ring in our bull's nose. Ned floated up out-a there like Harry Houdini. He cleared the top board of the gate without touching anythin', but air - landin' in the manure pile on the other side - splat on the middle of his stomach. Ned's feet didn't touch the ground more than six or seven times as he made tracks out of our barnyard and jumped over the water tank gate. I was standin' up - full of myself

- showin' no brains at all - lookin' out of the hay door laughin' as Old Ned floated over the top of our water tank gate like it wasn't there. I hopped across the hay to get a better view from the front haymow.

Peeked out through a knothole and saw Old Ned limpin' toward his flatbed - tryin' to brush off mud - cow pies and wet manure. He got some of it off - but the cow pies on his back and wet manure on his front - stuck to him like goo. Ned didn't even notice that Spot had clamped his teeth onto his ankle. Not until he tried to lift his foot up to the runnin' board of his truck. Ned should've known who he was messin' with. Spot's the smartest Border collie alive. When he tried to kick Spot with his other foot - Spot let loose and dodged. Ned's foot missed and he went up in the air - fallin' ass over teakettle into the gravel. Spot made a run at Ned and bit him on the rear end and dodged away before Ned could get at him again. Then he backed off - growlin'. Spot knew when to quit.

Now that was a sight I hope I never see again - Old Ned uncoilin' like a copperhead snake - strikin' out at Spot. Spot had too much practice dodgin' cows hooves to let anyone like Ned come close. Old Ned made a feint like he was comin' back to the barn, but Spot stood his ground growlin' - a deep low rumble - one that his wolf ancestors would be proud of. Old Ned kicked some gravel at Spot and jumped for his runnin' board. Spot came close, but not too close - a growlin' and a-dodgin'.

Old Ned had to give up - he'd met his match. He climbed in and started his flatbed - turned it around and leaned out the window - raisin' his fist at the barn. With a voice right out of hell - he shouted, "You haven't heard the last of me - Johnny Ropp! I'm gonna' send *The Big Hairy Red Thing* after you. Won't be nothin', but hair and bones left when

he's finished." Ned gunned his truck's engine - took off spinnin' gravel - bangin' against both pillars - flyin' down the lane. Spot followed, but stopped at the pillars - laid down - nose flat to the ground - nonchalant - like this type of tussle happened every day.

I waited until I could no longer hear the sound of Ned's flatbed before climbin' down from the haymow. Shook the hay out of my clothes and hair. Checked my body over. I was none the worse for wear, "Don't know what got into Old Ned Smith. Coming after me made no sense at all. Pride must be a terrible weight to carry. I'd have to stay alert from now on. If Ned was mad at me before - after today he'd be beside himself." I washed my face off at the water tank. Looked at my hands - I was shakin'. Might not have bothered Spot, but Ned scared the dickens outa' me. Picked up my book under the walnut tree and headed for the back porch. Better to read than dwell on the what ifs. I still couldn't figure out what Ned was going to do if he caught me.

Stuck my nose in the book. The Harvard bullies were comin' to New Haven again - lookin' for my Yale hero - just like Old Ned was chasin' after me. He used his head - just like I did and got the best of four Harvards. They were full of dust and dirt when he finished with 'em. Still couldn't figure out why Yale men were heroes and Harvard men were bullies. Sort of like they flipped a coin and Harvard lost. Or - it could be that Harvard was all business and slack on books. Mother said Harvard Press wouldn't publish anything that didn't look up a Cambridge navel. Not sure what she meant by that, but she must know what she was talkin' about - she was a librarian. Maybe they didn't teach literature at Harvard or maybe Harvards didn't know how to write books with stories in them - like a good boy's novel. A school that takes pride in producin' lawyers and accountants had to be a devil's playground.

Yale beat Harvard - my football hero got the girl and I finished the last chapter before Grandmother came home. I ran outside and helped her bring in baskets - all empty save one with three pies and enough leftovers for supper. She was exhausted, "How did your day go - Johnny?" I knew better than to mention my tussle with Ned Smith, "Nothin' special. Spot's waitin' for Grandfather. Won't budge - so I finished the Yale football book." "Why don't you find another one to read. Your Father has an attic full. Much better than wasting your time listening to radio." "Yes Ma'am." I had my eye on another one - a book about the German Kaiser. Its cover showed two boys my age tweaking his nose. Brought it downstairs to read in the kitchen. Grandmother had a glass of milk and a slice of cherry pie waitin'. "Johnny - you missed quite a show. Should have come along with me. A horrible looking old man - the one who runs the boiler on the threshing machine returned after the noon meal with his clothes all covered with manure. Why - he smelled just like our barnyard. He looked like he had been in a fight with the devil and lost. Thresher Captain sent him off and his friends went with him. Neighbors pitched in to help run the boiler. Wouldn't want to eat next to an ugly - one toothed man like him. Why - he smelled terrible. We're having leftovers for supper tonight."

Didn't have to keep an eye out for Grandfather. Spot would let us know when he was on his way home. And he did - made a real commotion - barking - tail waggin' in circles - jumpin' for joy. Grandmother walked out on the back porch - wipin' her hands on the apron. I followed - careful not to slam the door. Grandfather gave us a wave as he drove his wagon through the two stone pillars. Grandmother called out, "You're later than last year. What happened?" Neighbor had a few more acres of wheat than we did. And we had to help get the threshing machine ready to move on. Did you hear about Ned Smith and his gang?" "Yes - while we were cleaning

dishes Mr. Smith wanted to be fed. Did he ever stink!" "How did Johnny get along all by himself?" "Finished one of his Father's dime novels and began another one. He's just like his Father. Don't believe we'll have a farmer when he grows up. We're having leftovers for supper. Be ready in an hour." Grandfather set the brake and climbed down from the wagon, "Hold the reins - Johnny - while I put the harness away. Don't hold them back if they head for the water tank. They've done a full day's work." Didn't have much choice. When two giant Clydesdales decide they're thirsty - an eighty pound boy can't hold 'em back. After they drank their fill - I had a treat for them. Sandy nosed one pocket and Clyde the other until I gave them each an apple. Grandfather led them back to their stalls, "Shell some corn - Johnny. My boys deserve more than just an apple. They hauled as much as any tractor there. Mighty proud of my Clydesdales."

Grandmother made leftovers into as good a meal as I've ever had. At supper - Grandfather couldn't get over the way Ned Smith looked and smelled. "You should have seen him - Mom." "I did - when he asked to be fed." Didn't stop Grandfather, "He was all covered with mud and manure. Looked like someone hit him in the stomach with a two-by-four. Had to walk bent over and his pants were torn at the cuffs and rear end. Passed out while he was adjusting the boiler. Captain fired him on the spot and his friends left with. Didn't miss a one of them, but it did take extra effort to clean up after the threshing was done. Old Ned smelled bad enough to make birds fall out of the sky. Worse than our barnyard on a hot summer day." "Is he the one that makes moonshine on the river near Dublin?" "Believe he does. Have a hard time selling it - the way he smelled."

After all the excitement - the rest of the week was pretty tame. I shoveled wheat around the granary to help it dry. If we didn't - it'd get moldy and wouldn't be fit to

make bread out of. Grandfather filled his spreader with manure from the barnyard until most of the manure was gone. Spread it over the wheat fields and pasture. He'd grow hay on the wheat fields next year. Did it ever smell. I wasn't close enough to smell Old Ned after he landed on the gate, but if he smelled like our wheat fields - vultures would fall out of the sky. Had to leave on Sunday. Father - Mother and my two sisters drove up Saturday. The odor of manure must have gotten to them - too. We left for Osborn right after Sunday dinner.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Wear gloves when you're doin' farm work.
3. All Yale men are pure of heart.
4. All Harvard men are bullies - or lawyers.
5. Any Ohio farm boy can whip the Kaiser.

Trouble was - I knew I couldn't tangle with the Kaiser - not unless we had another war. I didn't know anyone from Yale - or Harvard and I'd never been to Germany. Why would anyone want to go to an inferior school when Ohio had more colleges and universities than any other State. And why would anyone want to go to Germany when Michigan was just north of our border. Folks get so cold up there - they grow fur. Couldn't be a better school anywhere than Ohio State - and it wasn't too far down the road from Grandfather's farm. Had it in my mind that the Kaiser must have gone to Harvard - or was livin' up in Michigan - him bein' so mean and such a big bully - too.



### 3

Goin' from a Bellpoint farm to the village of Osborn isn't just a fifty mile drive over flat farmlands of central Ohio. It is a trip in time - from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Only problem was - my view of the world was marred by the location - squeezed between two sisters in the back seat of my Father's four door Chrysler Airflow sedan. So I was limited to imagination. We were travelin' from an echo of Hannibal in Missouri to a replica of Andy Hardy's movie set. But my real world view was mostly of tree tops and clouds. When I was younger - I'd lay on the back ledge and watch as the world passed by. Now - my world was a scene reminiscence of looking upward from the bottom of a milk pail - all handle and sky.

First town of any size was Plain City. I could tell we were gettin' close by the size of treetops. Top branches grew together alongside the highway when we drove past Plain City's fairgrounds. Next came houses with turrets - all covered with Victorian gingerbread. Plain City was plain all right and clean as a whistle. It's the type of town farmers retired too when their sons took over the farms. Must have gotten its name from the Amish who settled southeast of town. Amish - all dressed in black and gray were out in force today - horse drawn buggies in front of their Churches. Talk about serious worship - they'd spend all day Sunday and Sunday evenin' in church.

On the south side of town is the Plain City dairy - Sellin' Amish cured meat and cheeses. Father purchased a two pound slice of Swiss cheese - cut right off a large wheel -

so sharp - if you chewed too much too soon - it'd cut right through the roof of your mouth - like paper cuts finger. Father said, "Amish cheese is sharp because Amish farmers age great wheels of it under their barnyard manure piles." Mother added, "And they seal the wheels air tight in paraffin before they bury it." With nothin' to do but look up at clouds - I asked, "Why do they bury their cheese under manure piles?" Father took chemistry in college, "Manure acts like a compost pile. Manure generates heat. That helps the cheese ferment and cure. The longer the cheese ferments - the sharper the cheese." Mother added, "Don't worry - the manure doesn't seep in and contaminate the cheese." After that lecture - I was afraid to ask about the summer sausage hangin' above the meat case.

I was glad we stopped. Sittin' still for thirty minutes can be wearin'. Back on the road - my sisters kept busy lookin' for white horses to make a wish on. I didn't play that game anymore. Not much fun when you can't win because your view is restricted. I knew we were goin' to stop again. Always did - at the old general store north of Springfield. Sold the tastiest - greasiest potato chips in the whole wide world. Thick - salty and freshly cooked - when you bit into an air bubble - grease would squirt all over your face. A handful would give me a fat fix for a week. Only problem - I'd have greasy hands with no place to wipe them. I'd wait until my sisters were lookin' outside and wipe them on my pants. Drove through the outskirts of Springfield - past the Masonic Home and the hospital. Had to drive right through downtown - no way to go around it. Osborn was less than twenty miles away.

As we came over the crest of the hill by the Wabash Cement plant and our car pointed down - I could see out the front windows. On the horizon - Patterson Army Airfield - spread out as far as the eye could see. It was Sunday - not

a plane in the sky today. Osborn was over to my left - laid out like a checkerboard - north and south - east and west streets . Main feature - besides the Army air field - two cement plants. The one close to where we lived was the Southwestern. And another village - Fairfield was trapped between Osborn and the Army Airfield. Most of the older houses in Osborn were moved out of Huffman Prairie when a flood control dam was built there. Seemed a shame to move a town away from all that history. Orville and Wilbur Wright built an airfield and hanger on Huffman Prairie testin' their flyin' contraptions after they returned from Kitty Hawk. Mad River cut through Huffman prairie - like a drunk leavin' a bar - which is why it was called - mad.

Trapped - between Fairfield and The New York Central Railroad - Osborn had nowhere to grow. Slick Willy called Osborn his number one town - one school - one drugstore - one grocery store - one pool hall - one gas station - one ice cream parlor - one blacksmith - one doctor - one bar - one jail - one court and one bandstand. And it would have been perfect if it had one lawyer. Bandstand was a medium sized gazebo located in the middle of a traffic circle. School was run by Bath Township - so Fairfield didn't have to build one. High school had enough boys for a football team, but no money to buy uniforms. Merchants paid for 'em with advertisements on the jerseys - right above the numbers.

When Father parked in our driveway - I almost escaped. Mother grabbed my arm and sent me upstairs, "Need to get the farm smell off you. After you bathe - change your clothes and come on down for supper. Grandfather Ropp sent one of his sugar cured hams home with us." Maybe it was the relief - knowin' Old Ned Smith wouldn't be chasin' after me. Soaked in the tub until the water turned cold - when usually I was in and out in a minute. Mother fried grilled ham and cheese sandwiches on top her four legged gas range for supper. It

was modern and convenient, but couldn't hold a candle to the Cast-iron ranges our Grandmother's used. She cooked Father's favorite - home fried potatoes and my nemesis - a big pot of green beans. So my vacation was officially over. Knew I was home when I had to eat green things again.

Father wasn't allowed to smoke his pipe inside the house - so he sat out on the front porch swing after supper. I sat down on the front steps near him. When the time seemed right - I asked, "Remember the dime novels up in the attic?" "Your Grandmother still has them in the attic?" "Yes - I read two of 'em. Started one about Kaiser Bill and finished one about a Yale football player." "The Yale book was my favorite. How did you like it?" "Couldn't put it down. Can you tell me why the Yale boys are always heroes and Harvards always bullies?" "I asked the same question when I was your age. My parents didn't know. My guess is the author went to Yale and didn't care for those that went to Harvard. Both schools used to dominate college football, but they don't anymore." I waited while he relit his pipe. Figured now was as good as time as any to ask about Old Ned Smith.

I waited until Father's pipe made smoke, "Grandfather Mac and me fished the deep hole down below the dam. He said Dublin down the road is not a place to go. Everyone I asked in Bellpoint says it's a mean place and not to go there. How did that happen?" "Few years back - Dublin was full of shady folks - thieves - moonshiners and the like. It's on the Delaware County line and as far away from the Sheriff as anyplace in the County can get. Land there isn't worth a plug nickel. Too hilly to plow and too rocky to plant. And the folks hanging around there are not accustomed to a hard day's work. 'Bout all they're good for is chasing rocks with a stick. Mostly cutthroats and layabouts. I agree with your Grandfather. I'd give those Dublin folks a wide berth. Why did you ask?" "One of them is Old Ned Smith." "Is Ned Smith

still around? Thought he'd be in the State Pen or dead by now. How did you meet him?" "Captain fired him from the threshin' machine at the neighbor's farm. His friends quit - too. German Jerry and One Eyed Jack." "Ned's gang is a mean bunch. Don't you ever tangle with them." I almost mentioned *The Big Hairy Red Thing* Ned threatened me with, but decided I'd gone as far as I could go without causing trouble for myself. I excused myself and went inside.

After breakfast - I rode my bicycle to Slick Willy's house to see if he wanted to go fishin'. Mad River wasn't too wide and its banks were lined with trees. Plenty of shade for bass. Sort of a cross between the Scioto River and Mill Creek. Willy was sittin' on his side porch steps - poundin' a softball into his new glove - tryin' to make a pocket. I walked my bicycle next to him, "Hey Slick." "Hey Johnny - what do you want to do?" "Ride out to Mad River and go fishin'." Willy was off the ground and into his garage quicker than I could say, "Jack Robinson." Didn't know what that meant, but we all used it. Willy said it had somethin' to do with Robinson Crusoe, but you know Slick - he knows everything. Right or wrong - Willy had an answer.

We put our poles over our handlebars and rode toward Jonsey's. Willy asked, "What are we goin' to use for bait?" "Brought along mustard powder to pour down night crawler holes." "We gonna' eat 'em or fish?" "You'll see - brings worms up out of their holes in a hurry." "Catch any big ones on the Scioto River?" "Few bass, but it was too hot for 'em. Mostly sun fish and crappie." "Your Grandfather Ropp still mad at me for teasin' your bull?" "Never was. That Durham bull saved my hide. Scared off a mean one that was chasin' after me." Willy didn't look too interested - so I changed the subject, "What did you do while I was away?" Played softball at the school most days. We need a new ball. Old one wore out." "Think Jonsey wall to go fishin'?" "Can't.

Got caught stealin' peaches from a neighbor's tree. He's grounded for a week." "No one would be grounded a week for eatin' a peach." "Well - he was. You'll see."

We rode into Jonsey's driveway and found him workin' on his bicycle inside the garage. I shouted, "Hey - Jonsey. Want to ride out to Mad River and go fishin'?" "Wait until I finish tightenin' my chain. When did you get back?" "Last night. Slick says you're grounded for a week." "Nah - just the weekend. Peach didn't taste worth a dam anyway. I'm ready to rumble. Hand me my pole." About halfway to Mad River - I remembered - we didn't pack a lunch and none of us had money to buy one. Didn't matter - wasn't anyplace around to buy food anyway. Had to walk our bicycles along a windin' bramble filled path to get to Mad River. Hid our bikes when we got far enough from the road and close enough to the bank. Mad River was at its summer low, but still movin' along at a pretty good clip. Full of twists and turns - I could see how Mad River got its name.

I found an old worm can on the bank and mixed up a pinch of mustard powder with water. Now - night crawlers are easy to find, but hard to catch if you don't know how. Look for little dirt caps on the ground. Flick 'em off with your forefinger and pour a little mustard water in. Ten to twenty seconds later a night crawler would come squirming out of its hole. I repeated this ten more times until we had enough bait for today. Willy shook his head, "I'll have to remember that trick. Bass love night crawlers more'n crawdads." "We had good luck on the Scioto with crawdads." "Fish must be stupid up there in Bellpoint."

We took off our sneakers - rolled up our pants legs and waded west along the bank - lookin' for a likely place to fish. Never swam in Mad River - it ran clear - cold and fast. Jonsey said he did, but we didn't believe him. Willy

was splashin' alongside the bank - loud enough to scare fish a mile away. He looked back at Jonsey, "You're full of it. No one could swim in here and live. I've heard stories about folks fallin' into Mad River and never bein' seen again. One man fell in north of here and washed up thirty miles down stream. Mad river ain't safe to swim in." Jonsey wasn't one to buy Willy's foolishness, "Can't be that dangerous or we would have read about it in the newspaper." "Willy laughed, "When did you begin readin' newspapers." "I sell 'em at the main gate Sunday mornin'" "Patterson Army Airfield?" "Ain't two of 'em."

We waded around three more bends before we found a pool deep enough for our likin'. Across the river stood a large buckeye tree - its roots crawlin' down the bank. I tested the water, "Too deep to wade here. Plenty of shade - just right for largemouth bass to hide on a hot summer day." Bass must have gone to bottom or across on the other side of Mad River. We wet our lines, but none of us got a nibble. We all leaned back and it wasn't long before we were asleep on the bank. Willy woke us up with his hollerin', "I'm dead - Lord almighty - I'm dead! Snake crwaled up my pants leg. I can still feel it crawlin'! Lord almighty - somebody save me!" Willy was jumpin' and down on one foot tryin' to shake it loose. About that time - a black snake came flyin' out of his right pants leg and made tracks toward the water. Swam clear across the river - right on top - and didn't stop until it was high up in the buckeye tree on the other side. Snake was just as scared as Willy.

Willy didn't know the snake was out - so he was still hollerin' and jumpin' up and down like a Mexican jumpin' bean in a jar. Then it happened. Before I could tell Willy to quit jumpin' - he slipped and slid and tumbled head over heels into Mad River. Went right under. I jumped in and helped pull him up. He came up sputterin', "Where's the

snake?" "Up the buckeye tree on the other side of the river. Quit thrashin' around. I'll help you out." We climbed up the bank and sat down. Willy emptied the water out of his cuffs and turned his pockets inside out, "Don't think I've ever been so scared in my life." Jonsey was still laughing - pointin' at the water, "How deep is it?" Willy answered, "Up to my chest." Slick looked at me and I looked at Jonsey and we all shouted at the same time, "We've found a swimmin' hole! Lets go swimmin'!"

Peeled off our wet clothes and hung them on the nearest tree limb. Left our underwear on. Never could tell when a nosy girl might come sneakin' by. Jonsey jumped in with a whoop and a holler. Willy and me followed after him. We bobbed and jumped and bobbed some more. Stayed away from the middle - where the bottom began to slope downward - about twenty yards from the bank. I found a swimmin' hole - as good as the one up Mill Creek. After we spent more'n an hour jumpin' and splashin' - we had to negotiate a slippery - muddy bank to get out. Didn't have towels - so we air dried our bodies. Willy and my clothes were still damp, but Jonsey didn't want to wait. He started walkin', "I'm starved. Your clothes will air dry on the way to town." We pulled our damp pant legs on, but it wasn't easy. Damp clothes stick to your legs like glue to paper. Our shoes were still squishin' as we walked to our bikes. Jonsey had it right. By the time we were halfway to Osborn - our clothes were mostly dry. I offered, "Let's meet at the ball field after lunch. Jonsey nodded, "Bring your ball."

Mother worked at the library and Father had summer construction work. Teachers didn't get much pay back then and we had ends to meet. My sisters were cleanin' house and doin' girl things - so I fixed a Midwestern lunch. Made a peanut butter sandwich with mayonnaise on whole wheat. White bread would make a perfect sandwich, but Mother was on one of



her health food kicks. On top the range she had a kettle of whole bran - ground at the Yellow Spring's Mill - cookin' over the pilot light. Took twenty hours of cookin' before it was fit to eat and then I needed sugar and milk to get it down. Milk didn't come in boxes. Milkman delivered it to the door in bottles - early in the mornin'. Mother skimmed the cream off the top for bakin' and Father's coffee and my sisters and me drank the rest. Didn't have room in the refrigerator to store a week's worth of milk. Electric refrigerator replaced our ice chest, but neither would hold much. I ate my sandwich on the run. Didn't want to show up late or I might not get picked to play. Might be late for Sunday School - or class, but never for a ball game.

Our ball games were always pickup affairs. Didn't have organized teams until we turned sixteen - American Legion ball. But - it was hardball. A game that'd hurt hands and head. Not the same as softball. Hardball was a much faster game than we cared for. We were livin' in the best of times. We played our own ball games without adult interference. And we made up our own rules. And all of us showed up. Played sunup to sunset. Sometimes we didn't even stop for lunch. Went on all summer - unless fishin' or swimmin' interfered. Each of us had a glove and some of us had a ball. Wore more than a few balls out. We played four outfielders - so more of us could play. Game went nine innings or nine runs - whichever came first.

Willy beat me to the ball field and Jonsey rode up a minute later. Got lucky. Three players had to go home - so we all got to play. I got fourth outfielder. Basically - my job was to keep balls from rollin' out into the street - so I played way back. We didn't mess around. If you could reach a pitched ball when it was your turn at bat it was a strike. Games moved right along. Worst part about playin' outfield is judgin' the flight of a ball. Especially if it was coming

straight on. Wasn't too bad if it was left - or right. We missed a bunch - so I was busy runnin' balls down. Fourth game was over an hour before supper time. I was draggin', but I rode home as fast as I could. No way I was goin' to miss my favorite radio programs.

Made it inside as the theme song began. Somethin' about Hudson High sung by a robust male trio. Had to be written by an Annapolis graduate. Father said Hudson High was a funny term Midshipmen used for West Point. Cadets got even when they taunted the Midshipmen by callein' the Naval Academy - Canoe U. Couldn't be a better radio program anywhere than *Jack Armstrong* - except *Captain Midnight*. Had my decoder ready. At the end of each show - the announcer always read a series of letters. I'd spin my decoder and the letters would reveal a secret message. I hoped for somethin' special - like a map leadin' to a lost gold mine, but it never happened. Letters would decode into a promotion for the next episode.

I'd get Mother to buy the cereal they advertised on both shows and I'd send in box tops. But - all I'd ever get was a tin toy that broke when I put it together - or fell apart when I played with it. Slick Willy and me were suckers for airplanes. We'd eat the worst tastin' stuff - so to get box tops to send in for model airplanes. Instead of the sleek pursuit plane they advertised on the cover - we'd get a cardboard box with a block of balsa wood inside. We'd read the directions on how to carve it. And then we'd carve and carve until we wound up with nothin', but shavins.' Givin' us a block of wood and expectin' us to carve an airplane was like givin' a Bible to a chimpanzee and expecting him to read Genesis out loud. But - most times Slick and me weren't as smart as monkeys. We kept eatin' horrible cereal and sendin' box tops in. And the cereal companies kept on sendin' us a block of balsa wood.

Soon as my programs were over - I checked the kitchen cabinet under the sink for a mason jar. Saw 'em light up last night from the front porch after supper. Firefly season had begun. Mother stopped me, "Put the jar away - Johnny. We're going Bryan Farm State Park and cook supper over an open fire. Wash up and get your hiking gear on." I liked goin' to Bryan Farm. It and the mill where she bought her bran were the only things Mother liked about Yellow Springs. But - this was the perfect time of year to catch fireflies at dusk. We'd catch 'em and store 'em in a mason jar. Punch holes in the top of the lid so they'd get air. Didn't work - though. Next mornin' we'd have a jar full of dead fireflies. Catchin' fireflies is one of those things that has no purpose at all. Still - most warm late summer evenings we'd chase after 'em, but not tonight.

Bryan Farm Park is on the little Miami River - which isn't much wider than Mill Creek. But - it has the biggest barn in the whole wide world. Big enough for Paul Bunyan to keep Babe - his great blue ox - room for a dozen wagons. Along the banks of the Little Miami is a place called Clifton Gorge. Cliffs aren't more than twenty or so feet high. This is Ohio not Grand Canyon country. I'd heard tales of Daniel Boone swingin' across the gorge on a vine to escape an Indian war party. Don't think that Willy and me didn't measure that gorge to see if we could - too. Would have - too if we could find a vine. Wasn't one anywhere near the river left uncut. Park Rangers must have known. With no vines - my sisters and me hiked the trails until we were worn out.

When it was too dark to find our way - we returned to the campfire and cooked hot dogs. Father made us wait until there was a good bed of coals. Then he'd cut branches and carve a point on each stick. My sisters placed one hot dog on theirs but I'd put two on mine. My stick would bend and bend - so far over my hot dogs would touch the coals. Lost a

few in the past, but tonight all I did was burn 'em around the edges. Tasted all right. Put enough mustard on bread and I'd eat it. Two hot dogs - a couple of handfuls of potato chips and a glass of lemonade were my limit. Before the coals died out - we used our sticks to cook marshmallows. Mine burnt - too. Had to use the bathroom and the only one around was under the barn. Except for the bathroom - the barn was locked up. Park Ranger wouldn't let any of us inside the barn. Said it was too much of a fire hazard - with all that wood - and straw on the floorin. When we got back - everything was packed up. Didn't want to go, but it was time. Rangers locked the gates after nine. Somethin' about burnt hot dogs and my stomach that didn't seem to get along. I could still taste 'em when I went to bed. Next mornin' they were still talkin' to my brain. Milk - sugar and Mother's bran helped break the logjam. Maybe her bran wasn't so bad after all.

When I opened the front door - Willy and Jonsey were waitin' on my front steps with a canteen and a sack lunch in each hand. I asked "Where we goin'?" Willy smiled, "Don't ask and you won't have to tell." So I didn't. Went back inside - filled my canteen with water - soakin' the canvass cloth on the outside of the metal. Evaporation'd kept water cool for an hour. Made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Couldn't use mayonnaise - wasn't safe to get mayonnaise warm. Germs breeding in the hot sun would kill me.

Jonsey and Willy were swingin' in my apple tree when I came back out. Willy didn't say anything until we were a block away from my front steps, "Gonna' hike up the hill to Southwestern's old quarry." "Not supposed to go there." "Won't mess around with any of the old equipment. Besides - there's three of us - no ones gonna' get hurt." "And your the one who tumbled into Mad River." "Found our new swimmin' hole - didn't I?" "Long as Jonsey doesn't mess around with

dynamite caps guess it'll be all right. Father says they're layin' around all over up there. Only takes one of 'em to blow your finger off." Jonsey didn't say a word - he just smiled. Then he opined, "Not much chance of that - not with me around. I know how to handle 'em. I've been trained. If we do find one" and he smiled again, "I know how to throw 'em so they won't explode near us." Jonsey's smile worried me a bit. Had a suspicion he was carryin' one or two of 'em in his pocket. Be grounded for a year if I had one.

Walked up my street past the village Blacksmith's shop. The clangin' sound of hammer on metal made us stop and look in. He had his fire white hot and was placin' a metal wagon wheel rim in it. He bent it in a circle and plunged it into a tub of water. Steam shot up and the noise made us all jump back a couple of feet. Blacksmith was still laughing as we ran off. Next stop was the houseboat - up on a trailer in the back of the lumber yard. Didn't wonder why it was there. Been there for as long as I could remember. Wasn't a lake of any size within thirty miles - 'cept Indian Lake and I didn't know anybody who'd want to put a houseboat on it. Jonsey put his hand out, "Look toward the stern window. Is that smoke comin' out?" Willy - nosy as ever climbed up on the trailer wheel. We began to climb after him, but he was comin' down as we were goin' up.

Slick took off runnin' and was halfway up the block before we caught up. And he kept right on runnin' - a chatterin' away like a magpie, "I looked inside and saw three bums smokin' corncob pipes and drinkin' whiskey from a jug and somethin' red all covered over with fur. Ugliest man I'd ever seen - with one tooth in his mouth - pointed and said, 'Got a young un' lookin' in. He'll lead us to Johnny Ropp.' When they jumped up - I jumped down." We kept on runnin'. I looked back over my shoulder. There they were - big as life and twice as mean - Old Ned Smith - One Eyed Jack - German

Jerry and *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* - who was all covered up inside a rain coat - a-runnin' after us. "Damn! Thought I was rid of Old Ned Smith for good. Keep on runnin'. They're worse than two handfuls of snakes." Willy asked, "What'll they do if they catch us? Rub our faces in the dirt?" "Much worse than that. Wouldn't put it past 'em to cut our throats and feed us to their red friend." We ran around the corner - past the Green Frog - the only bar in town - over the New York Central Railroad tracks and across the lawn towards the Southwestern cement plant.

Stopped and looked back. Couldn't see 'em following - so we made a beeline for the cement plant's sign. Too high to vault over - so we ran around the corner and hunkered down behind it. Jonsey peeked over the top, "Must have given up. They're goin' into the Green Frog. Fess up - Johnny. Who are these guys and why are they after you?" "Long story. Tried to tell Slick yesterday, but he wasn't interested." "I am now." "Remember the Preacher's boy in Bellpoint?" "Old Will - he's wilder than a thistle." "He and me sailed a rowboat over the dam by the Columbus Zoo." Willy stopped me, "That's the tallest tale I've ever heard. That dam has to be seventy feet high. You'd be dead." Wasn't any use going on when he wasn't listenin', "Lets start walkin' toward the quarry. Can't follow us there. As I was sayin'. We lost our oars and had to climb up a river bank near Dublin." Willy stopped me again, "That's in Ireland, not Ohio. You sure are full of it." "Anyway - we were hitchin' a ride back up river when Old Ned Smith - he's the ugly one with only one front tooth - picked us up in his truck. Took us to his moonshine still - locked us in." Willy and Jonsey were rollin' on the ground laughing. Willy got up, "You sure can tell a whopper." Jonsey added, "Your whoppers are as good as Slick's." "*The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* - covered up inside a raincoat - did you get a whiff of sulfur and manure?" They

both nodded, "Yes." "Ned was gonna' feed me and Will to him." By the time I got the last word out - we were halfway up the hill on our way to the quarry.

Got to take time out to explain why whiskey is so bad. You had to live in Ohio to understand. Only place to buy whiskey in Osborn is the Green Frog. The pool hall sold beer and you'd have to drive to Dayton to find a State liquor store. Beer was mostly three-two - unless you bought six percent at the Green Frog. I'd never met anyone who'd been inside the Green Frog - 'cept now - Old Ned Smith and his gang. Now - that's normal for anyone who lived in a small Ohio town. Westerville wasn't more'n forty miles away and it's the home of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. No one around here would drink hard liquor in a saloon - that was frowned on. Mind you - wine was in the cellar of most homes for medicinal purposes. And a lot of folks here needed heavy medication to stay well. And most everyone had a jug of whiskey to ward off a-winter chill. Most folks gave temperance lip service on Sunday and got sauced on medicine come Saturday night. That's how Old Ned Smith stayed in business. So you can see why no upright Ohio Christian would be caught dead inside a cocktail lounge - let alone a saloon as smelly as the Green Frog. Not when it's the Christian thing to have a home remedy.

We weren't on the path to the abandoned quarry more'n thirty minutes - runnin' like we were rabbits. The abandoned quarry was dug out of a hillside - open on one side. Didn't have more'n a drop of water in it. Not enough to drown a frog. Face of it was rock and fun to climb. It was the only way up that was close. Only other way was a quarter mile in either direction. Important to get to the top, but once up there it was the same as the bottom - all rocks and scrub trees. This quarry is lot like life, the fun of it is the climb. We came up here because we weren't supposed to and

mostly because it was somethin' to do. As soon as I asked, "Think we got away?" Willy said, "We got company." Turned around. Old Ned and his gang weren't more'n a football field away from us. They weren't runnin' and they weren't walkin'. Sort-a joggin' along - mean like. *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was lookin' agitated - like he had the hungries. They were all breathing hard - so I knew we had the advantage.

Wasn't much choice. We scampered up the quarry's rock face. By the time we got to the top they were standin' at the bottom - catchin' their breath. Willy and I picked up several good sized rocks. Jonsey peeked over the edge and looked back at us with that crazy smile of his and took a cylinder out of his pocket. He turned somethin' on it with his fingers and threw it over the edge. Didn't fly straight down like a rock or one of those spears we made. Kind of tumbled and fluttered. They must have wondered what it was - too. All four of 'em were starin' up with their mouths open - watchin' it fall. Jonsey made a good toss. His cylinder landed right in the middle of 'em. German was bending over to pick it up when all hell broke loose. Explosion kicked up so much dust and rocks - we lost sight of 'em. When the dust cleared - all four were on the ground writhin' - moanin' and a-cussin' at us.

We stood there like three fools - starin' down. Jonsey got that silly smile on his face, "That was a good one wasn't it." Willy and me dropped our rocks, "Won't need 'em now." Jonsey got the giggles, "Must have taken some rock fragments in their hind ends." I tugged on his arm to get him back from the crest of the hill, "Better make tracks. There's only one road back to town. Don't want to share it." We took off runnin' on a path leadin' through the woods to the highway above the quarry. Half mile away - we could still hear *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* roarin'. Willy was shakin'



as we ran cross the road to the railroad tracks used by the cement plant's gondola cars use to haul rock." Slick said, "Crouch down" as we walked on the other side of the tracks - away from the road, "so we'll be outa' sight of Johnny's friends. That furry red thing sure has an odor about him." "Not my friends. Sorry I drug you into this fight. Old Ned won't forget. That was a pretty good sized explosion. Can't be a dynamite cap." Jonsey wore that silly grin, "Used to be before I fixed it up. Sure was a sight watching those four fall. Like four oak trees in a forest." Willy asked, "What if you missed?" "Got another one in my pocket." Willy and I looked at each other and jumped away. Jonsey laughed, "Won't go off unless I do a little magic to it." Willy wouldn't have any of it, "Throw that damn thing away - or you'll be walkin' by yourself." Jonsey twisted the cylinder in his fingers and threw it down the hill. Explosion wasn't as big as the last one.

We didn't wait around to see what was going to happen next. We took off runnin' toward Osborn. Had to wait for a donkey engine pullin' gondola cars full of rock only once. Willy had all the answers - so I asked him, "Can't follow us here, but they may find my house. What do you think we should do?" Willy asked Jonsey, "Any ideas?" "Need to put more powder in my dynamite caps. Boy - was that fun." Willy shook his head, "We got a picnic to do. Lets have it in my backyard. Johnny can stay at my place until his parents come home from work." He looked at me like I'd brought 'em, "Do you know how they got here?" "Didn't see Ned's truck. Must have hopped a freight. Wonder why they left Dublin and took to the road?" I knew the answer as soon as the words flew out of my mouth, "The law must've busted up Ned's moonshine still. Will and me were the last ones there. Bet they're blamin' me." All of a sudden - our energy was gone. Not easy stayin' on top - usin' every muscle and thought to stay alive. We walked on - quiet like.

When we reached the entrance to the cement plant we had two choices - walk alongside the road - or walk along the railroad tracks to Waterworks Park. Looked back up the road as far as we could see. Ned and his gang weren't in sight. As we jogged down the road to Willy's house - Jonsey was still smilin', "They'll need help from Doc if their gonna' get those stone fragments outa' their legs." Willy added, "And their hind ends."

Sandwiches were dry and the canteen water warm, but we were happy. Sort of a victory celebration. Now we knew how cavemen must have felt bringin' down a giant tusked mastodon.

Willy's Mom brought out hot cookies and cold milk and we shot baskets at the hoop on Willy's garage. The lumber yard wasn't more than a block and a half from my house - so didn't take much to convince me to stick around. Rested on the steps at Willy's side door after an hour or so. I pondered, "If Old Ned was mad at me before - he must be plumb crazy by now. We should do what Tom Mix would." Willy asked, "What would Tom do?" "He'd form a posse and ride after the bad guys." Jonsey was up on his feet, "We got bikes. We can ride after them. We'll need weapons." Jonsey got that silly grin, "I can take care of that." I grabbed his arm, "Sit down. Didn't you hear *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing's* roar? Tom wouldn't rush in like a fool. He's stop and think - make a plan. Tom always says it's better to stay away from a fight than go lookin' for one." Willy weighed in, "This fight has come lookin' for you."

Sometimes - Willy says just the right thing, "Souldn't get all worked up. Won't be comin' after you until they heal. Those rock fragments have to hurt." Willy stood up, "We won't say or do a thing unless we're forced too." I put my hand on Willy's and Jonsey followed with his, "Lets make a pact" and we shook. Not as good as prickin' your finger and sealin' it in blood, but almost. I looked up at the sun,

"Time for me to head on home." Jonsey whooped, "I'm late. Old Nel will give me what for if I don't get to the Main Gate at Patterson Field." I asked, "Old Nel?" "She's the one I sell newspapers for. She's the distributor for the Dayton Herald." "Whats' she look like?" "Like a witch. Have to cover your watch when she enters a room."

Walked home by the back alley, but I felt safe. Knew our village would be on my side. Nothing organized - mind you. Osborn is a small town in its habits. A stranger who didn't have a job - or income wouldn't stay long. He'd have to have honest work and a place to stay. Bums had three choices - move on - go to jail - or take up residence in the County Poor Farm. If one was down on his luck and willin' to work - well that was different. Old Ned Smith and his gang would stick out like sore thumbs. County had a Poor Farm - Old Folks Home and two orphanages. No one in their right mind would pay people for sittin' around and not workin'. Better to have a clean wholesome place for 'em to stay until they got back on their feet. Food - shelter and supervision would put a body back on the right track. Felt safe growin' up where vagrancy laws and common sense were the rules of the village. Time and Law protected me from the likes of Old Ned Smith. I knew I was safe livin' in Osborn, but I ran most of the way home through the back alley anyway - with an eye out for Old Ned and his gang. Had to wonder why no one stopped him for hidin' *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing.*

I arrived before Mother and just in time for afternoon radio serials. Willy lost interest in 'em and Jonsey had to sell newspapers - so I listened alone. Turned the power on. It took ten seconds for the tubes to warm up. Radio didn't come right on until semiconductors were invented. I had my decoder ready and my ear tuned in for the Hudson High song. Wasn't disappointed, but I never was. I was a fan. Only one I liked better was Tom Mix and he didn't have a radio show.

Mother was later than usual this evenin'. She had a load of new books to put away after she closed the library. Father was late - too. He stopped by the pool hall for a few games after work. Without a summer job and a tailor made pool cue - my sisters and I would have never seen ice cream and potato chips. Tonight was special. He brought home a nickel bag of potato chips for each of us. Father paced on the front porch - waitin' for Mother.

Mother walked up - not more'n ten minutes later, "Mom - Doc stopped by the pool hall. Had quite a story to tell. That's why I'm late. What happened to you?" "Our mailman brought a box of new books for the library. What did Doc have to say?" "He treated three vagrants this afternoon with rock fragments in their legs and hind ends. After they left - Doc phoned the Chief and he picked them up. They were living in the lumberyard - trying to make a home out of the old houseboat. Chief took them to the station. No wanted posters outstanding - so he gave them a choice. Jail or a ride to the county line. They chose the later. Drove them south - toward Dayton and put them out on the road. Doc said they were as sorry a-looking lot as he's ever seen. Wouldn't give their names. From his description they sound a lot like Ned Smith and his gang from Dublin." Mother asked, "Is he the ugly one who spent his Sundays under the tree next to Bellpoint's general store." "Yes - that's Ned all right." Chief thought they might be rustlers - some farm animals are missing."

Now - I kept my mouth shut and you know how hard that is to do. Would-a said somethin', but I'd made a pact and shook on it. Farm animals missin' made the hair on the back of my neck stick out and goose bumps grow on my arms. Looked like *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was growin' larger. The rain coat Ned had over him barely covered his fur. And his roar was much deeper - too. Ned must-a caught a young un.

My Parents didn't mention Old Ned Smith at supper - so I thought I was home free, but I wasn't. Father waited until Mother was in the kitchen - cleanin' up after supper, "Come outside - Johnny. You and I need to talk." I followed him out on the front porch. He filled his pipe and lit it, "Ned Smith told Doc that three boys threw a stick of dynamite at him from the top of the quarry face. He also told Doc that you were the ringleader of a pack of wild ones. Do you know anything about this?" As a general rule - I avoid any and all confrontation with Father. For one thing - he's bigger than me and for another he's smarter. The easiest path for me to travel is - mind my manners - keep my mouth shut and speak only when asked too. But - my mind was always workin' and now it was racin' through two stories and a lie. No way around it - I had to tell the truth, but I couldn't tell all of it, "You've caught me dead to rights. We were at the quarry today, but I'm not a ringleader. It's a long story. I thought I could handle Ned, but he's out of control." "So that's why you asked me about Ned and Dublin. Tell me every -thing that happened today."

"Jonsey and Willy came by and we decided to go on a hike. So we packed a picnic lunch and took off in the direction of the cement plant. On the way - Willy noticed smoke comin' out of the houseboat - so he climbed up the trailer wheel and peeked in. Old Ned and his gang saw him and chased us all the way to the quarry. We climbed up the rock face to get away. When they were millin' around at the bottom - Jonsey threw a dynamite cap at their feet. All we were doin' was tryin' to scare 'em off. Willy and me had rocks ready, but we didn't need 'em. We were as surprised as they were when it exploded. Knocked 'em all their feet and gave us a chance to get away." "From the description Doc gave of their wounds - it sounds like Jonsey had more than a dynamite cap." "He modified one he found." "Where did you run too?" "Didn't want them to catch us - so we ran all the way back to Willy's

house. Stayed there all afternoon." Father walked over to the porch railin' and knocked ashes out his pipe - relit it and at down on the swing.

He smiled at me, "You know how your Mother feels about you playing at the quarry. And you proved to yourself how dangerous a dynamite cap is. I don't want you to ever go near one of those again. But - I'm glad Jonsey had one when you needed it. It probably saved your lives. Ned and his gang play for keeps. And I know Ned wouldn't be after you here just for sport. He must have a reason. Tell me what happened when you were at the farm." "All began when I was stayin' at Grandfather Mac's in Bellpoint. Will and me hiked down the Scioto to fish for largemouth bass. Old Ned offered us a ride back to Bellpoint on the back of his flatbed Ford truck, but he didn't take us there. Instead he drove - so fast we couldn't jump off - to his place in Dublin. Locked us up in his shed. Will and me waited until they drank themselves silly and snuck out the back. We were halfway to the dam when they came lookin' for us. Got away again by hidin' behind the hedgerow. Crossed over at the dam to get away. When we found their truck parked outside of the roadhouse - Will took the distributor cap off and disabled it while I got our fishin' gear off the back. We walked and ran all the way back to Bellpoint."

Father didn't let up, "There's more to it than that. Didn't you mention Ned and his gang worked the boiler on the threshing machine?" I waited until Father refilled his pipe, "Ned saw me when he was runnin' the threshing machine at Grandfather Ropp's." "Dad said you had to stay home the next day because of blisters." "That's when Ned came after me. I hid in the back haymow. Ned came looking for me with a pitchfork. When he had his back to me - I flew out of the hay and blocked him out the hay door. He landed on the Durham bull's fence and fell into the pen." "Where did you

learn to do a running block like that?" "From your Yale football book. Spot kept him from doin' more harm. Old Ned smelled like our barnyard and looked awful. Captain fired him and his gang on the spot." Father turned away so I couldn't see him laugh, but I did. He turned back, "Ned holds a grudge longer than anyone I know. He wouldn't come all the way here just to get even. He'd wait for you to come back to Bellpoint." "Might be his still. Bet the sheriff busted it and Ned and his gang are on the lam. Might think I turned him in." "Did you?" "Didn't think of it - or I would have. I caused Old Ned a whole bunch of trouble. Know one thing for sure - I'm gettin' tired of lookin' over my shoulder to see if he's comin' after me." Father didn't say anything - not right away. He emptied his pipe over the porch rail and filled it again. Didn't start worryin' until I noticed Father starin' out over the porch rail - through the evenin' haze at our apple tree. Last spankin' I had was from a switch made out of its branches. Apple tree switch would bring tears to the eyes of Tom Mix.

Father placed his hand on my shoulder, "Ned Smith and his gang - can't be a meaner bunch in central Ohio. Neds been able to stay one step ahead of the law because folks are scared of him. Sheriff doesn't get down to Dublin very often and the Franklin County Sheriff doesn't seem to care. If there ever was a hell hole made for a group of stick carrying - rock hitting - worthless no-goods - it has to be Dublin - Ohio. Don't blame you for running away. I wouldn't want to be Ned's guest. Looks to me like he's identified you as his problem. You and your friends are the first ones I've known that ever got the better of him. Wish they had adults in Dublin that would do the same. We could turn him in, but there isn't enough evidence. Be your word against his. So we won't. Do you agree?" First time I'd been treated like a grownup - so I said, "Yes, Sir." "I won't punish you. The only thing you've done wrong is walk too close to the edge

and that's just being a boy. Stay away from the quarry and don't play alone until this blows over - if it ever does. Stay at Willy's - or with your sisters - or with your Mother at the library until we get home from work. I'll speak with Willy's Father. Don't think you'll have problems with Ned - not for awhile at least. Ned should be miles away from our County by now, but if you see or hear about him - call me and if I'm not around - the law. Don't try to take him on by yourself again. Stay out of his way. Do you know what Jonsey did to that dynamite cap to get such a big explosion? It took Doc the better part of an hour to get all the rock fragments out of their legs. Those three won't be sitting much for a week or two." "No Sir - I don't know. He had another one, but we made him throw it away." "If he ever brings a dynamite cap along - stay clear."

Jonsey's Dad was off somewhere. No one would say where - so he was given a lot more slack than the rest of us. Father patted me on the shoulder and walked back into the house to read the evening newspaper. I was so thankful for escapin' a spankin' I sat down with my sisters - listenin' to their radio program. I'd done all right - so far. If Old Ned came after me again - I was going to make life miserable for him. He played a game I knew I could win - long as he didn't sneak up on me. Wished I could tell Father the all of it, but forgivin' as he was - my rowboat ride over the dam would be the last straw. And I couldn't tell him about Ned's devil, *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. He would think I was tetched in the head. And playin' with my sisters was out of the question. They were busy doin' things they liked to do and I wasn't interested in doin' girl stuff. If it wasn't rainin' - I was outside with boys my own age. I liked my sisters and they tolerated me, but we lived two separate sets of lives under the same roof. Stayin' with Mother at the library was okay when it rained - or too cold to play outside - or when new adventure books came in, but in the middle of



summer? Tonight wasn't a total loss. There were fireflies to catch and an empty mason jar waitin'. I ran outside to the garage to find it. I'd made it through another scrape without gettin' my hide tanned or losin' my teeth. I had to have an angel on my shoulder.

Mother woke me before seven. Hot bran was waitin' on the table. She had my day planned, "You can walk to Willy's house with me. It's on the way to the library." "Can I walk my bicycle with us? We may want to go riding." "As long as you stay away from the quarry." "Have to check my fireflies before we go." Puttin' the jar in the garage instead of leavin' it in the sun on the porch saved about half. Turned 'em loose and dumped out the dead ones. Worst enemy a firefly could have was a boy or girl my age. Put my hr in the garage and walked with Mother to Willy's front door. Slick's place wasn't more'n two blocks away and her library another block over. Couldn't live on the wrong side of the tracks in Osborn 'cause everyone lived on the same side. I walked around to Willy's side door. Front one was used for parsons and guests. Willy wasn't outside and I knew enough not to knock. Picked up his basketball and shot a few before the side door opened. "Hey - Slick. What's up for today?" "Jonsey had to go shoppin' in Xenia with his Mother. Wanna' ride bikes?" "Can't go anywhere near the road to the quarry. And Mad River's out. Old Ned and his gang may be hidin' there." "Can't catch us on our bikes. We can outrun 'em." "Not on a path in the woods. Too wet and slippery." "I'm tired of shootin' baskets and it's too hot to play softball." We sat on Willy's side steps - not sayin' anything. August was here and we'd played ourselves out. The summer doldrums were beginnin' to set in.

Willy stood up with a wild smile on his face, "Ride home and put your suit on. We'll go swimmin' at Patterson Field." "We can caddie at the golf course and make some money." "Too

hard. Pro'll make us carry double and those leather bags are too heavy." "I'll get my suit." "Don't forget your caddie badge." Our caddyin' days at the military golf course didn't last long. Pro made us carry two bags the first time we tried. Willy and me made it to the fifteenth hole before we pooped out. Golfers had to carry their bags the last three holes. They understood, but the Pro didn't. Told us to stay away until we were big enough. We kept our caddie badges - though. They were neat - bright polished silver emblems - our ticket to get inside Patterson Army Air Field.

Put my swimmin' suit on under my pants. Couldn't sneak on if they saw our suits. Guards would know we weren't goin' to caddie. Willy hopped on his bicycle as soon as I rode up, "Got your caddie badge?" "In my front pocket." Before we got caddie badges - we used a hole in the fence someone dug near the warehouse. Wasn't big enough to get our bicycles through and guards kept fillin' it in. Don't know if someone dug it to sneak out or in. Rode through the gate at top speed a few times, but the guards caught on. Pulled down the wooden barrier when they saw us comin'. Once inside we had to hide our caddie badges or we'd get told to stay near the golf course. We stopped at the Officer Quarter's Gate and showed our caddie badges to the guard. He raised the barrier arm and waved us through. Had a smile on his face - like he knew what we were doin' and didn't mind - long as we played the game. We undressed in the men's locker room and hid the caddie badges in our shoes.

Weren't many people at the pool - not in the mornin'. Willy and me bobbed up and down in the shallow end - which wasn't very shallow. It was a little over four feet at best. Neither one of us strayed too far away from the wall and we didn't splash around. Life guard was goin' to be Father's new quarterback in the fall. He knew we didn't belong here, but as long as we were civil - he left us alone. After a

couple of hours - Slick and me looked like two eighty pound prunes. Willy pulled himself out of the water, "Had enough?" "Yes." "I'm starved." "Mother gave me a quarter. Want to go to the PX snack bar? They make the best milkshakes in the whole world there." We found two mostly clean towels and dried off. Wrung out our suits best we could, but they were still damp when we put 'em back on and pulled on our pants. Willy let out a holler, "The damn needle clip on the back of my caddie badge came undone - stuck me in my behind."

We each had a quarter to spend - more'n enough for lunch. Milkshakes were a dime, but Willy wasn't sure he wanted one, "Pepsi Cola and Hershey Bar cost the same. Be much healthier than cows milk." "Why don't you buy a Coke and a Mounds Bar. Sell Coke at the drugstore - so it must be better for us and a Mounds Bar has coconut. Has to be good as vegetables and tastier." "Won't buy a Coke - even if it's better. Only six ounces for a nickel. Pepsi gives you twice as much." "You're like that radio jingle, 'Twice as much for a nickel - too. Pepsi Cola is the drink for you.'" "Well - it's true. I do get twice as much. I'll get a Mounds and a Pepsi." "Why not try Orange Crush - it's better for you. Has orange flavor. Should be the same as eatin' an orange." "Too much fizz - just like Coke. What are you gonna' get?" "Milk shake makes a whole meal for me and I'll still have fifteen cents to put in my bank."

Had to have a chocolate milk shake. PX made 'em big and thick from scratch. Not like ones after the war - with all that whipped air and additives. Real chocolate syrup and vanilla ice cream. Always left a big lump of ice cream at the bottom - wouldn't mix up. Cold - so cold it'd give you an ice cream headache. So thick - I had to eat it with a spoon. Served it with a long stainless steel one. Wasn't any carry out. Had to eat at the snack bar. And nothin' to throw out - 'cept soda fountain straws. Willy had his Pepsi

drunk and Mounds bar devoured and I was only halfway through. By the time I got to the hunk of vanilla ice cream on the bottom - he was pacin'. After a mornin' of swimmin' and ridin' bicycles and full stomachs - we needed rest.

Wasn't a better place in the whole wide world to do nothin' than on an Army Post. Parked our bicycles next to a tree on top the hill overlookin' the runways and watched as airplanes took off and landed. We could see two and a half runways. Leaned back and watched the new four engine bomber - the XB-1 - runnin' taxi tests. Had four huge propellers - looked bigger than a barn - though it wasn't too excitin' watchin' it taxi around. Willy was impressed, "Sure makes a lot of noise. Is that all they're goin' to do - taxi back and forth?" "Guess so. Won't take it off the ground until they're sure everything works the way it's supposed too. Looks like they're finished Pilot's takin' it back to the hanger where they keep experimental planes." Willy poked me, "What's that landin' on the east-west runway?" "Looks like a flight of four Boeing P-26 Peashooters." "Neat looking - ain't they?" I was hoping we'd see the new Curtis P-40 Warhawk. We waited for over an hour, but none showed up, "Looks like I'll be drawin' Peashooters in my notebook come fall." Willy had enough, "Lets ride home. Looks like the Army is done for the day." "Want-a ride over to the school and see if anyone is playin' softball?" "Great - let's get our gloves. Might be an openin'."

We played ball that afternoon - and the next - and the next - and the next. Didn't go near Mad River. We were still worried about being away from town with Old Ned Smith and his gang on the loose. Last week of August - playin' softball stopped and football began. We played touch football in the mornin'. Afternoons I had to help my Father. I carried helmets from the equipment room to the field. All of 'em freshly painted in blue and gold - Bath High School

colors. But - they still smelled of leather and sweat. Father was excited. He was trainin' his team to use the new T formation. Xenia's Soldiers and Sailors Orphan's Home was in for a shock when we played 'em this fall. Everyone else used a single wing. I was on pins and needles. Summer was almost over and I couldn't wait for school to start - and I'd have a seat on the bench to watch our varsity football team play on late Friday afternoons.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Don't mess with chemicals and dynamite.
3. Listen to my Parents.
4. *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was growin'.

Trouble was - I really did want to follow my parent's advice. But me and my friends were always gettin' into things we shouldn't. Felt like I was bein' pulled in two directions at once - with fun on one side - responsibility on the other and fun kept winnin' out.

# 4

Just the thought of goin' back to school got Willy down in the dumps, but not me. I couldn't wait for school to start. And haulin' helmets out to the practice field durin' hot - late August afternoons paid off. I was still doin' the same thing, but with a new title - Assistant Manager. First day of class - I walked in with my head held high and chest out. I was somebody, but not to Willy and Jonsey. They put the needle into my thin skin - showin' no mercy. "'Bout all you're good for is to fetch and carry," Willy said. Jonsey was even more derisive, "You ain't nothin' but a water boy." Knew I was more than just a water boy, "I get to carry helmets - too." I figured they were needlin' me 'cause they were jealous of my exalted position. In the back of my mind I could hear my own voice whisperin', "Father is keepin' me close in case Old Ned shows up." Didn't matter to me. I liked my job. Monday through Thursday I carried helmets from the equipment room to the practice field. After the team finished practice - I'd carry 'em back in and give 'em a good cleanin'. Leather can get mighty sweaty and dirty. Insides needed scrubbin' so no one would get sick. Friday - that was game day. Players drew their own helmets. After the game they cleaned their own uniforms, but I still had to clean the helmets.

After school let out Friday - if we had a home game - band would form up in the front of the school. Everyone who could walk followed the music to Waterworks Park. Right past the gazebo in the center of the village. Everyone in Osborn and most of the folks in Fairfield knew Old Bath High School was playin' football at home that afternoon. Willy didn't

care for football, "Football team should be called the Bath High Bathers." We didn't have a mascot or a nickname - unless it was Merchants - with advertisin' on the back of our wool jerseys. I rode to the game with the football team on the school bus. Couldn't have 'em walkin' on cement wearin' cleats - so we took the school bus. Father rode on the front seat. I sat on the steps with the water bottles.

Jonsey was right about me bein' a water boy. As soon as the bus arrived at Waterworks Park - my job was to fill a case of half-pint milk bottles with water. Closest faucet was under the water tower. I could only carry one case at a time and we had two. Spent most of the game haulin' empties one way and water the other. And were they ever heavy when full. Spilled a quarter of it on the return trip 'cause I couldn't keep the case level. Wasn't a total loss. I had a seat right down front. I could see tackle football up close. Saw enough of the game to make me want to play in the band. Pickup games of touch football were fun - like shootin' a BB gun. We kept all our teeth. Tackle football? The way they played it in high school was like firin' a rifle with real bullets. Scrapes - and blood - and bandages - and players limpin' off the field didn't look like much fun to me. And bein' a coach like Father didn't look like much fun - either. Even though Father's team won 'most of their games usin' his new T formation - he had a problem with the school board. They didn't care for any of his new fangled ideas. He had a pool of limited talent that was outrun and outsized. Only way he could win was to outthink the other coach - and my Father was good at that.

Father's troubles began with the first home game. It was rainin' - real hard. Couldn't pass because the ball was too wet and was the wind ever blowin'. When our quarterback handed off - his halfbacks kept droppin' it. Didn't lose a fumble, but our team wasn't gettin' past the fifty yard line.

Game was bein' played in the center of the field. After a quarter of sloggin' it out - it turned into a kickin' game. Father's new quarterback was as tough as nails. He'd been a blockin' back when they played single wing the year before. And was he ever a nice guy - the same lifeguard who didn't kick Willy and me outa' the Officer's Club pool. Father had him run a quarterback sneak ten straight times - from our own ten yard line to the other teams goal line. His last run was for a touchdown. That broke a scoreless tie and won the game. Every member of the school board was in attendance and not a-one of 'em cared for T formation football - or ten quarterback sneaks in a row. Father said it was because we still lived in a number one town where folks had a one track mind - stuck in the past. If he had players to run single wing - he might have used the double wing - like Michigan and Ohio State. Father didn't care much for single wing. Said it was too much like a Rugby scrum. No science to it - all rough and tumble.

A few weeks later - believe it was our third game - we played an away game with the toughest team on our schedule. The orphans at Ohio Soldiers and Sailors Home in Xenia. Were they ever tough - well coached and motivated. The Home was ready to play on every down. As usual - we were losin' after the first half - down by six points. Father pulled a play out of his hat that was so far ahead of its time - had to be pure genius. After receivin' the kickoff and returnin' it to the forty yard line to start the second half - he had his quarterback pretend to be confused. He took the snap from center and the whole team stood upright. Then they all walked sixty yards to the end zone for a touchdown. Soldiers and Sailors Home team stood by and watched. Referee didn't know what to do - so he called a half the distance to the goal penalty for usin' a flyin' wedge formation. Wasn't though - none of the players linked arms. So we lost our first game. That penalty made the difference.



Half way through the season - I had to agree with Willy and Jonsey. They were right about me bein' nothin' more than a water boy and a helmet carrier, but I didn't mind. I was a member of the team and that was good enough for me. Football team stopped by our house Saturday evenins' for milk and cookies. Mother didn't mind, but it was a lot of work - bakin' six dozen cookies every Saturday afternoon. Learned a lot from those Saturday evenin' talks about leverage. How a lighter fella can move a larger one out of the way with science. I got so wrapped up in football I completely forgot about Old Ned Smith and his gang. It was the weekend of the first full Harvest Moon that brought Old Ned and his devil's friend - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* back into my life.

It was right after our last game - a victory over Dayton Oakwood. Now that was a rivalry. Most of the Officer's kids from the brick quarters on Patterson Air Field went to school at Dayton Oakwood. Townies and military brats livin' side by side, but goin' to different high schools was bound to make a rivalry. Each team played like their lives depended on it - we knew ours did. Loser would get ragged by his friends until next year's game. This one was a doozy. We beat them fair and square on their own field. Football season - for us - was over, but it ended on a high note. It was after six - when the team bus returned to Osborn. Mother had our car packed and ready to go to Bellpoint. Father said we were goin' to help Grandfather Ropp cut corn, but I had a feelin' it was more than that. My sisters were stayin' behind with friends - talkin' like we'd be leavin' Osborn for good. I liked visitin' Bellpoint, but I wasn't certain I wanted to live there. Course with me livin' in Bellpoint - we'd have enough boys for a baseball team.

The night was clear - moonlit and cold. That time of year appetites got cranked up - to prepare a body for a long winter ahead. Mother packed sandwiches for us to eat on the

way and a thermos of hot chocolate for me. I polished off my share before we reached Springfield. Without competition for sittin' room - I was able to stretch out on the back seat and close my eyes. Mother and Father must have thought I was asleep. They whispered about advantages and disadvantages of movin' back to Grandfather Ropp's farm. Don't know which side won. I fell asleep and didn't wake up until we turned north on Route #42. By then - Father's thoughts turned to the harvest and Mother's to knives.

When Grandfather harvested wheat - all the neighbors joined in to help. Threshin' time was a together time of the year. But - when it came time to cut corn - he was on his own. Wioldin' a corn knife to cut corn stalks wasn't a neighbor's idea of havin' a good time. Ohio farmers had two ways to harvest corn - use a cutter bar - cut the corn green and store stocks and ears inside tall round silos - or pick it by hand - leavin' corn stalks standin' in the field - to plow them under come spring. Grandfather Ropp chose a third way. He cut stalks by hand and tied 'em up in bundles called shocks. When the ground dried out - he'd return to shuck corn - remove the husks and store the ears under the shocks to dry. After the ground froze - he'd collect his corn by horse and wagon. Then he'd shovel it over his head into the corn cribs. The remainin' corn stocks were used for fodder. Lay 'em on top of manure in the barn yard. His way was more work intensive, but environmentally friendly. Mixed with manure - corn and straw fodder made a natural fertilizer. Spread it on the fields and it provided needed nutrients to the top soil. Only problem was - the aroma.

Mother reached around her seat and tapped me on my shoulder, "Wake up - Johnny. We're in Bellpoint. Your Father and I talked it over. You won't be cutting corn - at least not this Saturday. Your Uncle Bus has a surprise for you. He's taking you and Grandfather Mac to an Ohio State

football game tomorrow." I woke up excited, "Yes Ma'am - who's playin'?" "Illinois. Just as well you're going to the game. I'm worried you might cut yourself with a corn knife." Mother didn't know about Willy and me - stickin' jackknives into the dirt - playin' mumblety-peg. I'd handled knives as sharp, but not as big as Grandfather Ropp's corn knives. They were big all right. I'd taken 'em down from their pegs in the equipment shed more'n a few times. Handles were six inches longer than a fully open jackknife. Swung 'em around a bit - pretendin' I was a knife thrower in the circus. Had good balance. Almost threw one - to see if it stuck in the shed wall, but knew better. Grandfather had three corn knives - all as big as Cuban sugar cane machetes. I knew I could cut corn with 'em - if they'd let me. Didn't argue with Mother - though. Three tickets to a college football game in the varsity "O" section at The Ohio State horseshoe. Doesn't get any better than that. And I knew where the varsity "O" section was. Right under second deck of the south stands. We'd be dry if it rained.

Didn't sleep soundly. Comin' from a village of a little more'n a thousand and goin' to see a college football game with over eighty thousand fans. Well - that was like visitin' Barnum's show in New York City and seein' his giant elephant - Jumbo. Only one thing spoiled it. Had to wear my Sunday clothes to the game. Goin' to a college football game was serious business. Everyone wore sincere clothes - the type we wear to weddins' and funerals. Uncle Bus arrived in his Chrysler roadster before eleven. He wore his camel hair topcoat. Grandfather wore a black one and everyone at the game would be wearin' coats and ties. I bundled up in the rumble seat - coverin' my legs with a car blanket. Uncle Bus's Chrysler roadster looked like somethin' that won a race in Indianapolis. Long - sleek and black - it had a spare tire mounted under cover on the drivers side. Wooden runnin' boards made it easy to get in and out. Seats were leather.

Even had isinglass curtains to mount on the side windows if it rained. Front windshield rolled down if you wanted to streamline it for racin'. Six tapered in-line cylinders made it fly like the wind and wooden spoke wheels kept it on the ground. Chrysler roadsters were more than a decade ahead of the competition. Father said it was because no one built cars like 'em anymore - not even Dusenberg.

Uncle Bus drove across Bellpoint Bridge and up River Road - south toward Columbus. Father and Grandfather Ropp waved to us from the lower corn field as we passed by. I leaned back and watched clouds driftin' by on a dark blue sky - like sails on an ocean. Goin' to be a perfect day for a football game. Crisp and clear - with a scent of smoke floatin' in the air from burnin' leaves - addin' spice to a cool autumn afternoon. I was on pins and needles. Couldn't wait to get to Ohio Stadium. As we crossed over Olentangy River - I could hear the music of The Ohio State Marching Band blowin' on the wind. We parked on a sports field close to the open end of the stadium. Administrators and former athletes were given priority parking.

Uncle Bus didn't attend many games. Bought tickets all right, but gave 'em to Grandfather Mac and his friends. He spent his Saturdays refereeing small college football games. He'd had his fill of big time football when he played tackle on defense and fullback on offense for three autumns at The Ohio State. Winter - he played center on the basketball team and spring it was track - his favorite sport. When the coach pressured him to play baseball or lose his scholarship - Bus walked away from The Ohio State. Played with the Canton Bulldogs - a professional football team - for awhile. Pay wasn't much and he didn't care for the way Jim Thorpe and Johnny Blood played the game. He told Grandfather Mac, "Not enough money to make me stay in a game where you get kicked - elbowed and gouged. And that damn Thorpe - he'd bite any leg

available at the bottom of pile. Hundred dollars a game won't even cover the damages. No Sir - not enough money in the world to put up with that kind of nonsense. More money in auto repair than professional sports."

We waited for the game to start - sittin' on the runnin' board - eatin' fried chicken Grandmother packed for us. When the drums started their rat-a-tat-tat and The Ohio State Band began to warm up - we wiped our hands clean and entered the stadium. I was so dazzled by the spectacle - the game went by in a blur. Eighty thousand people! Never been among so many in my life. But - I remember The Ohio State Marching Band. Had to be the best damn band in the land. Wasn't another college band around that played - or marched good enough to carry their instruments. When they marched into the stadium through the tunnel at the closed end of the horseshoe - the air filled with electricity. Drums marched in first - the lead drummer tappin' his sticks on the metal rim of his drum. Band followed in single file - formed under the goal posts. Drum major was the last to arrive. He strutted through the band wearin' a hat two foot high. He did a bow to the crowd - turned around - bent backwards until the top of his hat touched the ground - blew his whistle and all hell broke loose. Band marched quick step to the sound of a dozen drums. Blew his whistle again and the band played The Ohio State fight song as it marched down the field toward the flagpole. Hair stood up - all over my body. What a band - what a sound! An all boy brass band! Weren't any whimpy Michigan reeds or flute players in that group. When they played - all eighty thousand folks stood up and cheered. I made my mind up right then and there that I was going to play in our high school band. Mostly 'cause the band had all of their teeth - football players lost most of theirs.

At the start of the game - Illinois marched the length of the field like they were going to push Ohio State into the

grandstands. Kicked a field goal when they were stopped on the two yard line. In the second quarter - with all four players in the backfield spinnin' like tops - Ohio State scored two touchdowns. Couldn't tell who had the ball or which direction it was goin'. Each one of The Ohio State backs threw a forward pass. Both teams looked winded by the time the half ended. Playin' both ways wasn't a game for sissies. Half time was the best of all. Band made block formations honoring both schools - playin' great music - from Handy to Sousa. Illinois scored early in the second half on a fake pass and run - right up the middle for sixty yards. The Ohio State scored two more times and we could tell it was all, but over by the end of the third quarter. Leadin' 28 to 9 - The Ohio State's coach put in his reserves. Uncle Bus explained why, "Doesn't want to run up a score. Has to play in Champaign next year. Illinois can be tough at home and football teams have long memories." Had a hot dog and a coke, but the dog was tasteless and half cooked. Coke didn't have any fizz and mine bled right through the paper cup it was served in. Not allowed to have glass bottles in the stadium. Someone might throw one at the referee.

After the game was over - The Ohio State Marching Band formed up in the middle of the field and marched out the same way they came in. Took us awhile to get down to the ground level. Problem with parking close in is gettin' back out. I wanted to follow the band, but Uncle Bus kept me on track - steerin' me toward his roadster. Took our time walkin' back - made a pit stop at the men's rest room. Uncle Bus wasn't in a hurry, "No place to go. Better wait until the traffic thins out." Grandfather enjoyed the afternoon, "State played a pretty good game today." Uncle Bus wasn't as impressed, "Illinois acted like they were spooked by the large crowd. They're young. Next year they'll be tough to beat. How did you like your first big time football game - Johnny?" "Wow! It was great fun. Isn't that band somethin'."

Uncle Bus checked me over as he boosted me up to the rumble seat, "Looks like you're none the worse for wear. Wrap up in the car blanket - Johnny. Sun's on its way down. An open air ride home will be cooler than comin'." Even though we waited an hour after the game was over - cars were still crawlin' slowly along over the Olentangey River Bridge. Inched our way along the highway out of Columbus. Uncle Bus decided to cross over the Scioto River below Dublin, "Too much traffic on River Road" was all I heard through the wind. Roadster's convertible top had a small window in the back. Hard to see ahead through it from where I sat. My view was mostly out both sides and behind. When we crossed over the Scioto River below Dublin we were drivin' alone on an empty road through rough - hilly countryside. Usually the rumble seat was great fun, but not today. I was travelin' in the land of Old Ned Smith and the afternoon sun was changin' from fall warm to evenin' chill.

Too late - by the time I saw Dublin on the road sign and hunkered down in the rumble seat we were in front of the general store. Made myself as small as I could, but you know me - curiosity got the better. I peeked out the right side of the rumble seat and there they were - Old Ned Smith - One Eyed Jack - German Jerry and - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* sittin' on the front porch - six legs and two cloven hoofs hangin' over the edge. I ducked, but Old Ned saw me before I could get down. I could have kicked myself - bein' too nosy for my own good. Peaked over the back of the seat. Ned pointed at me with his forefinger. *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was prancin' up and down so hard it went right through the general store's porch. I could here 'em chantin' -

*"Damn you to hell - Johnny Ropp - Ropp - Ropp*

*The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*

*Is gonna' get you and you'll rot - rot - rot!"*

Ned and his gang weren't known for originality in their chants, but I got the message. Wasn't the endin' I'd pick for what had been otherwise - a very good day. I tried not to worry. I was leavin' for home tomorrow night and Old Ned would still be here. He couldn't cause me trouble tonight - or tomorrow and after that I'd be on my home turf. Still - I wished he and his gang would just go away and chase after someone else. I hunkered down out of the wind the rest of the way to Bellpoint. Didn't look up until we crossed over Mill Creek Bridge.

Climbed out of the rumble seat at Grandfather's house - nose turned blue from the wind. Drive from Columbus to Bellpoint was a might too cold for a ride in a rumble seat. Grandmother Mac looked me over, "Lot of stadium grime on this young man. Wash up at the cistern sink before supper." She checked behind my ears and gave 'em both a good scrubbin'. Grandmothers seem to know more about ears than anyone. After an afternoon of hot dogs and fried chicken - I wasn't hungry until I smelled the aroma of Grandmother's roast pork and gravy. Now that's a combination that would wake a dead man up with a case of the hungries. And she didn't make me eat anything green. Got away Scot free 'cause Mother and Father were eatin' supper at Grandfather Ropp's farm.

Had to go to the parlor after supper. Uncle Bus still insisted that everyone, but the ladies rest after a big evenin' meal. He and Grandfather replayed most every down of The Ohio State - Illinois football game. Cigar smoke rose to the ceilin' - fillin' the room. Smoke inched down from the ceiling like mornin' fog risin' off the Scioto River. When it got too close for comfort - I excused myself and went outside to sit on the front porch. Harvest Moon was big and orange - shinin' through the cool night sky. Shame to waste a night like this sittin' around. Wandered across the street to see if Will and Jake could come outside.



Jake was hittin' fungoes with his baseball bat to Will. Would have been all right if he was usin' a baseball - which he wasn't. I spoke up and they both jumped, "Jake you're gonna' ruin that bat hittin' rocks with it." "Don't have a ball. Will hit it in the river." "Didn't mean - too. Kind of sliced off the end. Want to skip rocks on the Scioto?" I nodded, "Yes" - Jake flipped his bat into the front yard and we ran downhill to the river bank - pickin' up flat rocks on the way. We picked up thin ones - ones shaped like pancakes and discs. Jake went first. Got down real low to the ground - slingin' his rock sidearm. Made it spin real fast with a flick of his wrist as he released it. His first rock skipped sixteen times before it went under. Will was next, but his didn't skip more'n nine hops - a splash and-a sunk. My rock skipped eleven times before it went under. Jake stood there grinnin' - knowin' we couldn't beat him - which we didn't. Will and I kept spinnin' rocks - gettin' fewer skips as time went on. After twenty minutes or so - we gave up.

I looked over at Jake - grinnin' at us. He was a good three years older than Will and me and a foot taller. He knew when it was time to stop, "Had enough? Lets find us a log and watch the full moon rise over the river." Will found a dry log about twenty yards north on the river bank. Could tell it was used by fishermen. Cigarette butts were strewn all along the the bank around it. Jake tried to move it grabbin' the south end, but couldn't drag it more'n a yard. Rememberin' my Father's Saturday evenin' talk about leverage - I used a branch as a lever and broke it free. We rolled it down to where the lane ended and the river began. Seemed like a lot more work than necessary to find a dry place to sit, but we did it anyway. Sat on it for awhile - quiet like. River was slow and smooth. Carp were rollin' in the shallows - makin' ripples like swimmers do when they coast between strokes. Moon was shinin' like a great big orange ball - its light reflectin' off big muddy.

Silence finally got to me, "Drove north from Columbus this afternoon. Passed by the general store in Dublin. Saw Old Ned and his gang sittin' on the front porch. When Ned saw me - he started shoutin' and pointin'. If looks could kill - I'd be dead. All four of 'em came after me in Osborn - early August. Chased me and my friends all the way to an abandoned rock quarry. We climbed the face and Jonsey threw a dynamite cap down at their feet. After Doc pulled the rock fragments outa' 'em - law chased 'em across the county line. Sure are hard over - comin' after me. You had any trouble with 'em?" Will offered, "Week after you left last summer - Old Ned and German Jerry were layin' around our general store most every day. Jake and me stayed away - 'cept when we had to help around the Church. Haven't been around since school started. We really got too 'em - didn't we?"

The more we bragged - the more agitated Jake got, "You two are causin' me a whole lot of pain. I'm gettin' tired of lookin' over my shoulder - wonderin' if Old Ned and his gang are comin' after me. Don't feel safe goin' out by myself anymore. We got to take the offense - make 'em worry more about the law - than chasin' after us. Got any ideas how we can make 'em play defense for a change?" I thought on it for awhile, but knew I couldn't help, "Maybe, but I'm leavin' for Osborn tomorrow evenin'. Won't have time to finish 'em off." Jake poked me in the chest with his finger, "Not that Tom Mix crap again. We don't have any settlers to defend. We're the ones that need help." Not listenin' - which is not a good idea - I said, "Why don't we burn down Ned's shed and have the Sheriff bust up his still?" Jake cut in - all irritated, "Can't do that. Sheriff all ready put 'em out of business." Will laughed out loud, "Had too - the Federals were breathin' down his neck. Couldn't tie the still too Ned. He had it on county land. Some say the Sheriff warned 'em." Jake added, "And now there's rumors that Old Ned and his gang have taken up thievin' and rustlin'. Some of the farmers south of here

are complainin' about losin' livestock." Will wanted to know, "When you comin' back?" "Not until Thanksgivin'. Did you hear that? Somethins' splashin' out on the river." Will replied, "There's oars in the water."

Jake put his finger to his lips and whispered, "Look out on the river." Hair stood up on the back of my neck. Three men in a rowboat were rowin' in our direction. I whispered, "Holy cow - looks like Old Ned and his gang are a-comin' our way." Didn't have to say a word. We hightailed it to Doc's yard and hid under his bench. Stuck our noses over the back and confirmed the worst. It was Old Ned and his gang - all except *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. Must-a locked him up in their shed. We were in for it. They were carryin' clubs. We dropped down outa' sight - flat on our bellies - quiet as Church mice. Will poked me in the arm - whispered, "That's my rowboat their usin' - the one we sailed over the dam." Couldn't stand not knowin' - so we raised our heads up a bit and took a peek.

One Eyed Jack jumped off the bow as their boat touched the bank. He looked around and shouted, "All clear." Ned whispered back, "Quiet you damn fool. Don't want anyone to know we're here. Hold her close - so I don't get my feet wet." Ned hopped out. German followed - slipped on the bank and wound up ankle deep in the river - swearin' a blue streak. Ned grabbed his arm and pulled him out, "Shut up you damn fool." They pulled the boat part way out of the water and German sat down on the edge - pourin' water out of his work boots. Ned was lookin' around like he knew we were here - hidin' in Doc's yard.

Soon as German had his boots on - Ned pointed at Doc's house and his gang followed - in a trot runnin' toward us. Passed by - not more'n ten feet from our hidin' place. We were shakin', but we kept our noses flat to the ground. Our

breathin' was louder than the winter wind, but Ned couldn't hear it. All three of 'em were makin' more noise than a flock of geese runnin' away from a hatchet at Christmas. Old Ned had enough of their commotion. He yelled at German, "Don't make so much noise. Stay on the path and follow One Eyed - he sees better at night. When we get inside - don't turn on any lights. We'll work by the light of the moon." Couldn't hold my tongue any longer. Had to let it out. I whispered, "Wonder what they're after this time?" The sound of glass breakin' was my answer. I asked another question, "What do we do now?" Jake whispered back, "Nothin'. Got no law around here. By the time we get a warnin' out - they'll be gone and we'll get blamed for breakin' Doc's window." I stood up and moved toward the house. Will grabbed my arm, "What are you doin'? None of those Tom Mix heroics while we're around." "Gonna' look in through Doc's window and see what Old Ned's up too. Where's Doc?" Jake followed me, "He's at the hospital. His Mrs. went along. Told Mom she had shoppin' to do."

Must have looked like two chipmunks - peerin' into Doc's side window - noses barely over the top of the sill. One Eyed Jack was holdin' a sack and Ned was emptyin' drugs into it out of Doc's medicine cabinet. German Jerry's head popped up into the window and we dropped like stones fallin' into the bushes. Jake ran for the bench and I followed - hunched over like an ostrich - thinkin' no one would be able to see me. 'Bout that time - Ned and his gang came stumblin' outa' the door like drunken sailors - carrying duffels. German was the last one out. He was whisperin' real loud to Old Ned, "I know I saw 'em - two little rats peerin' in the window. Had to be the Preacher's boys. Lets go get 'em."

Ned kept on runnin' - right on by us, "Don't give me any of your lip. Even if they saw you they won't say a thing. We have to get across the river and down the road. Need an

alibi and if we don't get back to the roadhouse in time - we won't have one." One Eyed Jack tossed his sack in the boat, "Ain't no one around - 'cept us and our friend waitin' across the river - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing.*" Moon's full - we'd a-seen 'em." German slipped on the bank and tumbled head over heels into the water. His sack flew up in the air toward the boat and One Eyed Jack caught it. Ned scolded, "Damnit - German - be careful with that sack. Be worth a pretty penny when we get back to Dublin." One Eyed Jack reached down and pulled German out of the water as Ned shoved the rowboat away from the bank. He pushed German into the boat sayin', "Row damnit! Lets get outa' here."

We let the air come out of our lungs - all at once - stood up and edged our way downhill to the river bank. Will asked Jake, "Got any idea where they're goin' too?" "Most likely parked their flatbed near the school - on the other side of the river. You heard Old Ned say they had to get to the roadhouse for an alibi. After that - who knows? Sheriff burnt down their hideout. No ones ever robbed Doc's office before. That's like burnin' a barn or robbin' Dad's Church. Don't get any lower than that. Don't have a choice. Johnny - you go tell your Uncle Bus. He'll know what to do - he ain't scared one bit of Old Ned. Those no-good moonshiners need to be put away." I wasn't certain, "What if he thinks I busted Doc's window?" Jake nodded, "Could be trouble, but none of us would steal from Doc. Doesn't matter if they do think we did it. It's the right thing to do." I agreed, "If we don't - we ain't no better than they are."

Runnin' across the road to Grandfather's house - I felt like a settler from a Tom Mix movie - on my way to tell Tom about a robbery. Got about half the story outa' my mouth before Uncle Bus was up outa' his chair. He was right over to the wall phone - callin' the Sheriff. While he was on the phone - Grandmother and Grandfather walked across the road to

Doc's and checked the damage. Uncle Bus motioned for me to follow him, "You did the right thing - Johnny. No telling what Ned and his gang would do to you if you tried to stop them." He measured the door window to Doc's office, "Damn fools. Could have walked right in. Doc never locks his door." Only two places were ever locked in Bellpoint - Doc's medicine cabinet and the door to the general store.

Pretty soon almost everyone in town had gathered around. Most excitement around here since Bellpoint won the State Basketball Championship - or when Grandfather Mac's general store burnt to the ground. Grandmother came back with a broom and a dustpan to clean up the glass. Uncle Bus cut a pane of glass from the sheet Grandfather had leanin' up against the back wall of his livery stable. The damage was repaired in a jiffy. All the excitement was over by the time the Sheriff's Deputy drove up. He didn't do much - 'cause he didn't listen - either.

Deputy spent less than two minutes askin' Will - Jake and me questions. Wasn't interested in where Old Ned said he was goin' - just what we'd seen. As he left - I whispered to Will, "He ain't gonna' catch up with Old Ned. Not tonight or ever. Whiskey Roadhouse will be closed - Ned'll be long gone before he starts lookin'." "Must not want to tangle with Old Ned's gang. Your Mom and Dad just drove up." I walked to the other side of the street. Grownups would know what was goin' on. They did, but back inside Grandfather's house all I learned was it's time for me to go to bed. Didn't want too. House was buzzin' with Old Ned sightins' and what he'd done. I sat down at the top of the second floor steps - so I could listen in. Grandfather was loadin' his double barrel shotgun with rock salt - in case Old Ned found his way back. Grandmother looked up the stairs and caught me listenin' in. She shooed me to bed. I was asleep by the time my head hit the pillow.

I felt a tug on my arm and a tap on my shoulder. Rolled over and opened my eyes. Father said, "You're going to help cut corn - today." "It's still dark out and it's Sunday." "Of course it is. Now shake a leg. Breakfast is waiting downstairs." Stretched my arms above my head and got all my parts awake. Rolled outa' bed happy. I was goin' to cut corn. Then I realized - Father was takin' me outa' harms way and cuttin' corn was as good excuse as any. I rubbed my eyes and looked for warm clothes. It was goin' to be cold ridin' on top Grandfather Ropp's wagon this mornin'. Hopped down the back stairs. Grandmother had a bowl of hot oatmeal cookin' on the range and hot chocolate in my cup. Cuttin' corn had to be serious business if it meant missin' Sunday School. Father was in a hurry, "We'll begin at first light - while the sun's still low on the horizon." Grandmother gave me a caramel roll to eat on the way.

On our drive to the farm - I had a question that was burnin' in my brain, "History books mention that Central Ohio was covered with forests. Whatever happened to 'em?" "Your book was right. Most of it was cut down and burned to clear land so it could be farmed. Rest was used to build houses - barns and corduroy roads." "What's a corduroy road?" "Logs are laid side by side. This used to all be forest and swamp land before it was drained. A corduroy road used to connect Bellpoint to Delaware. It was a rough ride, but better than being stuck in the mud. " "Must have been fun before they cut it all down. Would you like to go back?" "Don't think I would. Rattlesnakes were thick as branches on a tree along the Scioto and mosquitoes filled the air all summer."

Father relit his pipe, "Delawares hunted this area when it was first settled. Wasn't a healthy place." "Where'd the Delawares go?" "Most went west and some are still around. Married in with the first settlers. Those arrowheads your Grandfather Ropp and I look for. They were left here by the

Delawares." "Did Great Grandfather Ropp use wood from the old forest to build his house and barn?" "That's why they're still standing. The woods you see today are second growth. Every farm has one or two. Good for wild life - though we haven't had a bear or deer around here since before the Civil war." "So that's why you hunt pheasants - squirrels and rabbits." "You missed groundhogs - bobwhites - pigeons and black snakes."

Father turned into the farm lane, "We're almost there. Mind your manners and watch how you swing your corn knife. When you think you're an expert - that's when you'll cut yourself - so be careful." We passed through Grandfathers two pillars - guardin' the lane. Looked like cement obelisks from Egypt or small Washington monuments. I could still see black paint on the sides - where Grandmother scrapped the Studebaker. Perched on top the cement water tank was a magnificent cock pheasant. When he saw us - he began to strut - back and forth on the front ledge. Father pointed him out, "That cock Pheasant will be strutting there until hunting season. Morning the season begins - he'll be gone. Morning it's over - he'll be back." As soon as I got out of the car - Spot was at my side. I had two paws in my hands and a tongue lickin' my cheek. Grandfather led Sandy and Clyde outside from their stalls and handed me their leads, "Water them good - Johnny."

I led 'em to the cement water tank - gettin' adjusted to standin' between to giant Clydesdales. Always made me a bit uneasy. If one of 'em stepped on me - I'd never be able to walk again. Pays to show some respect to farm animals. Soon as you get too comfortable around 'em - that's when you'd get hurt. I walked 'em to the wagon - so Grandfather could hitch 'em up. He had to coax Sandy into his harness today. On a cold mornin' like today - he'd just as soon stay inside a warm barn and snooze.



Under Grandfather's wagon seat were three sharp corn knives - a gallon jug of water and several rolls of bindin' twine. Twine was used to tie around the corn stalks to hold the shocks together. Cock pheasant looked us up and down from his perch on the water tank and strutted to the far corner. Didn't budge until Spot jumped up in his face - barkin'. Then he fluttered to the ground - still in control of his world, but on the opposite side of the tank. Spot barked at him a bit more, but it was of no use. He couldn't squeeze through the fence to get at him -so our cock pheasant knew he was safe. Spread out his wings and flew back to his perch - still cock of the water tank. Father came out of the equipment shed and handed me a set of gloves, "A might large, but usable." Grandfather knew what I was thinkin', "Go on ahead. You can use the energy. We'll be out in the corn field until noon. Be a long time 'till dinner."

I was up the back porch steps - standin' on a chair and reachin' for the white candy sack quicker than Jack Robinson. Had an orange slice in my mouth and another in my hand before Grandmother Ropp shooed me out the back door. Didn't bang the screen door. Grandfather had 'em stored away for the winter. Soon as I climbed up to the wagon seat we were on our way. Father walked alongside - openin' and closin' gates, but mostly lookin' for arrowheads. A few still popped up out of the ground as it cycled through a freeze and then a thaw. Sandy and Clyde pulled our empty wagon at a brisk walk. Each rut and bump jolted my bones. Grandfather was talkative this morning, "Only one corn field left to cut and shock. The secret of cutting corn is to use a downward stroke - away from your feet. Use a diagonal cut - two to three inches above the ground. Bury the corn knife into the ground with a clean stroke. That way you'll cut corn and not your leg." Father opened the gate to the field. Grandfather set his brake - leavin' the wagon and horses outside. We began to cut until we had enough corn to make a shock and

room enough to bring the horses and wagon into the field. From then on it was cut and shock - cut and shock until the sun rose high on the north horizon.

We each took a row and competition began. I was always behind - still catchin' up as Father and Grandfather were bundlin' another shock. Grandfather called out when it was time to gather the stalks. From experience - he knew when we had the right number. The fun and excitement of cuttin' corn was wearin' thin after the third hour. When the competition faded it was replaced by peer pressure. But - try as I may - I was always behind. But - I didn't quit. Sun was high on the midday horizon by the time we tied the last shock and drove the wagon to the barn for Sunday dinner.

Sandy and Clyde trotted along toward the barn - frisky as new born colts. Grandfather had to hold them back or they would have done a pretty fair imitation of old Dan Patch - the world famous trottin' horse. Mornin' ride out to the field jolted my bones - not havin' much paddin' in the seat of my pants. Noontime ride almost jolted me off the wagon. Father had to jog alongside to keep up. I climbed down - rubbin' my hind end. I ground corn for the horses as Grandfather led them to the water tank. I had corn waitin' for them as they entered their stalls. They were as hungry as we were. Dinner meal was fall like - ham - boiled potatoes - gravy and biscuits. That was the good part. Didn't care for the green beans and beets, but had to eat one or two. Kept Grandmother from scoldin' me.

Grandmother stopped me as I was going out the door, "You're not going anywhere young man - not with those hands. Why they're red as can be. Next time you'll wear leather gloves if you want to help cut corn." She rubbed her magic lotion on my palms and the sting went away. Almost made it out the door, but she stopped me. "Your hands have to heal

and toughen up if you want to do a full day's work." I was left standing in the doorway - watchin' with mixed emotions as the wagon left without me. Pride said go, but sore hands said stay. Just as well - tempers grow short cuttin' corn. Doesn't pay to be around an angry farmer with a corn knife in his hands. Had company though. Spot stayed with me. He wasn't keen on followin' the wagon on a slow journey through the corn field. There weren't any rabbits to chase. Most had gone under winter cover in the deep tangled grass of the fence rows.

Grandmother handed me her egg basket, "Check those haymows for me. I'm too old to climb up there and don't go sneaking out to the field." Found two dozen good ones in the front haymows. Had to throw the eggs I found in the back haymow to the hogs. Halfway back to the kitchen - I heard a noise that sent a shiver up my spine. Couldn't mistake the sound of a flatbed Ford truck. Almost lost a few eggs as I ran toward the back porch. Spot was barkin', but more of a greetin' than a warnin'. Wasn't Old Ned Smith. It was one of the neighbors.

Grandmother came out on the back porch - wipin' both hands on the front of her apron, "Afternoon Cousin Thomas. What brings you around?" "Sorry to bother you - Mrs. Ropp. Is Griff around?" "He and his boy are cutting corn up in the east field. Johnny can walk you out there if you want to talk." "No need for that. When Griff comes in - tell him the Sheriff is forming a posse to chase after Ned Smith." "Is it because he broke into Doc's medicine cabinet last night?" "More'n that. He's into more trouble." "Why that's a shame. It's time for Mr. Smith to be locked up." "Ned - German Jerry and One Eyed Jack came back to Bellpoint this morning and tried to kidnap the Preacher's boys. The older one - believe his name is Jake - cracked German in the shins with a baseball bat. Johnny's Uncle Bus heard the commotion

and shot One Eyed in the hind end with a load of rock salt from a double barreled shotgun." "What happened to Mr. Smith?" "He took off in his truck with a hairy red looking fellow. Left his two friends to take the punishment." "Dad won't be in until sometime after three." "He's going to miss the fun." "No ones caught Ned Smith yet and I don't think the Sheriff will this time." "Have to try. Tell Griff to give me a call this evening."

Cousin Thomas drove out our lane spinnin' gravel - scatterin' chickens - dust flyin' - like he was goin' to be late for dinner. Grandmother placed her hand on my shoulder and lead me back into the kitchen. She reached into the cabinet above her refrigerator and handed me an orange slice, "Young man - from the look on your face you know more about this than you're letting on." "Old Ned chased after me - too." "Well - don't ever let him catch you. Why don't you go up to the attic and read one of your Father's dime novels?" "Yes Ma'am. Would it be all right if Spot and I took a walk along the river later on?" "No - you better stay close to home. Your Father wants to start back to Osborn before dark."

Grandmother took the lever action twenty-two long rifle down from the kitchen wall and began to load it. She leaned it against the wall in the corner next to the door. I ran upstairs and finished my book about the Kaiser. Then I found a cowboy book with a western good guy who was a lot like my hero - Tom Mix, but I knew he wasn't. I was in the middle of chapter three when Father called, "Come on down - Johnny - time for us to go." I marked the page where bandits captured the good guy cowboy and were takin' him to a old gold mine deep in the hills of South Dakota.

Kitchen clock was at three, "Why are we leavin' - so early?" "Dad and I finished the field - all because of your

help this morning." Grandmother gave me a hug and sent me out the back door, "Drive carefully." Grandfather waved as we drove down the lane. I wanted to help him with the horses, but Father was in a hurry. I asked, "Did Grandmother tell you what happened this mornin'?" "Bits and pieces. Mac will fill in the gaps. Sounds like Ned is out of control. We're leaving for Osborn right after supper." He turned west on Route 42 and drove over Bellpoint Bridge. Bellpoint looked deserted. No one was outside playin' - not even Will and Jake. Wasn't the same as the safe crossroads I left this mornin'. Doors that were never locked were now. Strangers who were once welcome wouldn't go unnoticed. Behind each door was a shotgun - loaded and at the ready.

Uncle Bus walked outside to greet us as we drove up, "I imagine you heard about the excitement we had this morning. Mom has supper ready. Come on inside. I'll fill you in as we eat." Grandmother led me to the kitchen cistern sink, "My-my look at those red hands. After you wash up I'll put some lotion on them." I overheard some of the days events at supper, but the doorbell rang and the Preacher asked to see Grandfather Mac. Didn't that top it all? Our Preacher was really agitated, "I'm leaving in the morning. Know that I'm supposed to give you notice, but Bellpoint is too dangerous for my boys." Grandfather was in-between happy and mad, "Not proper. We need time to interview a new preacher." "I don't give a holy damn about proper - not safe for us here. We're leaving for Lake Erie in the morning." Grandfather was just short of losing his temper, "You must not know your boys very well." He slammed the door on the Preacher. He came back into the dining room, "I'll phone the United Brethren office in the morning and let them know we need a Preacher."

Grandmother was all smiles, "I want to know a little more about the new preacher before you hire him. I'm not too happy with the one that's leaving." With all the commotion

goin' on - I was able to excuse myself from the table and was out in the kitchen before anyone missed me. With Will and Jake goin' away - if we moved to the farm - I wouldn't make a difference. There wouldn't be enough boys in Bellpoint High school to field a baseball team. Knew the grownups wouldn't tell me everything - so I slipped out the back through the kitchen door. Didn't have much time. We were headin' back to Osborn in less than an hour. I ran across the street and stood outside Will and Jake's house. They were gettin' another one of those lectures - so I walked down the lane to the river and skipped a few rocks. Walked back up the lane to see if the lecture was over. It wasn't. Will looked out the screen door. I pointed up the lane to Grandfather's back yard. Will nodded and I scooted. Sat on a bench by the livery stable and waited. Sun was restin' on top the horizon when Will came runnin' up the lane.

He was outa' breath - talkin' a mile a minute, "Jake said you'd gone back." "Leavin' in a few minutes." "Hear about the excitement we had this mornin'?" "It's all over Delaware County. Cousin Thomas was at the farm - formin' a posse - just like a Tom Mix movie." "You and that damn Tom Mix." "Is it true that you're movin' to Lake Erie tomorrow mornin'?" "Might be tonight. Soon as we finish packin'. Mom's been at it all day." "Sorry to see you go. We might be movin' to the farm after school's out next summer. Do you know where you're movin' too?" "To my Grandfather's place in Loraine County. Dad's givin' up preaching. Gonna' sell Bibles to farmers. We'll still be near water and Erie ain't as muddy as the Scioto."

We sat there swingin' our feet under the bench for a minute or two. Had to know, "What happened?" "We were walkin' to Sunday School in front of your Grandfather's place when Old Ned Smith came up the hill in his flatbed Ford truck - like a bat outa' hell. Came roarin' to a stop. One Eyed

Jack and German Jerry jumped out and chased Jake and me to our yard. Jake grabbed our baseball bat and whacked German in the shins. You should have seen the look on his face. He fell like a tree. One Eyed turned tail and ran back toward Bellpoint Road. Your Uncle was on him like stink on a skunk. He fired a barrel of rock salt into One Eyed's hind end and he fell screamin'. German came after your Uncle and he gave him the other barrel." "What happened to Old Ned?" "Don't know. What with German and One Eyed rollin' and moanin' on the ground - he took off. Didn't even hear his motor." "He probably coasted down hill in idle while you were occupied." "Talk about stupid. No one in Delaware County messes with your Uncle Bus." "Except Old Ned and his gang. Brains must be fried from all the whiskey they drink." Mother called, "Johnny - we're leaving in ten minutes."

Will wasn't done yet, "Bible must be right about an eye for an eye. German and One Eyed had to get repaired by Doc. He didn't have a thing to kill the pain since they stole it all the night before. Ain't much fun having a load of rock salt removed from your hind end without painkillers. Took more'n two men to hold 'em down while Doc worked. You could hear 'em screamin' a block away. German passed out when Doc set his broken leg. Jake snapped it like a dry twig. Butter would've melted in their mouths after Doc fixed 'em up. They were as polite as could be. Confessed to crimes no one knew about. When the law catches up with Old Ned - he'll go away for a long time." "Where are they now?" "Locked up in the Jail at the Courthouse."

I had my say, "Posse is out looking for Old Ned - just like in a Tom Mix movie." "Bet Old Ned's long gone by now." "You're going to miss all the excitement up on Lake Eire." "Won't miss runnin' from Old Ned." "Where will Ned go if they catch him?" "State Prison in Columbus, but he'll figure a way to finagle his way to the prison farm near London."

"Hope not. That's too close to Osborn. Write and give me your address." "Let's spit on our palms and shake on it." I spat in my right palm and so did Will. Made a real wet handshake. I watched Will as he walked back down the lane. Breakin' a promise is one thing boys do as well as grownups. He didn't write and neither did I. I never heard from him - or Jake again.

I was on my way to the kitchen when Mother came around the corner of the house, "Didn't you hear me? Your Father is ready to leave." I hopped in the back seat and we were on our way. I was too keyed up to sleep, but I closed my eyes and pretended too. Mother and Father must have thought I was. They talked about movin' back to the farm. Mother asked, "What do you plan to do with all the land. There must be over two sections." "Can't farm half of it. Good for sheep - though. Think Johnny will make a good farmer." "Not after living in town. I'm not moving to the farm until you promise to put indoor plumbing in. I won't live in a house without a bathroom. We'll need two and a half baths and a new kitchen." "Can you live with what we have as long as we begin to remodel." "I can put up with the kitchen, but we must have bathrooms. Your Dad will have to agree to put them in before I'll move."

Should have kept my mouth shut, but I didn't, "Are we movin' to the farm?" Father laughed, "Little ears don't miss a thing. We might. Your Grandfather wants to retire and move to town. It's a lot of land for one person to farm. We'll have to modernize and you'll have to help." "Would you sell the horses?" "Grandfather's pets? Never." Mother asked, "Would you like to live on Grandfather's farm?" "If we have too, but I'll miss my friends." "Don't mention it too anyone. We're not certain if we'll move. If the School Board finds out your Father is leaving - They won't renew his contract and we might change our minds."



Now I couldn't go to sleep. Maybe livin' on a farm wouldn't be so bad after all. And sheep! Spot would be in Border collie heaven, "Will Spot stay with us." Father laughed, "Delaware isn't a good place for a Border collie and if we have sheep - we'll need his help." "With less than nine boys in high school - I'll make the basketball team!" My mind was goin' a mile a minute. A new school! And I all ready knew most of the boys. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all. We passed through Plain City as twilight turned the western sky from purple to gray and then night. Harvest Moon came up over the eastern horizon like an orange pumpkin on Halloween night.

Around the corner - by the Amish dairy outside of Plain city - I though I saw a flatbed Ford truck parked in the shadows. I turned around and looked out the back window, but it was gone, "Could it be Old Ned Smith?"

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Crime doesn't pay - ask German and One Eyed.
3. Learn to play a band instrument.
4. When you're ahead - don't run up the score.
5. Livin' is temporary - nothin' is forever.

Now I had a secret I couldn't share. Not countin' some of my run-ins with Old Ned. And maybe Old Ned would be so busy runnin' away from the law - he'd forget about chasin' after me. And maybe the moon is made out of cheese.

# 5

Fall - wonderful crisp golden fall. And Halloween was just around the corner. The time of year when we could be a little bad and get away with it. Fall - football is in season - jumpin' into a pile of leaves is a sport - cider has substance and nights are too cold to play outside. There's nothin' as invigoratin' as breathin' in the aroma of burnin' autumn leaves on a crisp fall afternoon. Maybe it's because Ohio skies finally turned from a milky haze to a blue - so deep you could see forever. Fall was the best of times - wedged between summer heat and the gray days of winter. But - darn it all - I wished we had fall all year 'round. After we returned from Bellpoint - the temperature dropped below freezin' and stayed that way for a few days. Any leaf that hadn't bothered to turn red - or yellow - or brown did. Wasn't any snow. Too soon for that. Basketball season was about to begin. Osborn's school wheel was takin' another seasonal spin.

Weather was dry and cold. Just right for firmin' up the dirt on Willy's outdoor basketball court. Slick's Dad had a typical driveway - two strips of cement with grass in-between - 'cept we'd turned the grass into dirt playin' basketball. Fall - our ball would bounce without splashin'. In spring - or winter it was muddy - or raisin' summer dust. Basketballs made of leather had a rubber bladder inside that didn't hold air very well. When they had a little age on them - like old folks - their spring was gone. Nothin' worse than an under inflated ball - 'cept maybe one that is over inflated. If you didn't have enough air - it wouldn't bounce off the dirt - just go thunk. Over inflate one - it'd bounce too high and

hit you under the chin'. Then your teeth would cut your lip. As much as we enjoyed playin' basketball outside - playin' inside on a real court made us feel like varsity. Saturday mornin' - before sunup - the Bath High School coach let us use his indoor courts. Supervised us a bit 'cause one of us might accidentally grow tall and become a real player.

Almost forgot to tell you what happened to Old Ned Smith. Just like I figured - he was too smart for the law. Old Ned was still on the loose. Grandfather Ropp said he jumped across the state line to Newport - Kentucky - across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Rumor had it he was firin' a boiler on a big river sternwheeler. Couldn't figure out why he didn't make a career out of it. It bein' steady work and all legal. Stealin' was like lookin' for Indian gold. For every fool that found some - there were ten thousand that didn't. One Eyed Jack and German Jerry were locked up in the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus. Justice moved fast before those Washington lawyers were turned loose. Osborn didn't have an overabundant supply of 'em. Only had two and Father said that was one too many. The accused had a right to a speedy trial and the courts obliged. Only worry I had was - what if Ned's friends were sent to the Prison Farm outside London? Old Ned would break 'em outa' there for sure. Couldn't worry about what-ifs. Had to wake up early in the mornin to play basketball in the gym.

Woke up Saturday mornin' and Osborn's sky was black as midnight - moon had disappeared over the western horizon. I rolled outa' bed - my skin feelin' like a goose bump factory and ears so cold - felt like they'd break off. Now that's dangerous. Willy said when they got that way - all you had to do was bump into somethin' hard - both your ears would fall off and you wouldn't know it. Turned on the ceilin' light - so bright I couldn't see. Soon as I got my eyes adjusted - I pulled on my pants and tied my shoe laces into

knots - tryin' get my sneakers on too fast. Pulled a sweater over my head and grabbed my gym bag. Didn't stop to brush my teeth. Didn't have time. Mother had wheat bran simmerin' over the pilot light on her gas stove. Filled my bowl halfway and sprinkled brown sugar over the bran. Poured milk to the rim and mixed it up. That way I could down it like a hot milkshake. Had to hurry. If we showed up late - we'd have to sit around and watch. Wolfed down the last of my bran and hurried out into the early mornin' cold. Ran along the sidewalk - tryin' not to step on a crack - all the way to Willy's house.

Lights were out at Willy's and so was he. Couldn't tap on his bedroom window. It was on the second floor. Picked up a little pebble and bounced it off the window and waited. Lights didn't come on. He was either dead or he'd gone on alone. Willy didn't care for sports - anyway. His idea of a good time was prancin' around in front of a band with a baton in his hand. My feet were beginnin' to freeze - so I took off joggin'. Jonsey caught up with me by the village gazebo - in the center of town. He was carryin' a gym bag - same as me. We had a tee shirt and gym shorts inside. We wore our sneakers. Most everyone had one pair. He asked, "Do you know where Slick is?" "Don't know. Lights were out and I couldn't wake him up." "Damn it's cold. Can't even feel my feet." "Should have worn thicker socks." "Don't own any." Right after I said it - I knew I shouldn't have. With his Dad gone - times were tough for Jonsey's family. I figured a faster run might get his feet warm, "Race you to the gym." We made it to the back door breathin' hard and walked down-stairs to the basement. Boy's locker room was so cold - felt like the inside of a meat locker.

We dressed in the varsity locker room, but weren't allowed to use the lockers. They were for high school and the team. I wadded my shirt and pants up into a ball -

stuffed 'em inside my gym bag and pulled on my gym clothes. Didn't like wearin' a tee shirt. Only time I ever did was when Mother made me or when we played basketball. Tee shirts were underwear. No boy worth his salt would be caught dead in one. Didn't like the way it felt around my neck. Tom Mix might wear a bandanna, but he'd never be caught dead in a tee shirt. Wasn't manly - and a tank top? Only gangsters wore 'em. Wearin' one of those was awful - lookin' like a bank robber. Underwear was for sissies - 'cept as gym clothes. Wouldn't catch a real boy wearin' a tee shirt out in the open - not one that showed. Pitched my gym bag on top the locker. Shoe laces were under the rubber soles of my sneakers - so I worked out the knots and tied 'em right.

Made it upstairs to the gym just in time to choose up sides. It was as cold as a meat locker upstairs in the gym - too. We bounced around like jumping jacks - tryin' to keep warm. About the only organization we had was time and place. Sometimes we'd do lay-up drills. Didn't like 'em - not at all. I'd go too far under the basket and hit the bottom of the rim - or underneath and have to shoot a reverse lay-up. Neither one pleased the coach. We called our own fouls and didn't try to maim each other. If we did - we'd get ours. Other than not likin' reverses lay-ups - coach had a lot of patience with us. Had too - since he was the only one there and he had three games goin' at once.

I shot the ball ten times and made two - about average for our group. Thought it was because of the cold air in the gym. Outdoors we made almost half of the ones we launched. Could have been the pressure of tryin' to impress the coach. We all tried way too hard - so everyone shot their fair share of air balls. Or - it could have been our baskets were lower. Played three games before the older boys arrived. Can't remember who won or who lost. We didn't keep track. Wasn't important anyway. The fun was in the playin'.

Jonsey and me were dressed and were outa' the locker room by ten. Didn't shower. No one had a towel. Even if we did - we wouldn't. Wet hair when it's cold outside? Willy said it would make your nose stop up. And Willy? He was a no show - so Jonsey and me stopped by his house on our way home. His Mother came to the door, "Sorry boys - Willy came down with the German Measles. He might be okay by Monday - in time for school." I looked at Jonsey and backed away. I had 'em last year and he had the signs - red spots poppin' out on his cheeks. Asked him, "How do you feel?" "Woozy, but I thought it was the basketball game 'caused it." "Are you hungry?" "No." "Better go home - get yourself checked. Looks like you're comin' down with 'em - too. If you stay home - might not get to the upchuckin' stage.

Jonsey looked none too happy. Worst thing that can happen to a boy is get sick on a weekend when school was out. And that's when it always happened. Mother said life isn't always fair and I figured gettin' sick at the wrong time was what she meant. This was the wrong Saturday to be sick. Tom Mix had a brand new movie showin' at the theater and today was the day! The last episode of our weekly Saturday serial was showin'. I'd looked forward to this weekend for two months. Every Saturday - before the main feature we had a short black and white serial. Ours had villain wearin' a black mask and this was the Saturday he was goin' to take it off. Every kid in Osborn went to Saturday matinee. Only cost ten cents and an ice cream cone afterwards at the soda fountain was a nickel. Theater sold candy and popcorn in boxes, but they charged too much - so we never bought any. If you dropped popcorn on the floor - be a month before you were let back in. So we couldn't take a chance. My weekly allowance was fifteen cents. Ten cents for the movie and five cents for an ice cream cone. Never could make up my mind - chocolate or strawberry. Vanilla was for girls. Chocolate usually won me over.

Last summer the soda fountain made my ice cream decision almost impossible. Owners added two new flavors - pineapple and lemon. Both were made outa' real fruit and were they ever good. Lemon would cool you right down and pineapple made you feel like you were in Hawaii. Willy and Jonsey hardly ever ate ice cream. Willy received a dollar allowance and Jonsey made more'n a dollar sellin' newspapers at the main gate to Patterson Field. But - come Saturday - they were always tryin' to borrow my last nickel - or take a lick of my ice cream cone.

When I returned from playin' basketball - house was empty. Mother was at the library - Father at a coaches meetin' in Dayton and my sisters were at a friend's house. Made myself another Ohio lunch - peanut butter and mayonnaise on wheat bread. Washed it down with a glass of cold milk. Checked the bottom of my glass for wash back. Had an inch of it - mostly peanut butter in color. Poured it out in the grass and washed my glass. Didn't lock the door. No one did. We had police. Didn't have any crooks hangin' around Osborn - or Fairfield. Ran all the way to the library. If I was late for the movie - I'd have to stand up in back if all the seats were taken. Mother was expectin' me. She had four new boy's adventure novels on the corner of her desk, "Stop back in after the movie. I'll save them for you. You might find one to your liking." She handed me a quarter and I just stood there bug eyed. She squeezed my hand, "You're growing up - so you need more than fifteen cents." Knew now was not the time to run off at the mouth - so I gave her a kiss on the cheek and ran out the door.

Even though I was in a hurry to get in line and wait for the ticket window to open up - I didn't run or even jog. A boy can't think when his innards are bouncin' about, "I'm richer than I've ever been. A whole quarter!" I'd learned from experience - don't ever question a grownup's motives.

And never ever - when they did you a favor - or they might change their minds. Had to think about what I would do with that extra ten cents, "I'm rich enough to buy a comic book - milk shake - banana split - almost anything and still have enough for a movie." Thinkin' and not runnin' put me at the end of the ticket line when the window opened.

Buy the time I purchased my ticket - I was relegated to the last row. Our favorite seats - down front - were occupied. Could hardly make out who the villain was when he took off his black mask. Turned out to be the rich old whiskey sellin' saloon owner who was tryin' to buy up the entire valley. He and his gang were scarin' the settlers so they'd sell out cheap. Willy and Jonsey missed a great Tom Mix movie. Maybe one of Tom's best ever. I sat right on the edge of my seat. Tom was ambushed from behind. Now - no one would ever get the better of Tom straight on. Anyway - Tom and his sidekick - can't remember who he was, but he wore a white hat - were tied up and left in a deep silver mine - sittin' next to a lit stick of dynamite. Tom Mix didn't panic. He wiggled himself into a sittin' position and took his time. Thought himself right out of this fix. Scooted next to a broken shovel and rubbed the ropes that were 'round his wrists on the blade. Picked up that stick of dynamite - with the fuse almost to the end - and threw it out the front entrance. Landed next to the gang that tried to do him in and they got theirs.

Tom Mix had to be the greatest cowboy that ever lived. He rounded up bad guys - roped steers and shot his six shooter straight. Tom didn't mess around with any of that sissy stuff - singin' on his horse or playin' a silly guitar. Only hillbillies'd play a guitar. Not Tom - he was a real workin' cowboy. Tom came out west from Mix - Pennsylvania when he was a bit older than me. Worked ranches and rodeos before movies. Tom Mix was the world's greatest!



Walkin' into bright sunlight from inside a dark theater almost makes you go blind. Stood there for awhile - until my eyes adjusted. And I still had fifteen cents burnin' a hole in my pocket. Don't know what came over me, but I walked right past the soda fountain. My mind must've been taken over by aliens or maybe it was Tom Mix's example. Decided to save fifteen cents a week from now on - just like the richest man in the world did when he was a boy. Yes Sir. I'd do the same as John D. Rockefeller. Start savin' dimes and end up ownin' my own company. I'd have to open a bank account so I could make it grow by earnin' interest. If I'd learned one thing from watchin' grownups - you needed money to make money and John D. Rockefeller showed me the way. Any boy could do it if he saved his dimes.

Goin' home was outa' the question. My sisters would be listenin' to the wailin' saxophones of popular swing bands on radio. Some of 'em sounded like a roomful of cats in an old folk's home - dodgin' rocking chairs. Glen Miller or Kay Kayser were the only bands I could stand. Willy's parents bought him a tenor sax. Had a long way to go before he could even sound like a cat with its tail caught under a rockin' chair. Willy would place that piece of metal between his lips and the noise! Hurt my sinuses. Couldn't play it worth a lick, but he kept on tryin'. My friends were home sick and radio bands made my stomach queasy. So - Saturday afternoon at the library was better than doin' nothin'.

Mr. Andrew Carnegie - a Scotsman who owned steel mills - donated more'n ten thousand libraries - all across America. But - he missed Osborn. Mother's library was a one room buildin' in our number one town. What it lacked in size - it made up in warmth and quality. I looked through the four books Mother picked out and selected *Tom Sawyer* by Mr. Mark Twain. Mother stamped the date on it, "Good choice. It's time you begin to read the classics." I leafed through it

and saw enough captioned illustrations to get my interest. Sat down at the readin' table and started at the beginnin'. I was on page ninety-five when Mother was turnin' the lights out. It was time to go home.

Walked home with Mark Twain's book tucked under my arm. Mother asked, "How do you like Mr. Twain?" "Words seem a bit strange. Talked funny back then. Always thought the Scioto River was wide and deep, but his Mississippi must be wide as an ocean." She nodded, "Supposed to be the biggest river in the country, but I've never seen it. Your Father and I have never been west of Indiana." When we arrived home - I picked up at page ninety-six and read until it was time to go to bed - stoppin' only for supper. Couldn't get over Tom ridin' down river on a raft. Knew what I was going to do if we moved to the farm. In my spare time - I'd build a raft and float it down Mill Creek. If it worked - I'd take it on the Scioto River - all the way to the river bank across from Grandfather Ropp's farm.

With Will and Jake gone north - I wouldn't have anyone around Bellpoint to play with. Twain's book about Tom Sawyer convinced me. Floatin' down river on a raft had to be one of the greatest adventures in the whole wide world. And there were boards and nails up in the loft of the livery stable. My mind was racin' so fast - I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until after Thanksgivin'. The last thing I remember before my eyes closed - was Tom layin' on his back - lookin' up at the stars - floatin' down big river.

Wakin' early Sunday morning and goin' to Sunday School isn't half bad if you have a friend. With Willy quarantined - I had to go it alone. Couldn't attend United Brethren - like Grandfather's in Bellpoint. Didn't have one in Osborn or Fairfield so we walked to the Methodist Church. Don't know why we picked it - 'cause it was the farthest away of

all. Walk was longer than ever today with the wind blowin' across Huffman Prairie. Felt to me like winter had arrived two months early. Pulled my collar up and walked backwards into the wind. Worked fine until I turned around and tried to walk into the wind. Cold - so cold - wind cut through my jacket till I was chilled to the bone. Would have turned around and gone home, but didn't. Tom Mix would never be a quitter and neither would I.

Mother made me wear a tie. Ties made my neck feel like it had rope around it - like a rustler's neck - the one hanged in Tom's movie yesterday. Couldn't give up - so I decided to walk backwards and brave it out. On a windy - cold day like this - wished I went to Jonsey's Church, but we couldn't. Jonsey went to a Lutheran Church. Somethin' about bein' a member of the Missouri Synod. Didn't know what that meant, but Willy thought it might be a branch of the Jewish religion. Convenient - wasn't more'n a block from my house and right down the alley from Slick's. Jonsey talked us into attendin' Sunday School with him - so we did. Stayed on for quite awhile, but we both had to quit. It was right after the free cookie episode.

Talk about mad - Slick and me were steamin' that Sunday mornin'. Every time I bring the subject up - he gets madder, "Why - I almost starved to death. Should-a thought twice before we ever decided to attend a Sunday School run by them Synod folks from Missouri." Now - goin' to Sunday School run by relatives of Jesse James ain't much different than goin' to Sunday School in a regular church. I wouldn't mention it to Slick, but I really enjoyed goin' to Jonsey's Church. I could sleep in half an hour later - 'cause it was so close to my house. And those Lutherans used pretty much the same Bible as the United Brethren and Methodists did. And our Sunday School classroom was right inside the front door, but Willy and me - our split with 'em was predestined.

Me and Willy got up late that Sunday. Barely made it to the Church in time for Sunday School and neither of us had time for breakfast. After Sunday School was over - Jonsey said, "You're in luck - Pastor is servin' grape juice and cookies today. We gotta' go." We were starved, but Willy wasn't sure, "How many speeches before we eat?" "Won't be more'n thirty minutes. Sunday School teacher said there wasn't gonna' be time for a long sermon." Willy knew most everything and he didn't look convinced. I asked, "You game - Slick?" "Maybe. What kind of cookies?" Jonsey was goin' out the door, "Big sack of 'em. Looked like sugar." We ran upstairs to the big room with benches. Willy still wasn't sure, but he came along, "Well - okay. But - if they don't serve us in an hour - I'm walkin' out."

Found a place in the back - where I'd always sit if given a choice. Big crowd on hand. We must not have been the only ones who heard about free food. Wish I had a watch - seemed like it was forever before our turn to go up to the rail to eat. After this episode I figured the rail was in place to keep the congregation from gettin' a free run at lynchin' the Pastor. And this one deserved to have his neck stretched. Jonsey knelt down - so figurin' there'd be no cookies if we didn't - Willy and me followed. Pastor gave Jonsey his share, but when he got to us he said loud enough for folks outside to hear, "Can't serve you two communion. You haven't been confirmed." Passed us right by. When we didn't move - an usher lifted us up by the arms - manhandled us to the rear. Willy was so mad he kept right on goin' out the door. He was spittin' nails, "Damn that Jonsey. He promised us we'd eat and I sat there for over an hour and didn't get fed." Jonsey came out behind us, "You shouldn't have made such a commotion. A Missouri Synod Pastor won't feed you unless you've been confirmed." Willy grabbed Jonsey by the tie, "Why didn't you tell us that before we went upstairs?" I asked. "What is confirmed?" "You have to go

through religious instruction." "Now you tell us. Well I'm finished going to your Synods Church." Slick said, "Next week were gonna' be Presbyterians. Bet they let us drink the grape juice and eat the cookies."

Presbyterian Church was a block farther, but still a mile closer than the Methodist. And I liked Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church. Synod had it's main entrance on the side. This Church had its entrance to the back - just like United Brethren in Bellpoint. Never could understand why the front of a church was at the back. Maybe that was one of those things you learned when you were confirmed. Sunday School with the Presbyterians was the best ever. Wasn't long and we had a great teacher. Made old Bible stories seem fresh and new. So - it was my greatest disappointment when Willy told me about Presbyterians havin' a disease called predestination. Went to Sunday School there till just before vacation in Bellpoint when Willy pulled the plug, "Can't stay here. You and me are gonna' be Methodists." "I like it here. Won't they serve us cookies?" "Don't know, but it doesn't matter. We can't stay." "Got to be a reason." "Predestination." "What?" "If you're not a Presbyterian you can't go to heaven." "No problem - we can join." "Won't make any difference. They believe it's determined before birth. If you and me stay here we'll go straight to hell. Our only hope is to get out of Presbyterian Sunday School before we're trapped into goin' to hell." "Why would they want us to attend if we're goin' to hell?" "Presbyterians must need sinners."

Our Catholic Church was halfway between the Synod and damnation. I wanted to try Sunday School there, but Willy'd have no part of it. I'd attended a wedding once. It was like a high school pageant with robes - flags - smoke and it was all in a foreign language. Now that was neat. Wouldn't have to listen to the same old stories over and over. But -

Willy wouldn't go, "They preach in Latin and we'd have to go to school to learn it. And unless you pass the tests - you'll never get a cookie. Be the same as going to a Synod. Methodists give grape juice and cookies to anyone who can reach up to the rail. And we won't have to take any extra schoolin'." No extra school and free cookies settled it. Willy and me became Methodists by default. But - if Osborn or Fairfield had a Holy Roller Church - we'd a-gone there for sure.

We'd seen a Holy Roller Church in late August. It was wonderful - everyone stuck their hands up in the air and sang and shouted. It was like a circus, - tent and all. Even had an acrobat for a preacher. He'd climb up the center tent pole sayin' he was goin' to heaven - and then he'd slide down sayin' he was going to hell. Didn't have an organ - just guitars - drums and tambourines. When they got goin' the whole tent jumped up and down. And when their preacher really got wound up - he'd roll around on the floor and shout in a language we couldn't understand. Willy said it was Latin - and the preacher, "He's a fallen away Catholic. Once a Catholic Priest falls - he's condemned to wander the world preachin' inside tents." I was beginnin' to believe Willy was full of it. But - going to Church after watching a tent full of Holy Rollers holdin' hands was pretty tame.

Made it inside the Methodist Church and downstairs to the basement with all my parts attached - though a cold fall wind had done its job. Couldn't feel my nose or ears and my hands and feet were numb. Classroom was almost empty. Only me - three girls and the teacher. Teacher didn't look like he felt too well, but the girls were doin' fine. Lesson was mercifully short today. About someone called Job - who no one - including God seemed to care for. This was the part of the Bible where everyone got smited. No turnin' the other cheek with Job's friends. After workin' on Grandfather's

farm - I couldn't understand why anyone would sit on top a manure pile to think. 'Course the Bible called it a dung heap. Didn't make much sense to me. Told the teacher, "Why even Old Ned Smith wouldn't hang around Grandfather's manure pile any longer than necessary. Smell would knock crows out of the sky." Teacher asked me, "Who is Ned Smith - Johnny?" "Ugly old moonshiner from Dublin - Ohio and my own personal devil. Has a devil's helper - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* for a friend. His thing can eat a whole cow in one sittin'." Our Teacher gave me one of those looks that told me my talkin' was over - cut class short and excused himself. I could see a few red spots breakin' out on his cheeks.

Didn't stick around and go to Church. Didn't feel like I needed it and Preacher wasn't servin' food. And was I ever starved. Walkin' against the wind had worked up my appetite. Goin' home was much easier than comin'. Wind was at my back - so I ran most of the way. Kept me warm. Neither Father or Grandfather Ropp were much on goin' to Church. Grandfather Mac never missed. But the Ropp side of my family decided to cut out the middleman and go direct. Mother went to United Brethren in Bellpoint, but didn't attend here. But - she made sure I went. When I rebelled - she brought me up short, "I know your Father doesn't attend anymore. Before you can speak directly to the Lord - you must go to Sunday School and study religion - or he won't listen. Grandmother Mac asked me to make sure you attend. And your Grandfather presides over the Church board." Couldn't fault that kind of logic - so I went.

Breakfast was over and it was too soon for our noon meal - so I made a sandwich out of left over bacon and sliced tomatoes. It was so good - I made another one. Too cold to read outdoors - so I holed up at my desk and picked up where I'd left off in Mr. Twain's book. Finished *Tom Sawyer* on the

fate of Indian Joe as the organ theme to *One Man's Family* came up through the register. Mother followed with, "Supper's ready - Johnny. Did you finish your book about life on the Mississippi?" "Yes Ma'am - it was a fun read." "Did you relate to Tom and Huck?" "Yes Ma'am. Felt like I was a part of Hannibal. Reminds me of livin' along the Scioto River - a lot like Bellpoint and Concord Township today." Mother had prepared pan fried potatoes and breaded pork chops and I ate until I was stuffed. Afterwards we listened to Fred Allen and Jack Benny's radio programs. I was about to help my sisters work on a puzzle when Mother asked the question that stops all fun, "Have you finished your homework?"

You know what makes summer so special? Well - I do. Don't have a single Monday - not one - all summer long. Fall - winter and spring - we have five Mondays. I know their disguised as Tuesday - Wednesday - well - you get my drift. Least it wasn't dark when we went to school. Didn't spring forward or fall back. Stayed right on God's time. Didn't have to worry about gettin' run down by a car on our way to school in the dark. Stopped by Willy's on the way. He was half asleep when he stumbled down the side steps - pullin' his sweater on over his head. Willy had a whole world full of grumbles when he woke in the morning.

Slick stopped at the bandstand and placed his feet up on the bottom step and tied his shoe laces, "Hate goin' to school almost as much as I hate Mondays." I had waited a long time - since I came back from Bellpoint - to give my answer, "Goin' to school is like cuttin' corn at Grandfather Ropp's." Willy bit, "What's cuttin' corn like?" "Have to get up early - work bent over and there's no one around to lend a hand when you need one." "Got to be just as borin'. What would your buddy Tom Mix do?" "Marry the schoolmarm and go drift fishin' like Tom Sawyer." "Tom Sawyer?" "Book I read while you were gettin' well." "Any good?" "Got some



swell ideas about buildin' a raft." "Mad River's too far away and runs too fast for a raft." "Scioto River is slow muddy and perfect." "You won't have enough time." Almost blurted out that we were leavin', but caught myself in time, "You ought to read more books." "Rather play my tenor sax. Books are for worms."

Didn't talk the rest of the way. Too busy tryin' not to step on a crack in the sidewalk. Willy kept sayin', "Step on a crack and you'll break your Mother's back." Takin' two steps on one block and one on the next wasn't easy for short legs. Last time I slipped and stepped on a crack - that same day I fell off my bike and landed on the grass. Didn't pay to tempt fate. Couldn't step on the grass - heavy dew had turned it white with frost. If I did we'd kill it - make large brown footprints when it dried.

It was a Beautiful day for a Monday - wasn't a cloud in the sky. Sun was risin' over the tree tops - looked just like last night's Hunter's Moon - orange as a Halloween pumpkin. Wasn't a day for anyone to be locked up in school. Wasn't much fun having your Father teach at the same school. Mine taught French and Math on the other side of the buildin' in High School. Willy and me were exiled to the middle - Jr. High side. Math was a struggle for me. My mind was analog in a digital world. Up side was no one would try to beat up on me. Down side was my parents knew every move I made and my teachers expected too much from me.

Jonsey waved at us. He was sittin' where we always waited - on the top step of the Jr. High entrance. He looked a bit washed out, "Hey Jonsey. Your red spots are gone." "Sicker than a dog Saturday night." The first bell clanged and sent us runnin'. Had five minutes to get to our room or we'd be tardy. In the Seventh grade we had more than one teacher. But - we weren't allowed to change rooms - not with

puberty about to strike. We stayed in the same classroom and our teachers changed rooms. Only time we got out was to go to the cafeteria or to the bathroom. Most of us brought our own lunch. Couldn't afford to eat at the cafeteria - so we had to eat in the same room. If it wasn't for music lessons - I'd never seen daylight. Music lessons were held in the band room. If you call blowin' into a Song Flute - music. We ate our lunch there - had fifteen minutes. Then we'd take out our song flutes.

Now - a Song Flute was not my first choice when it came to band instruments. A Song Flute to a musician is like water wings to a swimmer. Both were for trainin' - not the real thing. Havin' me take Song Flute lessons is like tryin' to teach a monkey to read - it couldn't be done. I'd look at the notes on the pages of my Song Flute music book and go blank. Never knew where to place my fingers. Mother wouldn't let me out of it, "Now - Johnny - music is one of the fundamental parts of education." "Did you take music when you were in school?" "We didn't have a music teacher or a band at Bellpoint. I want you to have the opportunity I missed." So here I was in a Song Flute class - like a weed in a flower bed.

Willy loved Song Flute as much as he did his tenor sax. Got that far away look in his eyes every time he placed the mouthpiece between his lips. Played every note like the Pied Piper - perfectly. Willy would be able to attract a flock of rats with his tune. Not with his tenor sax. Slick's trouble was the reed. He's push the keys on his sax and make a sound like a flock of goosed geese. Song Flute was as easy for him as it was impossible for me. He didn't understand my plight, "Just put the mouthpiece between your lips and blow. Easy as pie. Don't even have a reed." "I can blow into it all right. Just can't coordinate the music notes on the page to my fingers on my flute."

Bandmaster terminated my music lessons that very noon - after it was my turn to play solo. I could hide in a crowd, but not all alone. Must have been painful for him - coverin' up his ears, "Stop! I can't take anymore. Can't you read music?" "No Sir." "You're excused. Turn in your song flute and music book. You start on drums tomorrow at noon. Tell your Mother you need drum sticks." I sat in the back of the class with a grin from ear to ear - listenin' as everyone else passed their solo test. It was embarrassin' to be the only failure, but necessary. On the way to our classroom - Willy looked at me and winced, "Drums - you're gonna' play drums!" I answered right back, "Drums - I'm gonna' play drums in The Ohio State Marching Band!" Slick gave me one of those you got to be kiddin' me looks, "Playin' drums is lower than eatin' worms."

A frosty cold morning had turned into a bright sunny afternoon. And as slow as the hands on the classroom clock moved in the mornin' - this afternoon they were suspended in time. Had all we could do to stay awake - except the girls. Sunny day didn't give them the slows like it did us. Our Teacher wasn't bit by the slows, but she knew she had a class full of wanderin' minds. Made us stand up and stretch at thirty minute intervals and when that didn't work made up games to keep us interested. Worked - we all stayed awake and learned a thing or two about words and stuff. When the last bell rang - Willy was out of the room like a shot out of a cannon. I placed the books I didn't need for homework inside my desk and turned around - lid still up. Willy was motioning for me to hurry-up. Trouble was - my feet got in gear before my brain. I was three steps away from my desk when the lid crashed down. When I turned around toward the door - Teacher was standin' between me and Willy, "Johnny! How many times have I told you not to slam your desk lid?" That was a question to which there was no answer. "Your punishment is to stay after school and help me clean up."

Take the erasers outside and pound the chalk out of them. After that you can wash the blackboards." Willy turned away with one of his Cheshire-Cat grins. Made a motion like he was shootin' baskets - so I'd know to stop by his house for a game of horse.

If truth be known - I didn't mind cleanin' erasers and blackboards. That's another thing I didn't understand. Our blackboards were green. Only the high school kids had wall lockers. We had desks with lids - old fashioned school desks with lids and ink wells on the top right hand corner. As we got bigger - so did the desks, but the design remained the same. School wouldn't let us put ink in the inkwells. Girls and pigtails? The temptation would be too great. One thing about those lids - soon as you let go they'd close. So - I was sittin' outside poundin' two erasers together. At the rate I was goin' it'd take at least thirty minutes or more. Remembering Tom Sawyer whitewashin' the fence - I began poundin' erasers with gusto. Wasn't long before I had three fifth graders poundin' along with me. But - I didn't charge 'em for helpin' like Tom did. Had the blackboards washed and room cleaned in less than fifteen minutes. Cleanin' up wasn't enough to make me never slam a desk lid again. Now if she made me sit still for fifteen minutes - well - that would have made a difference.

Found Willy shootin' at the basket on his garage, "Just us for now. Wanna' play horse?" Willy drove to the basket - shootin' - a lay-up. I dribbled toward the basket and missed my lay-up. Knew I was in trouble. Willy would keep shootin' lay-ups until he missed. He missed his third attempt, but I had two letters. I shot three straight two hand set shots from where a foul line should be and made 'em all. Willy didn't. He had three letters. I tried a hook shot from the right hand side of the driveway. Missed everything and the ball wound up in the neighbor's yard. My goose was cooked.

Willy did me in. He made five straight lay-ups and I missed three out of five. My nemesis - couldn't make a basket close in. Willy poured salt on my wounds, "Got a horse on you! Lets play one-on-one." "Only until one of us gets to thirty points. Got to get home in time to listen to *Jack Armstrong*." "The All American Boy. Waste of time if you ask me. I get to take it out first." Playin' one-on-one with Willy - with his ball and his court - had to play by his rules. Slick was allowed to dribble the ball with two hands and take three steps before shootin'. By the time the sun disappeared over the garage we each had twenty-eight points. I forfeited - didn't want to miss my radio program.

Ran all the way. Made it just in time to hear the announcer say, "All American Boy." You're probably wonderin' why we walked instead of ridin' our bikes to school. It was against the rules to ride a bike - or drive a car to school - if you were old enough. We could walk or ride the school bus. And the only way we could ride the bus was to live outside the city limits and that meant Fairfield's - too. Teachers walked. Didn't have a parking lot. Besides - there was no need for a car. Most everything in Osborn was within walkin' distance.

Knew I had it comin' - just didn't know when. Father waited until I stood up from the supper table, "Understand your teacher made you stay after school today." Couldn't duck it. He probably knew why - too. "Got in a hurry and slammed the lid down on my desk after final bell." My sisters weren't laughin' or gigglin', but they did have wide smiles. "Pay attention to what you're doing next time." Had a feelin' I wasn't the only one relieved when his belt didn't come off. Father had two iron clad rules when it came to school discipline. Rule number one - the teacher is always right. Rule number two - even when the teacher is wrong - the teacher is always right.

The next day - and the next - and the next - and the next were all the same as Monday. 'Cept I didn't slam a lid down - or stay after school. Friday after school - Jonsey tried to talk us into sellin' newspapers at Patterson Field's Main Gate. He was in a hurry, "You can make two - three dollars a week and it isn't hard work - stand in one place. Old Nel won't let you bring your bike." Willy asked, "How come?" "Army won't let you park it near the gate." We were on our way home and Willy was fussin', "Jonsey's flipped his lid. How can we sell papers and still have time to play?" "I know you don't care, but I'll miss my radio programs - so why is he tryin' to talk us into it? He needs to make money to help his Mother out." "Been offered a paper route. Means more money and steady work. Tell you what. Lets ride our bikes over and see how he's doin'." "Can't stay long or I'll miss *Jack Armstrong*." Jonsey wasn't interested in havin' us hang around. He was doin' all right - though. Must have sold four papers while we watched. As we rode away he yelled out, "My last day. Start my route tomorrow afternoon."

Saturday mornin' - right after basketball practice - Willy and me walked by the theater to see what movie was playin'. Stopped right in our tracks - it was goin' to be another one of those vaudeville song and dance shows. Tried to spice it up with two extra cartoons, but we wouldn't have it. I looked at Willy and he looked at me. Didn't have to say a word. No cowboys meant no movies. Willy kicked the dirt in the gutter with his feet, "Wanna' ride out to Mad River?" "Pack a lunch?" "Right - meet me at my place in twenty minutes." "How about Jonsey?" "Can't - starts his newspaper route today." I took off runnin' for home. With football season finished - Mother had cookies left over. Made my peanut butter sandwiches with mayonnaise. It was cool enough outside for me to pack them in a sack and not worry about gettin' sick. Ate one sugar cookie and packed four in my sack lunch.

Rode over to Willy's with my lunch in the basket. We pushed off and rode north. Weather was crisp and cool. I was feelin' great, "Kinda' glad the movie wasn't a cowboy film. This is gonna' be a great day to ride bikes - like a bottle of ginger ale after the cap comes off - all sparkle and fizz." Willy is a boy with basic needs. He grunted, "Gonna be an easy ride. Only a few swales - road's mostly flat." Crisp clear fall day like this gave us both a shot of extra energy we didn't need, but would come in handy later. Willy stopped outside of town at sleddin' hill, "Look over at the fence." "Which one?" "The one at the bottom of the hill." I missed it because weeds were coverin' it up. Wasn't more than a couple of wires - not more'n two feet high. Willy got down off his bicycle and inspected it, "Damn! Right at the end of our run-out. Won't bother your American Flyer - but it sure will put a crimp in my bobsled. No way I can stop bob short of it." "Drag your feet on the run-out. That'll make it stop. At least the farmer didn't plow up the grass. Sleddin' hill's still smooth as a baby's hind end. All we need is six inches of snow."

Hopped back on our bicycles and continued on our way - makin' great wide sweepin' S curves - side to side on a black top road - not a car in sight. We had this part of the county pretty much to ourselves. Most folks were listenin' to college football games on the radio or rakin' leaves. Saw only three cars on our ride to Mad River. Had to hide our bicycles a little farther off the road in the brush. If we parked 'em where we usually did - they'd be too easy to see. Had too hide 'em - be a long walk home if they were stolen. Sun was at midday warm. Didn't need our jackets - so we hung 'em over the handlebars. Shirt and sweater were warm enough. Willy waited for me to catch up. Had to tie my shoes again. "You know," he said "hikin' makes no sense. When we can ride around and see the world in a car - why walk?" "There's nothin' better than a tramp through the woods."

If we lived on an ocean - we'd swim in it. Live near woods - so we hiked. Willy's Dad hiked for exercise. My Father looked for mushrooms. Found quite a few, but I didn't have much luck. Couldn't tell the good ones from the bad - ones full of poison - so I didn't. If the truth be known - Willy and me hiked to explore. We were searchin' for Indian gold or anything that might turn up. And it was invigoratin' to go explorin' in the fall when leaves turned from green to red and yellow. We could see better with less leaves - didn't worry about brushin' up against poison ivy - or poison oak. And chiggers were all dead.

I carried my sack lunch and a stick. Stick was for snakes. Still had a few pygmy rattlers in these parts. Willy and me had never seen one, but it paid to be prepared. Walked all the way to the river bank and sat down on a fallen oak tree. Opened our sack lunches. I shared cookies and Willy shared water from his canteen. Buried the sacks like we're supposed too and crunched through leaves piled deep on Mad River's banks. Walked about a mile - or so downstream when my nose picked up a familiar scent. This one that sent shivers up my spine - a familiar pungent odor. I grabbed Willy's arm and whispered, "Don't make a sound. There's a moonshine still up ahead. Air is filled with the odor of corn mash cookin'. Should we go on? Could be Old Ned Smith." "Not many moonshiners in these parts. Let's find out." "Okay, but lets move away from the river and follow the trail."

Walked twenty yards off the river - followin' a frontier trail used by Indians - settlers and animals. Wide enough for fishermen to drive their trucks on - to get close to the river. Willy whispered, "Two of those drifters that chased us are in jail - ain't they?" I whispered back, "Not Old Ned and *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*." "Why are we whisperin'?" "Calm day. Voices will drift downstream a mile. If it is



Old Ned he'll be on us quicker than a bear on honey. So - watch where you're walkin' and don't crunch too many leaves." "What's a moonshine still look like?" "Bunch of copper pipes and a kettle - like an overgrown chemistry set. Be a lot of wood stacked around to build a fire under the kettle to cook sour mash." "If Old Ned has the smarts to make whiskey - he should be makin' an honest living." "Could if he didn't have a such mean streak. He does run a threshin' machine and a steamboat boiler, but nothin' steady."

If the wind had been up - we'd of never smelled the mash cookin'. But this was fall - wind only blew when a Canadian cold front came through - like Sunday. Bramble got thicker and odor of sour mash stronger as we got closer to the still. I pointed toward a path leadin' to the river, "Old Ned ain't one for heavy work. His still will be near water - so he won't have to carry it far. Look at the branches - they're scattered 'round. We've found the right trail. Old Ned is covering his tracks - so the law won't think his still's this way." Willy whispered, "Stinks so bad - all you'd have to do is follow your nose. We better turn around." "And miss out on an adventure?" I stopped just short of a log blockin' the trail. Willy didn't pay attention and fell right over it. He let out a yelp, "Damn!" before he remembered to be quiet. His dander was up. That log had to be punished, "Lets see if we can move it off the trail." "Been placed here to block the path. See the scrape marks. This log's been moved more than once." We each grabbed a thick branch and tried to pry it up, but it wouldn't budge. "Don't think anyone's gonna' move it again - not without a truck. Sunk too deep into the ground." I vaulted over - placing my hands on top. Didn't have to tell Willy to be quiet now. Both of us could hear men's voices comin' from the river. Leaves were too wet to crawl on - so we didn't. Both of us hunkered down - shuffled along bent over - real slow like. When we got close enough for a look-see - we moved upstream - off the trail.

Snuck up as close as we felt it was safe and hid behind a big ol' Buckeye tree. I peeked around one side and Willy the other - lookin' like two curious raccoons. We could see three men and *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* sittin' around a kettle - boilin' mash. Knew Old Ned, but the other two were strangers. Ducked behind the tree and pulled Willy back. He was stickin' out too far, "That's Ned Smith - all right. The other two are strangers. You know 'em?" "Never saw 'em before. Must be from Vandallia. Still looks like you said it would - a giant chemistry set." "With all that stacked firewood - they're gonna' be around for awhile. Seen enough?" "Willy took off a mite too quick - crunchin' one too many branches. Figurin' our cover was blown - I ran after him. Neither one of us said a word until we vaulted over the oak tree that blocked the trail. Willy whispered, "Someone's comin' after us" and took off. I could hear heavy breathin' and leaves crunchin'. And then - an odor of sulfur and manure.

Sprinted right past Willy to the trail. By now we were makin' more noise than a herd of cows 'in a cowboy movie stampede. Got lucky. Old Ned missed when he tried to jump over the tree blockin' the trail. Caught his shoe on a knot and tumbled ass over teakettle into a pile of wet leaves. Came up spittin' wet leaves and mud - hollerin' at the top of his lungs, "Damn you - Johnny Ropp I'm gonna' feed you to my devil and you'll rot - rot - rot." Willy and me were flyin' down the trail. Neither one of us had ever run a mile, but we ran one today.

We were ridin' our bikes a good hundred yards down the road when Old Ned and his smelly red friend came out of the woods. Ned had lost it - he was screamin' at me, "Damn you - Johnny Ropp. You can't hide from me and my red devil!" Willy and me leaned over our handlebars and pumped our bikes as fast as our legs would go. When we were satisfied that

we'd outrun Old Ned and his red devil - Willy slowed down, "Ned sure is hard over to get you." "We're gonna' put him outa' business. Don't stop now. Ned has a flatbed Ford truck parked somewhere." "Has to be on the other side of the river - or he'd be up with us." I slowed down and coasted too, "Must be. Saw a rowboat pulled up on the bank. What do you think of my trouble now?" "Glad I'm not you. Now I can understand why Ned doesn't do honest work. He's plumb crazy. What are you goin' to do?" "Notice you didn't say we. Still don't see any sign of his flatbed. He'd be here by now if he was comin' after us. Bet he's worried that we'll turn him in. Probably coverin' up his moonshine still." "How can he do that?" "Don't know. Could hide it in the woods or even in the river. He knows where I live. I've not seen the last of Old Ned." "How are we going to turn him in?" "My Fathers at home - workin' on school papers. He'll know what to do. After that we can shoot a few baskets." "I've had enough excitement for today. Stop by on your way to Church tomorrow mornin'." "Walk - or ride?" "Walk."

Left Willy at his house and made a beeline for home. Soon as I told Father about Old Ned - he was on the phone to the Sheriff. Won't drag this out - as you probably know what happened. By the time the Sheriff and his deputies rode out to Mad River - Old Ned was long gone. Found the remains of a fire and wood scattered about, but not a trace of his still. Didn't help my sense of well bein' - knowin' they found cow remains - too. Ned was on the loose with his red friend and madder than ever.

I was beginnin' to have doubts about my ability to get the better of Ned. Thank goodness for Halloween. Nothin' like a handful of free candy to make me forget my troubles. And I knew this was gonna' be my last beggar's night. Hard to walk around town when I'd be livin' on a farm. Willy and me were growin' outa' the costume age. Mother said, "By the

time anyone reaches eighth grade - it's time to put costumes aside." We helped the Sheriff shut down his still - so growin' up was comin' - ready - or not.

Try as I may - I couldn't figure what kinda' costume to wear for Halloween. Mask would make me look like a bandit and I didn't want to be like Old Ned Smith. Worse yet - Dime Store didn't have costumes my size. Leave it to Willy to come up with the perfect costume, "Cut three holes in a brown paper bag and we'll pull it over our heads." Mother made me promise to take it off when I crossed the street. Couldn't see out the sides. Halloween wouldn't be Halloween in Osborn without the annual prank. High School boys always hauled the houseboat outa' the lumber yard and strung it up on the flagpole in front of the school. Law tried to stop 'em from doin' it, but never was able too. Day before Halloween it'd be hoisted to the top as usual and like in the past - this year was no different.

It didn't rain - so Willy's paper bag idea worked out fine. Maybe I was gettin' too old to go beggin' or maybe havin' Old Ned chasin' after me was wearin' me down. Didn't have the same feelin' - you know - excitement - beggin' for candy. Forgot - you may not celebrate Halloween the same way we do. Night before is Beggar's Night. You call it trick or treatin'. Next night we'd pull pranks - like throwin' corn up on a porch that didn't treat. 'Course if we got caught - we'd have to clean it up. Anyway - the high point of this years Halloween wasn't the houseboat goin' up a flagpole. It was up there all right. The high point was Calvin - Calvin Poole - the outhouse tipper.

Everyone had indoor plumbin', but more'n a few houses still had an outhouse out back. None were used. Most were boarded up and full of dry rot. Calvin got so busy tippin' over the few remainin' ones he forgot to watch where he put

his hands and feet. Got the last one about halfway over and trouble began. Rotten old boards gave way and Calvin tumbled into the pit head first. Came outa' there smellin' like Old Ned Smith did when he visited Grandfather Ropp's barnyard. Wasn't a total loss to the town. Outhouses needed removin' and Calvin got a new first name. Instead of Calvin he was now known as - Cess Poole.

Day after Halloween - I stopped by Willy's on my way to school. He was sittin' on his top step eatin' a sandwich. He was always hungry, but eatin' his lunch before school? "You're gonna' be starved after lunch." Willy closed his sack and walked toward the bandstand. Wiped his mouth with his jacket sleeve, "Mom made me an extra sandwich for me." "Did you hear about Calvin?" "What happened?" "He tumbled into an outhouse pit." "Damn fool. Dangerous to tip one over. Here anything about Old Ned Smith?" "Father said he went back south to Newport - Kentucky. I'm grounded until Thanksgivin'." "How come?" "Mother is worried Old Ned'll come after me. Doesn't need too. Groundin' is bad enough." "Where do you think he hid his moonshine still?" "Don't know. Are there any caves around Mad River?" "Can't be - too flat. Jonsey is still pushin' for us to sell papers at the Main Gate." "Weekends maybe, but not during the week." "We could make money for Christmas." "Maybe, but not until after Thanksgivin'. We're going to Bellpoint."

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Learn to play the drums.
3. If there's a devil - gotta' be angels.

# 6

Bein' grounded meant I had to stay close to home this week and the next and the next. Weather turned for the worse - so I spent most of my time inside anyway. Bein' grounded in late fall wasn't as bad as it was in summer. Northwest wind blew away all the leaves that remained. It rained 'most every day and was that rain cold. Stayin' out of the way - where Old Ned Smith couldn't get to me was a waste of time. Like the wily old fox he was - Old Ned had gone to ground. Law couldn't find hide nor hair him. Wasn't even a good rumor about his whereabouts.

Jonsey hassled me and Willy about sellin' newspapers at Patterson Field's main gate. Seems Old' Nel was makin' him do both - sellin' papers at Patterson Field's Main Gate on Sunday Morning and deliverin' to homes afterwards. We were gettin' interested though - what with Christmas comin' on and no money for presents. Finally got Jonsey off my back by tellin' him I'd help out after I returned from Bellpoint and Willy said he would too - after Thanksgivin'.

Didn't have many school holidays. School started after farm work was done and quit before plantin' began. No way we would ever get Wednesday off before turkey day. Wouldn't be able to drive to Bellpoint until school was out. Father almost made it before dark. This was late November when the sun went down early - around five o'clock. So here I was - wedged between my two sisters again - anxious to get out of the back seat as soon as possible. Grandmother Mac shoed us all into the kitchen. She had supper waitin' on the stove. It was almost six-thirty when I wandered outside.

Bellpoint didn't look the same. I'd always viewed it through eyes of a temporary visitor. Now that we were movin' here - I was beginnin' to notice warts. Preacher's house needed fixin' - and a coat of paint. Front porch looked like it could use proppin' up. Grandfather's livery stable was in need of a good coat of paint - too. Boards on the south side looked like they never had any. Maybe I was gettin' too picky about Bellpoint. With Will and Jake gone up north - I didn't have another boy my age to play with in the village. Wandered down to the Scioto River and skipped two rocks. I could count fourteen splashes each, but only saw the first two. Gave it up and walked back uphill toward the livery stable. Turned on the light, but it was so dim I couldn't see anything. Not safe to climb up in the loft under those conditions - so I didn't. Turned off the light and wandered out back to the pump. Vines were all dead in the arbor leadin' to the outhouse. Couldn't hide where we were goin' this time of year. Before I could wander off again - Mother ended my day.

"Johnny! Where are you?" "Out back by the pump."  
"Come inside and get ready for bed. We're leavin' for the farm right after breakfast. You'll need a goodnight's rest." I was careful not to slam the back porch door, "Are we goin' to have goose?" "Yes - and don't make a scene about it. Eat at least a few bites. Grandmother Ropp will have sugar cured ham and sweet potatoes. Wash up and get upstairs to bed." I climbed the back stairs resigned to my fate. I couldn't get enough turkey, but goose? It was a might oily for my taste. Thanksgivin' and Christmas I had to gag it down. Goose was Grandfather Ropp's favorite holiday treat. A tradition his Great Great Grandfather brought with him from Wales. Went to sleep dreamin' about a great gray goose hangin' high above a large black pot full of dressin' - simmerin' on a Cast-iron range. Goose wasn't dead. Not a very appetizin' sight or sound - a goose honkin' his head off.

Never could understand holiday food. I was goin' to be fed more than I could eat at Thanksgivin' dinner and supper. You'd think breakfast would be light. Grandmother Mac cooked pancakes - sausage - eggs - oatmeal - hot chocolate and fresh pecan roll - all waitin' for me at breakfast. And she had a thirty-three pound turkey roastin' in the oven for dinner. Made up my mind to eat lightly, but I was on my second pecan roll when Father called, "Wash up and get ready - Johnny. We're leaving for the farm in ten minutes." I washed down the last bit of a pecan roll with my hot chocolate. Pushed my chair back from the kitchen table and was headin' out the door when Grandmother Mac grabbed my arm and led me to the sink, "Wash behind those ears - young man. Let me take a look." Now of all the things Grandmother said - those were my most feared words. I knew a good scrubbin' was comin' and I was right. She even washed my hair. When she was finished - I looked like a drowned puppy. My sisters gave me more than my fair share of room when I climbed into the back seat. Neither of 'em wanted to get wet from my hair.

Maybe it was feelin' clean all over or maybe it was the excitement of going to the farm. I felt like a cork about to pop out of a shook up fizz bottle. My sisters were singin' *"Over the river and through the woods"* and I joined in with most of the right words. No snow on the ground and we weren't in a sleigh, but the air was fall crisp and winter cool. It was a wonderful day for a drive along the river. Late fall is the best time of all to be on a farm. Most of the harvest is in the barn or under corn shocks. It was time to stay inside by a warm fire. Grandmother and Grandfather Ropp were waitin' outside on the back porch. Even after a large breakfast of pecan rolls and pancakes - a white candy sack is a welcome sight. My sisters and me opened it. Inside was my favorite - chocolate covered cherries. I had two in my hand before the sack was on the table. In the parlor fireplace was a Yule log - burnin' yellow and red.



Couldn't smell turkey cookin' - so I knew it had to be goose roastin' in Grandmother's oven. I'd just finished my second chocolate covered cherry when Grandfather entered the parlor wearin' his best straw hat and Saturday night goin' to town clothes. He took the cigar out of his pocket and lit it, "Come along, Johnny - we're visiting the home place." Quicker than a wink - Grandmother had that cigar out of his mouth and out on the back porch. "Dad - you know better than to smoke inside." She snuffed it out and handed it back, "Now - don't stay too long. I'll have dinner ready at noon - sharp." Grandfather stuck the cigar back into his pocket, "We'll be back by then." I hopped into the passenger side of Grandfather's Studebaker. He didn't have to smoke. The odor from his Saturday night cigar had found a permanent home in the car's upholstery. This mornin' was the first time I'd ever seen him blush, but his cigar stayed out.

Now the home place is somethin' special. My Great Great Grandfather came north from Alabama when Ohio was still a wild place - after Perry won his naval battle on Lake Erie. When the Civil War was over - bein' from the south where they owned slaves - wasn't popular in Ohio - even though Great Great Grandfather didn't have any. And it didn't matter that Great Grandfather was a drummer boy in Lincoln's Grand Army of the Republic. Bein' a Democrat in an all Republican county was trouble enough. No one had central heating back then - so all twelve rooms in Great Grandfather's home had a fireplace. With six bedrooms and two kitchens - the home place wasn't easy to maintain. Great Uncle Fred still lived there, but he wanted to move out to a farm of his own - like his brothers. He'd had enough of freezin' in winter and burnin' up in summer. Told Grandfather Ropp, "I'm too old to chop wood and too poor to feed twelve fireplaces. Land is so rocky - I keep busting plows. Isn't good for anything, but a quarry." He had a buyer that was interested in the rock under it.

I didn't care for the geese that were guardin' the brick bridge. With necks arched high and feathered backs up - they protected it from intruders better than a pack of wild dogs. And they were meaner - too. Brick bridge across the stream was built for carriages - not cars - so we parked on the other side. Had to run through a gauntlet of geese guardin' the bridge to get to the house. Darn gander chased me all the way to the porch - wings raised - peckin' at my rear end. That bird could fly without leavin' the ground. None of the geese bothered Grandfather.

I could tell this wasn't going to be a happy visit. Grandfather had to sign papers for his part of the sale of the home place to a commercial quarry. And his six brothers and two sisters were just as reluctant - too, but he was the last to sign. Great Grandfather left the farm in 1861 - too young to tote a gun - so he joined Lincoln's Army as a drummer boy. Wanted to do his part - like his Father - to set slaves free. Got captured by Mosby's raiders in Winchester and sent home from the Shenandoa Valley. Set free by a Confederate lieutenant - a neighbor from Alabama - he'd seen enough killin'. When he came home he put his drum away and never played it again. Turned to farmin'. All seven of his sons left to work on the railroad that passed near his property. My Great Uncle Will stayed on as an engineer on the Baltimore and Ohio. The other six boys became farmers - tired of workin' for the Big Four railroad.

Wouldn't be here if Grandfather hadn't met Grandmother when he was home between trains. Her Father and Mother had just passed away. And she was left with a younger brother - a sister and large farm to care for. She was barely sixteen when she drove her team and buggy to the home place to see if one of Great Grandfather's boys would manage her farm. And my Grandfather was the only boy at home. Great Grandfather asked him to help. He volunteered, but only under the

condition that they would marry. Believed it wasn't proper for a bachelor to be runnin' a farm for a young single lady. They drove her horse and buggy to the county seat and were married that very day. That's how my Grandfather became a farmer. 'Cause he was the only son at home when Grandmother came callin'.

We didn't stay at the home place long. Grandfather whispered a few words to Great Uncle Fred - signed the papers - lit his cigar and walked over the brick bridge. Turned around when he saw I was trailin' behind, "Come on - Johnny. We'll be late for dinner." Problem was the geese. They were between me and his car. Grandfather laughed, "Don't worry. You wore them out when we arrived." Couldn't look like I was afraid - so I took off runnin' toward his Studebaker. And that gander took off - flyin' after me. Nailed me too on my hind end with his beak. Grandfather came between me and the gander and rescued me from further embarrassment. I hopped in the front seat of his car. Gander strutted off - knowin' he was still king of the yard.

Grandfather snuffed out his cigar and climbed into the driver's side of his Studebaker, "Had to sell the home place - Johnny. Always hoped you'd take it over when you grew up, but Fred didn't want to stay. Costs too much to modernize." "Why don't you add it to your farm?" "Mom and I have over two sections to farm now - more than I can handle. Looks like our family is going from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations." "What does that mean?" "It's an old German saying. First generation builds - second adds on and third sells it off." I pondered that for awhile. I could feel Grandfather's sadness. He was losin' a link to his past like I was losin' mine - Osborn.

We pulled into the farmyard in time for Thanksgivin' dinner. Grandmother came out of the kitchen and onto the

back porch, "Did you sign the papers - Dad?" "Yes. Hate to see the place go, but Fred wants to leave and none of us are willing to take it on." "How did you find the home place - Johnny?" "Never saw a brick outhouse before. Had five holes. Great Grandfather must have been rich." Grandmother laughed, "Did the gander chase you?" "Both ways - comin' and goin'." "In a couple of weeks he won't bother anyone. Wash up. Dinner is ready." I gave washin' a lick and a promise and walked to my place at the dinin' room table. Cooked goose was on a platter at the head of the table. Grandfather carved and we passed our plates to him. He looked at me and smiled. Must have known my likes. He placed two small pieces of goose on my plate and carved a large slice of ham for me. I filled the rest of my plate with candied sweet potatoes - mashed potatoes - gravy - hot rolls and cranberry Jell-O. My sisters ate more goose than I did, but I could tell they didn't care for it. One goose I wouldn't mind eatin' was that gander at the home place. Mean as he was - he'd be tougher than a goat.

After dinner and a slice of mincemeat pie - I was too stuffed to wander out to the barn. So - I followed my sisters into the parlor and cranked up Grandmother's old Victrola record player. Picked out my favorite record - a march by Sousa's band. One side had *Marching Through Georgia* and the other side - *King Cotton* - keepin' things equal. Victrola records had to be at least a quarter inch thick. Be hard breakin' one of 'em. The only amplification was a horn on top. Didn't use electricity. Had to wind a crank and the spring inside made the turntable go. My other favorite - was by a vaudevillian. A comedy record about Uncle Skinner's Chicken Dinner. Don't make comedy records anymore. No one would buy one - not with comedians performin' free on the radio. My sisters stopped playin' the piano and played a waltz record - *Blue Danube* or some river like that.

Grandmother must have noticed I was at sixes and sevens, "Why don't you gather eggs for me?" Spot must have been out of sorts - too. He perked up when I opened the door to the back porch. That Border collie was smart. He raced ahead of me to the barn. Won - of course. Sat in front of the barn door with a brag on his muzzle - waggin' his tail - barkin'. Wouldn't let me boost him up into the haymow. Just sat there patient as ever - while I searched high and low for eggs. Didn't find a one. As my feet touched down on the barn floor - Spot was out the door. Knew right where I was goin'. He sat in front of the sleigh - hangin' on the wall of the side shed and looked up at me with a grin. Must have known - wasn't an egg to be found. When I turned around - he was gone again. Found him sittin' under the tractor seat in the drive-through shed. Pointed his nose upwards. 'Course he was right. I found a dozen on the pad on top the tractor seat. Turned around and he was gone again. Smart aleck Border collie was sittin' in front of the hen house door. Grandfather Ropp had cleaned out the hen house and placed clean straw in every nest. Hens must have liked it. I found almost three dozen eggs. Knew there wasn't anymore to be found when Spot stayed put outside the hen house door. He walked with me to the kitchen.

Grandmother took the eggs off my hands, "Four dozen. We'll have enough for fruit cake and a week of breakfasts." Spot must have known I was comin' back outside. He read my mind again - crawled under the fence and ran up the lane to the east field before I opened the gate. Didn't run - more like a trot. He dashed on ahead - waitin' at the water tank as I huffed and puffed to a stop. Hard to run when your stomach is a pint over the top. Water tank was half empty - so I pumped her full and we trotted back to the farmhouse. Mother stopped me before I could wander off toward the river, "Where have you been?" "Filling the water tank in the east pasture." "Wash up and stay around. We don't want to be

late for Grandmother Mac's Thanksgiving supper." And here I was - stuffed up to my eyeballs from a double helpin' of Grandmother Ropp's dinner. Sky was turnin' from slate gray to black as we climbed into the car and drove along River Road - to another feast in Bellpoint.

When I climbed out of the car - I regained my appetite. The aroma of a thirty-three pound tom turkey made my stomach expand. Uncles and cousins were here and a festive feelin' was in the air. Grandmother Mac had been up since before dawn cookin' three kinds of dressing - two kinds of potatoes and pumpkin pies. But - it was the aroma of that magnificent bird that overpowered my senses. Grandfather Mac inserted two leaves into the dining room table - so it would seat twelve, but even that wasn't enough. My sisters - cousins and me were relegated to three card tables in the parlor. Looked to me that no matter how old I got - I'd never make it into the dinin' room at holiday time. The good news - no one could watch over me to make sure I ate green things. I got to fill my own plate in the kitchen. Loaded it down - turkey - mashed potatoes - gravy and rolls. I sat down with cousins - all older than me and worse yet - not a boy among them. They tolerated me - all right, but treated me like I wasn't there. That was all right with me. Me bein' the youngest and a boy - I couldn't add anything to their conversation. They talked on and on about school - clothes - horses and boyfriends until I was terminally bored.

After awhile - I stood up and said, "Goin' to the kitchen for some pie." Didn't really though - I set my plate down and kept right on goin' out the kitchen door. I was so full - I felt woozy. Walked down the lane past Doc's house tilted thirteen degrees forward - my stomach was so heavy. Sat down on the log that Jake - Will and me had rolled up to the edge of the river. Just sat there - starin' out over the Scioto - my eyes in gear and my mind - out.

Found three flat skippin' rocks along the way. Brick house and barns were built to last, but didn't. Seems like nothin' lasts - so I began skippin' rocks. Stopped halfway through my third toss. I remembered Twain's book - *Tom Sawyer* and his raft trip down the Mississippi. Drew my arm back and gave that last rock the trip of its life. Twenty-one skips before it sank to the bottom.

Ran up the hill to the livery stable - opened the door and turned on the light. Completely forgot about not havin' enough light to see what I was doin'. Scrambled straight up the wall ladder to the loft. Wasn't much light comin' up through the trap door - so I felt my way past the surrey to the middle of the loft - reachin' up for the string. Mind you - had to take a dozen swipes at nothin', but air - wavin' my hand around before I grabbed on to it. And then I turned it on - off and on before it quit swingin'. Turned around and looked toward the back wall. My mind wasn't playin' tricks. There - just like I remembered - stacked up against the wall was enough lumber to build two rafts.

Shuffled through the boards and then it dawned on me, "I need logs for the bottom to make it float above water and just maybe - Grandfather Mac wouldn't look kindly on me usin' his lumber. Turned off the light. Gettin' down was easy - I followed the light comin' up through the trap door. Turned off the light on the wall next to Grandfather's Plymouth Roadster and wandered over to the back porch steps. Sat there thinkin' - which is a very dangerous thing for a boy my age to do. Tomorrow - I'd take a walk up Mill Creek and look for logs. Had to be some along the bank and I might find a few boards. When Mother called for me to come in - didn't take much urgins'. I was still two pints of turkey over the top. Grandmother was waitin' - washcloth in hand. Climbed the back stairs to Uncle Bus's bedroom. I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

One thing about goin' to bed early - I woke up before dawn. And I wasn't the only one. Grandfather Mac had to go to work - or take vacation time. I could smell the aroma of pipe tobacco floatin' up the back stairs as I tied my shoes. I dressed in a hurry this mornin'. I had things to do and places to go. After breakfast I'd climb one more time up the ladder into the loft and check out the wood. Might have to use some of it - and then walk up Mill Creek. Grandfather was still at the table drinkin' coffee. "Morning - Johnny. You're up early today." "Goin' to hike up Mill Creek." "You don't need to hunt for crawdads. Too cold to go fishing - though we might go golfing tomorrow. Stay out of the water. Don't want you to catch a cold. I'll be home early today - Mom. Not much going on at the office." I listened, but didn't say much. If I did - might get too much notice and too much work. Didn't eat much breakfast - my stomach was too full from two Thanksgivin' meals. Ate what was on my plate - though - eggs and bacon and drank two cups of hot chocolate before I was out the door.

Grandfather followed after me. I opened the livery stable doors so he could back his roadster out and closed them as he drove away. He gave me a wave and a smile. Scrambled up the ladder and through the trap door to the loft. Should have asked if I could use the boards, but then he'd ask, "What for?" so I didn't. Looked at the openin'. Wasn't wide enough for an eight by eight foot raft. Fourteen foot fall to the ground would bust it up - anyway. Knew a raft built with flat boards wouldn't float above water. Not with me on it. Couldn't haul logs to the stable, but I could carry boards to the logs - if I had too. And I needed at least four logs. It was time to go up Mill Creek and scout around. Climbed down out of the loft with more worries than I climbed up with. Wasn't goin' to be easy sawin' four logs of equal length and notch them so boards would fit on top. I brushed myself off and headed toward Mill Creek.



Gave the general store a wide berth this mornin'. Never could tell - Old Ned Smith might be about, but he wasn't - not today. Wasn't anyone up and about. Bellpoint was sleepin' off too much food in too short-a time. Most of the leaves were gone off the trees - so lookin' for logs and lumber wasn't as hard as in summer. Turned upstream on Mill Creek with my eyes open. Creek banks up stream to the Old Mill were pretty well cleaned up. Not one piece of wood layin' around. Father said the first settlers cut timber from the surroundin' forests in winter and floated logs downstream when the spring rain brought high water. Built rafts to go along and protect what was their own. They'd return by Military Road - which went from Columbus to Fort Meigs on Lake Erie. Wondered if that was where Will and Jake wound up. Would be fun crawlin' around a fort. Military Road passed right by where Bellpoint is today. I wouldn't be the first person to float a raft down Mill Creek.

Almost made it to the Old Mill when I heard a car comin' up the road. Hopped off the road so I wouldn't get run over. It was Father. I knew my day was finished. He pulled to a stop, "'Hop in, Johnny." "Where are we goin'?" "To the farm. Grandfather Ropp needs our help." "Are we goin' to shuck corn?" "He has one field left. Grounds frozen. We can get into the corn field without the wagon getting stuck in the mud." Father turned around at Old Mill bridge, "What were you doing walking along Mill Creek?" "Hikin'. You mentioned logs floating downstream to the mill. Think there are any left on the banks?" "Might be some upstream of the Old Mill. They would have to be over a hundred years old. Probably full of wood rot."

Couldn't sneak up on Spot. He was dancin' along the lane as we drove between two stone boundary pillars. Sandy and Clyde were hooked to the wagon - ready. Grandfather Ropp gave a few clicks with his tongue and we were away. Father

walked alongside with Spot and opened the gate while I rode on board. As we climbed the lane toward the cornfield - the northwest wind began to pick up. My wool sweater and denim jacket kept my body warm enough, but not my ears. They were beginnin' to feel like a pair of icicles. Father trailed behind - lookin' for arrowheads. The great wooden wagon wheels bounced my bones as we jarred along over the frozen mud ruts.

Grandfather asked Father, "Heard anything about Ned Smith?" "Not since Johnny saw him running a still along Mad River." "Law hasn't seen hide nor hair of him around here. Sheriff put his place up for auction to pay back taxes last month. Didn't have more than fifty acres. Land over Dublin way isn't worth much. It's too rocky to plow and too poor to plant. Some fool land speculator paid fifty dollars an acre for it. Barely covered taxes and what he owed Doc to replace the drugs he stole. Never did recover them. Imagine Ned is going to be a might upset when he finds out his land is gone. Looks like we might be rid of him for good." That was good news to me. It would be a welcome change not to worry about Old Ned comin' after me.

Father crisscrossed the fields along the way. He was lookin' for a black - or stone glint that would reveal an arrowhead's hidin' place. When the Delaware hunted in the forest here - land was covered with thicket and forest - so they lost quite a few. Father began collectin' arrowheads when he was a boy. They were plentiful then. Not so today. He'd be lucky to find one or two a year. Horses slowed down - we were approachin' the gate to the cornfield. Grandfather had over a thousand acres of land and not all of it was bein' farmed. Half of it was in pasture - some was bein' rested and a he had several patches of woods. Boggled my mind to think of the work we'd have to do if all of the land was planted in crops.

Father opened the gate and Sandy and Clyde pulled the wagon to the first shock of corn. Grandfather got down off the wagon and pulled the shock over. Corn - as yellow as the sun was all ready husked. Grandfather smiled, "Happy Thanksgiving - boys. Thought I'd surprise you. Hired some boys from town help me out last month. Three-hundred acres of corn was too much work for me. This is the last of the crop. Soon as we load up and carry it to the cribs we'll be done." Father shook his head, "Should have known. So that's why you bought the new corn crib." "Planted more than I needed to feed out the stock. Need to buy a few more cows or sell corn at market."

Pitchin' corn up on the wagon was a lot easier than huskin' it. Wasn't long before we had a wagon full and were bouncin' back to the corn cribs. New crib had three openings along the side. Grandfather stopped the wagon at the middle openin'. I watched as he pitched corn back over his shoulder into the openin'. After several minutes - he stopped, "Want to try a few - Johnny?" I shoveled corn in front of me and quickly learned why it was easier to do it facing awa' from the crib and shovelin' back over my shoulder. Centrifugal force kept the corn from falling off my shovel when I turned it upside down. Only one person could shovel at a time - so we took turns - makin' short work out of a wagon load of corn. Made more than a half dozen trips before we were finished.

It was a good thing we finished when we did. The early afternoon sun would soon turn the cornfields into mud. Grandfather was pleased with my efforts, "Johnny is growing up. Might make a farmer out of him yet. If we bring more of our fallow fields into cultivation next year - we'll need more help. And we'll be able to turn pasture into crops if you're moving to the farm. Three sets of hands will make a difference." Didn't say anything. Didn't know if that was

good news or bad. Helpin' out every once in awhile was fun, but everyday? That would be work. And shovelin' corn had turned from fun to hard work. I had discovered a new set of muscles in my back and shoulders.

Face turned cherry-red from the northwest wind. Didn't notice it was cold until we stopped shovelin'. I helped Grandfather unhitch Sandy and Clyde and lead them to the water trough. Sandy nosed my pocket - looking for a treat, but I didn't have any. I gave Father the leads and headed for the corn sheller. They had more than earned an extra helpin' today. After I fed the horses and helped bed them down - it was time to wash up and get ready for supper. Pumped a pan full of water from the cistern at the sink next to the Cast-iron range. Cold water chilled me a bit, but it was soothing to my face and hands. Weren't any blisters this time. Grandmother had supper waiting at the kitchen table. As great a day as Thanksgiving is - I like the day after - better. You would - too if you liked leftovers as much as I did. Father took me aside as we sat down and whispered, "Take small helpings. We'll have to eat another supper in Bellpoint." I filled my plate with sugar cured ham - sweet potatoes and hot rolls. Washed it down with cold milk.

Didn't get back to Bellpoint until well after dark. It was late - had to be after six. Grandmother Mac's supper was turkey - mashed potatoes and gravy and more hot rolls. I was in leftover heaven. After eatin' more than I should have - I stuck my nose out the back porch door and thought better of goin' outside. It was below freezin' and pitch black. Talk about Old Ned today made me a bit uneasy - so it was best I stay inside. Ned was able to elude two sheriffs - their deputies and half the law in the state. No tellin' where he was goin' to turn up next. And he had to know I visited Bellpoint over Thanksgivin'. Radio had one too many dance bands playin' Friday night - so I did homework.

Homework over a holiday? Teacher worked - so she expected us too. If Will and Jake were still around - now that would make a difference. I'd be outside - even if it was cold. At nine o'clock my eyes were closin'. Shovelin' corn and eatin' all that food took its toll. Mother looked surprised when I went upstairs to bed without bein' told. Like last night - I was asleep before I knew it.

Woke up when it was still dark out. Bedrooms weren't heated, but mine felt warmer this mornin'. A late fall warm front must have passed through Bellpoint while slept. And I was hungrier this morning. Ate everything Grandmother placed in front of me - and she made Postum! Tasted a little like hot coffee, but it was made out of wheat. I wouldn't be goin' to the farm. Bringin' in stalks of corn for fodder wasn't necessary. Grandfather brought in a wagon load when he needed some and he didn't have anyplace to store a field full. Grandmother and me were the only ones up. As I opened the back door - she called out, "Be home before lunch. Your Father and Grandfather talked again last night about playing a round of golf at Marrysville. They'll want you to caddie." That got my interest up, "Yes Ma'am. I'll be back early. Gonna' hike up Mill Creek. Won't go far."

I was out the door and across the yard before anyone could call me back. Looked inside the livery stable and found a small hand saw hangin' on the wall. Brought it along. If I found my logs - I could do some trimmin'. Just knew I'd find the logs I needed along the banks above the Old Mill. I walked gingerly by the general store - even though it wasn't open. Looked all around, but Old Ned Smith wasn't about. I was beginnin' to wonder if he'd given' up chasin' after me. Turned west along the road and ran as far as I could. Didn't get halfway to the Old Mill before I slowed down to a walk. Stopped to rest at the bridge across the creek. I was outa' breath.

I'd have to come back and check out the Mill for boards. We didn't play around it. Too busy swimmin' below the stone bridge. Walked upstream on a path along the bank. Paid attention now. Hadn't searched this part. Found what I was lookin' for a quarter mile above the Old Mill. Two small poplars had fallen over near the bank. Stream had undercut their roots. I rolled them over to get a better look, "Usable part of each one is over sixteen feet. I can cut each in half and make a pretty decent raft." Snapped as many branches as would come off and commenced sawin' what was left. Had 'em trimmed well enough - so I could roll 'em around. Next step would be to hide 'em so no one else would find 'em. I rolled both logs high up on the bank so water wouldn't take 'em downstream. Then I covered 'em with the branches I'd just cut off, "It'll take a bit of sawin' - with a saw bigger than the hand saw I'm usin'. These two should be more'n enough to make my raft buoyant. Next summer won't be a total loss. Sure wished Will and Jake were here to share this adventure with me." I marked my spot next to the road with four large white stones pointing in a straight line to where my logs were hidden.

Really felt good - like I had accomplished somethin' important. Took off runnin' as fast as I could. Quarter mile later I was at the Old Mill Bridge and outa' breath. Old concrete bridge was just about gone in spots. Barely wide enough for a small car. Don't think anyone would drive across it today. Weather - water and time had taken their toll. Wouldn't be long before water would breach it and we'd have to cross over in the shallows upstream. On the other side was the remnants of the old grain mill. Water wheel wasn't around, but I could see the remains of the water pit where it had been - and the channel leading to it. Must have been an earth dam upstream, but I couldn't find any trace of it. Same flood that washed out the old covered bridge over the Scioto had taken it out - too. All that was left of the

Old Mill was a foundation - parts of walls - fireplace and a wood floor - where there wasn't any basement. Basement was closest part to the stream - so water would turn the grinding wheels and mill wheat and oats. Spring floods and time had silted it in. I found what I was looking for. Some of the floor boards would be just right for a raft. Even found some two-by-fours that had been used as braces. All I had to carry was nails and a saw.

Kicked some dirt off the floor boards to get a better look. Sun was at its winter low - risin' in the sky. Rays landed on the corner of a metal box stickin' out from under a floor board in the corner - where the fireplace and chimney still stood. I brushed some more dirt away, "Hello - what's this?" Found a trap door. Brushed the dirt away and found the hinges. Someone had done good work. Door looked like it was part of the floor. I pulled on the end stickin' up, but it wouldn't move. Got one of the two-by-fours stacked up against the remnants of the wall. Barely fit inside, but it worked. I pried open the trap door. Wasn't a tunnel or basement under it - just a metal box. Freezin' and thawin' this fall must have forced it upward.

If the man or woman who dug this pit had taken time to make it deeper the box would have stayed hidden. I tugged on it. It was heavier than it looked. Put both hands under it - lifted it out and set it on the top of what was left of a wall. Couldn't open it. Had a brass laminated Yale key lock securin' it. Written on top - *Open this here box and you'll die!* Now - that made me want to open it all the more. Looked it over to make sure it wasn't booby trapped. Couldn't see any wires. If it was it would have gone off by now. Wasn't a big box - 'bout the size of three cigar boxes - on top of each other. I turned it over - brushin' the dust and dirt away, "Whoever bought this box - invested well." Set it down, "Tom Mix would think on it and so will I."

Stoped thinkin' when I figured out what it was I was goin' to do. Picked the metal box up and moved it from side to side - couldn't give it a shake - too heavy. Sounded like metal and paper were rattlin' around inside. I had a choice - return it to the pit - or take it back to Bellpoint. If I took it to Bellpoint - I had to figure a way of gettin' it to the livery stable loft without raisin' too much curiosity. Picked it up again and took a good look, "I could call it a tool box. Seen somethin' like it advertised in a comic book. I'm all ready carryin' a saw. Better close the trap door." I let it fall into place and kicked dirt over it - so it'd look like no one had been there. Only person I had to worry about was the one who hid it. Took another look at my cover-up work, "Not bad - have to lift the door up to find out the box was gone."

Ran back over the cement bridge carryin' a box and saw. Stopped runnin' when I reached the other side. Box was too heavy and runnin' with the saw wasn't smart - might fall on it and cut myself. Had to stop and rest five times before I reached Bellpoint Road. Bellpoint was sufferin' through a quiet Saturday mornin'. Wasn't more'n six souls - outside of me - on the road. Not even a shade tree mechanic outside the general store. Still - felt like fifty pairs of eyes were starin' at me. Operatin' on the principle of finders keepers didn't take away the guilt I was feelin'. Took off runnin' up the hill to the livery stable - still had one more sprint in me - even with a heavy box under my arm.

Put the saw back on its hook and set the box down on the work bench. I looked the Yale lock over. Wasn't anyway I could smash - cut - or break a Yale lock. Now the box was metal and a hacksaw could cut through it, but it'd take me forever. Hit my head with the palm of my hand. The answer was right before my eyes. The staple that the hasp fit over. It was saw-able. All I needed was a hacksaw and there was



one hanging above the work bench - right in front of me. Couldn't see on the bench. Grandfather might find out and ask what I was doin'. Scrambled up the ladder to the loft with the box in front of me. Pushed it up the ladder and laid it on the floor. Then I pulled myself up. Looked around for a place to work. Pony cart seat was as good as any. Went back down for the hacksaw. Found a likely blade - attached it and climbed back up. Held the box between my feet and commenced sawin'. I was halfway through the staple - when Grandfather called up through the opening, "Come inside - Johnny. You'll need a sandwich and a glass of milk if you're going to caddy for me." "Be right down. Are you going to play golf in Marysville?" "As soon as you have lunch and your Uncle Bus arrives."

That was all it took for me to drop my mystery box on the pony cart seat. I was goin' to give caddyin' another try and Grandfather Mac's clubs were easy to carry. He had a light golf bag and what he called a short set of clubs - not more than eight and a Putter. Grandmother had a hot turkey sandwich - mashed potatoes and gravy waiting. I chewed on it and tried to remember the names inscribed on Grandfather's wooden shafted clubs. The one he teed off with was easy to remember. It was called a driver. The woods Grandfather used in the fairway were called - Brassie - Baffy and Spoon. The irons were just as hard to remember. He used a Cleek when he wanted to hit it long way. His mid iron was called a Mashie Niblick and the one he used to loft short shots over or out of the sand was called a Blaster. He liked to chip and run the golf ball up with his Jigger. The easiest golf club to remember in his short set was the Putter. And best of all - Grandfather Mac had a lightweight Sunday golf bag made out of canvas with leather trim. I drank the last drop of my milk. Even drank the wash back. Now - I don't often drink wash back, but I was bein' watched. Climbed up in the rumble seat - confident I could carry a golf bag.

Grandfather drove his Plymouth Roadster and Father rode up front. I rode in the rumble seat with their golf clubs. Bundled up in the car blanket and ducked my head down as low as it would go - to keep warm. Uncle Bus drove on ahead. He'd meet us at the course. With a cold wind whippin' around my ears - I decided to bum a ride back with him. Marysville Golf Course wasn't far - not more'n thirty minutes from Bellpoint. Marysville is a Bellpoint that grew up. Not certain who won - neither was very large, but Bellpoint was special - even if it didn't have a golf course. Golf season ended in Ohio when school started and football season began. Maybe it was the mounds of leaves stackin' up on the edge of the fairways. Lose quite a few golf balls in the leaves. Wind must have cleared it out - by now.

We arrived before noon. November it was, but we had a warm late fall day for it. Countin' the Pro's car and ours - there were only six cars in the parkin' lot. When we checked at the Pro Shop - he warned us, "Only one foursome ahead of you. They should be turnin' the front nine in about fifteen minutes. I'm going to close my shop early today. If you want a snack - better stop in after the front nine. Grandfather replied, "We'll take you up on your offer. Save three cups of coffee for us and an Orange Crush for our caddie. We may need to fuel him up with a candy bar." "I'll have it ready and waiting."

Always a lot of chatter when a golf game begins on the first tee. I agreed to carry two bags on the front nine. Father had a light Sunday bag - so it was easy goin' for the first nine holes. He could see I was wearin' down - so I just carried Grandfather's bag on the back nine. We stopped at the Pro Shop after nine. Orange Crush is a perfect drink when you need energy - instead of a wake-up. Didn't get a candy bar. Father bought cheese crackers. We took our time before goin' back out - since we were the only ones on the

course. Had to wait for coffee to cool. We were back at it soon enough. Finished eighteen holes in a little over three hours - well before dark.

Walkin' a golf course is almost good as hikin'. I would have enjoyed it more if I coulda' played, but boys aren't allowed to play golf - except on Mondays. Even if I was allowed - I couldn't. Didn't know enough about how to hit a golf ball, but I could putt. I learned real quick that golf was more of an art than a science - after watchin' three golfers of unlike talent score pretty much the same. Uncle Bus said, "Rhythm - touch and feel are the most important elements. Swing in tempo and let the club do the work." Easy for him to say. He drove two of the par fours and reached all the par five's in two. If he could putt - Uncle Bus would have set a new course record. Grandfather putted for par on almost every hole and so did Father. Unlike Uncle Bus - they made most of their putts. Turned out to be an even match. Besides carryin' clubs - I tended the pins and smoothed out the sand in the bunkers with a rake. Had to remain quiet. Now that wasn't easy. Had a lot of questions about this game.

Rode back to Bellpoint - up front with Uncle Bus in his Chrysler Roadster. He answered most of my questions. Even showed me how to grip the club and how to swing it when we returned to Bellpoint. Sure didn't feel natural, but then - swingin' at a stationary ball had to be a whole lot easier than tryin' to hit a movin' softball. Besides - golf had all the elements fundamental to bein' a boy - hikin' - hittin' - scorin' - and eatin' snacks at the Pro Shop. Only problem was - golf was in competition with all my favorite sports. And it took a long time to play - and how was I goin' to carry a golf bag on my bicycle? But - that didn't stop me from tryin'. Before supper - I sneaked a Mashie Niblick and several golf balls out of Father's bag.

Went out back - past the outhouse to the open field. Took a few practice swings and then tried to hit the ball. Missed - and I missed again - and again, "This isn't going to be as easy as I thought it was." Kept right on swingin' - and kept right on missin'. Reached down - teed the ball up on a tuft of grass and tried to remember what Uncle Bus told me, "Swing easy to hit it far." Took a couple of practice swings. Concentrated on shortenin' my backswin' and a low take-away. Clipped the grass with each swing. Set up with the club behind the ball and took another swing for real. This time the ball flew about a hundred yards. Set another ball down and repeated my swing, "This is goin' to be fun." Chased after the balls and brought 'em back. Wasn't long before I had to quit. Mother was callin' me in for supper. I leaned Father's golf club against the wall inside the livery stable. Placed both balls down on the dirt next to the club head and closed the door. I intended to take a swing or two after Sunday School in the mornin'.

Stuffed myself at the dinner table - then I sat in the parlor and promptly fell asleep. Too much turkey and carryin' double on the golf course had done me in. Mother woke me up and sent me to bed early. Woke up in time to get to Sunday School. And Grandmother made me stay for Church. Still had time to swing Father's golf club before Sunday dinner. Still wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. I'd get over anxious - swing too hard and miss.

I was able to hit it 'most every time by the time the dinner bell rang. Grandmother had about half-a turkey left, but with me gnawin' on it - it would fast become a memory. Her roast turkey tasted better with each meal. I was almost halfway through a second helping of mashed potatoes swimmin' in turkey gravy - with a thick slice of white meat when I remembered the metal box I'd found at the Old Mill. I still had half a staple to saw through. I cleaned up my plate -

excused myself from the table and hightailed it to the livery stable loft. It was right where I left it - on the pony cart seat.

Picked up the hack saw and commenced where I left off. Took about thirty minutes before the staple snapped off - lock and all. I pried it open with a screwdriver - standin' clear. And it was a good thing I did. A dart flew outa' the box and imbedded itself overhead in the ceilin' boards. Went right by my head with a whoosh. Used the screwdriver to turn the box around so and dump out the contents - didn't want to get nailed with another booby trap. Six leather drawstring bags fell out and another dart fired by my head into the pony cart seat. If Old Ned set these traps, he was makin' sure his box lived up to its motto, *Open this here box and you'll die!* Pounded on the back of it - to make sure there wasn't another trap. I lifted it with the metal end of my screwdriver and made sure the open part pointed away from me. Underneath - on the pony cart seat were six drawstring leather pouches and a bill of sale. I looked at it first. I was right about the owner. It was a bill of sale for one metal security box and a Yale lock made out to Ned Smith.

Looked inside the box - makin' sure it was pointin' away from me. There were only two springs and two triggers for darts. One worked on openin' - the other when I removed the middle leather pouch. It was time to look inside one of the pouches. I opened the drawstring and turned the pouch upside down. Twenty dollar gold pieces tumbled out onto the pony cart seat. Whistled to myself, "I've found Indian gold - more'n I expected. There is no way I can keep it. Ned stole it - or it's from illegal whiskey makin'." I counted out the gold pieces. There were forty. That meant eight hundred dollars! And there were six pouches. Had to be over four-thousand dollars in gold inside Ned's metal box. I placed the gold coins back inside the pouche.

Sat there for a minute and thought. Then it came to me. I placed the pouches into the box - along with the bill of sale - cleaned the area around the pony cart seat and took the tools downstairs to the workbench. Climbed back up into the loft and pulled one dart out of the ceilin' and the other one from the pony cart seat. Didn't know what to do with 'em. I was concerned. Old Ned might have coated the tips with poison. Just in case - I took both out to the back lot and buried 'em in the ground. Knew for sure - this box of gold coins wasn't mine. Father was hikin' the woods above Mill Creek lookin' for mushrooms and arrowheads. My mind was made up - Grandfather Mac would know what to do. I washed the dirt off my hands at the pump. Wiped my hands on my trousers and took the box inside.

Grandfather was workin' at his roll top desk. I stood there until he noticed. Didn't want to disturb him. "Hello - Johnny. What have you here? Looks like a metal strong box." "Found it under a trap door in the floor of the Old Mill. Bill of sale says it was purchased by Ned Smith." "So you think Ned is the owner? Lets have-a look." Grandfather opened it up, "Looks like its been booby trapped." "Had two darts that flew out, but I made sure it was pointed away from me." He read the paper, "Belongs to Ned Smith - all right. Lets see what's in these pouches. Grandfather whistled as he poured twenty dollar gold pieces out of the pouches, "Ned couldn't have come by this money doing honest work. Four-thousand eight-hundred dollars - Johnny. More than two years wages for most folks. We could buy three Chrysler Roadsters with this much gold." Grandfather telephoned the Sheriff's office and notified the Deputy on duty of my find. He turned to me after hangin' up, "They want me to drop it off on my way to work in the morning. You did the right thing. Deputy agreed with me that Ned didn't come by this gold honestly. There may be a claim or two against it. If not - it's yours. Deputy seems to think it came from selling illegal whiskey.

You might get all - or part of it - or at least a reward."  
"Will they tell Old Ned I found it?" "Don't think so, but  
I'll make sure. I'll let the Sheriff know we need to protect  
your identity."

I went out back and retrieved Father's golf club and  
golf balls. I was getting the hang of it. Took a lot of  
practice to hit a golf ball where you wanted it to go. After  
an hour of hittin' and fetchin' I grew tired of this sport.  
Cleaned off the club and washed the golf balls before placin'  
'em back in Father's golf bag. When I came in through the  
back porch door - Grandfather Mac was waiting, "Watched you  
hit golf balls out back - Johnny. Your Uncle Bus did the  
same thing when he took up the game." "Don't think I'll ever  
be as good a player as he is." "That doesn't matter. What's  
important is to be as good a-player as you can be." That was  
a comfort. Nobody in the State of Ohio could hit a golf ball  
as far as Uncle Bus. Father and Mother were sittin' around  
the kitchen table - drinkin' coffee and talkin'. I sat in  
the chair near the Cast-iron range and listened in. They  
were talkin' about Old Ned Smith. My findin' his gold had  
caused quite a stir. Everyone at the table seemed to have an  
Old Ned story to tell.

Learned a lot about Old Ned Smith. Most of it bad. He  
was kicked out of the Army before World War I was over. He  
lied to get in and stole to get out. Joined up when he was  
sixteen. Never made it overseas. Spent too much time in the  
brig. When Prohibition came along - Old Ned built his first  
whiskey still near Dublin. He was caught and released more  
times than anyone could remember. Didn't take long for Old  
Ned to learn his trade. He learned from experts in prison -  
how to cover his tracks. His stills were found and busted,  
but he was never around. Uncle Bus thought that someone in  
the Sheriff's office was tippin' Ned off about the raids. I  
was left with the impression that a lot of unsavory thugs

lived in Dublin. Grandfather Mac said it had a population of thieves and cutpurses who were members of a notorious club known for gamblin' - drinkin' and such. When they got to talkin' about these lazy no-goods - I remembered I'd left tools on the bench. Forgot to hang 'em up.

I excused myself - made like a shadow - huggin' the wall to the back porch door. The hacksaw and screwdriver were right where I left them. I hung up the saw and put the screwdriver back in the drawer. I'd found Old Ned's Gold and was a hero. I was pretty full of myself by the time I returned to the back porch. Wasn't long before I was put in my place - between my sisters in the back seat of Father's Chrysler Airflow. As we drove home to Osborn - I wondered how Old Ned was going to take it - losin' all his gold. Ned would be so mad he'd be a wild man. Bet he'd start lookin' for me and what would I do? Best I could come up with was - run like crazy.

Each time I saw his friend - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* - it was growin' bigger and bigger. And farmers were losin' animals around here - too.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Golf is easy - with rhythm - touch and feel.
4. Swing easy to hit it far.
5. Be ready to duck - somethin' may be comin'.
6. If you're in a hole - quit diggin'.



*Osborn*

Monday morning arrived crisp and clear. Not a breath of a-breeze. Like a wicked witch had sucked all of the air out of Osborn. Stopped by Willy's place, but he wasn't ready to go to school - so I ran on ahead. I figured there was no reason for two of us bein' late. Jonsey was sittin' on top of the school steps, "'Bout time you showed up. Where's Slick?" "Wasn't ready. Sure hard comin' back to school after bein' in Bellpoint." Jonsey wasn't listenin', "Are you and Slick ready to sell newspapers at Patterson Field's Main Gate?" "Hadn't crossed my mind." 'Course it had, but I wasn't goin' to let on to Jonsey. Didn't pay to look too anxious when there's hard work ahead. "Bull hockey - you and Slick both need money for Christmas." "You talk to Slick?" "Yup - said he would if you would."

Jonsey stood up, "Don't have to sell newspapers durin' the week - only Sundays. You stand outside the Main Gate and sell 'em for a dime. Make a penny on each paper." "Where do we get our papers?" "Old Nel's garage in Fairfield. She's the distributor. Only drawback is - you'll have to get up early on Sunday." Willy came runnin' up the school walk, "Bell ring yet?" I said, "No - what's this about agreein' to sell newspapers on Sunday?" "I need money for Christmas and so do you." I looked at Jonsey, "Looks like Slick has us both committed." Willy smiled and said, "Yup!" just as the first bell rang. As we walked inside, I whispered to Willy, "Guess what I found at the Old Mill in Bellpoint?" "Not interested - probably fool's gold."

Jonsey said we didn't have to talk to Old Nel until Saturday afternoon - after the movie matinee - which was all right with me. It was gonna' be a cowboy shoot-'em-up and I wouldn't miss one of those for anything. Week went by fast enough. We could play basketball outside - though it seemed a little colder each day. Saturday came and the cowboy movie had a fellow named John Wayne in it. He didn't sing - so that was a plus. Looked a bit young to take Tom Mix's place, but he wasn't all that bad. Givin' a cowboy a guitar is like givin' a Bible to a monkey. You don't get religion or music. Willy had to stop at the soda fountain and get an ice cream cone. And it looked as good as all get out, but I couldn't buy one. Not if I wanted to be like John D. Rockefeller. Willy's shirt had to be magnet - a mysterious food attractor. Anything messy landed on the front of it and stuck. After a chocolate ice cream cone - his shirt had more brown spots than a red head with freckles. Kind of blended in with the hot chocolate he had for breakfast. Weren't allowed to bring our bikes - so we walked and ran the four blocks to get to Old Nel's garage.

Old Nel worked out of her garage - attached to the back of a two bedroom frame house. Garage backed up on an alley. Jonsey was waitin' for us - sittin' in the corner foldin' his evenin' papers. Newspapers were stacked all over the garage floor. Cloth newspaper bags were hung on the wall with nails that looked like meat on hooks. Jonsey introduced us, "Nel - these are my two friends - the ones who volunteered to sell Sunday papers at the Main Gate."

Old Nel spit tobacco juice into the corner and looked us both - up and down. Ugly - if looks could kill - we'd be dead. Looked mean enough to play pullin' guard on The Ohio State football team. Had to be in her late fifties. Looked like she'd been rode hard and put away wet. "I've seen you boys around. My name is Nel Smith and I'm in charge. What I

say goes. Be on time and turn in your cash at the end of the day. I expect to see money - not unsold papers." Old Nel spit out the wad of tobacco she had in her mouth and lit a cigarette. Willy and me had never seen a lady smoke - or chew before - wasn't proper. And Old Nel's breath? Only way I can describe it is - the odor comin' out of the Green Frog when the front door is left open in summer. Didn't know what to say - so I didn't, but silence got to Willy, "I'm Willy and this here's Johnny. What time do we have to be here in the mornin'?" Nel gave Willy an evil stare - made him look down at his shoes and shuffle his feet. She took another drag on her cigarette and looked us over. The snarl on her lips became a smirk, "Be here at six-thirty sharp. You'll start with fifty papers each. Now get outa' here!" We both bolted for the door - knockin' each other over.

Didn't stop runnin' 'till we were back in Osborn. Willy was all shook up, "Don't know if I want to work for Old Nel." "She's ugly enough to be a witch. Her breath smelled like somethin' bubblin' out of a witches cauldron." "Cauldron? What the dickens is that?" "Big black pot sittin' on an open fire. Witches cook bat wings and newts in 'em." "You've been spendin' too much time at the library. Do you think we should sell papers tomorrow?" "Didn't give us a chance to say if we wanted too or not." "Lets give it a try. It'll get us outa' goin' to Sunday School and I need the money." "Wear old clothes. If we look poor - we'll get bigger tips." I stopped in my tracks, "Did you get her name" "Nel Smith? You mean she's Old Ned's sister?" "Got to be. No one else could be that mean and ugly. Even has that same sour mash odor about her." Willy laughed, "If I had a watch - I'd cover it up around her." "How - so?" "She's ugly enough to stop a clock. You goin' to the library?" "Sure am. Gonna' read up on witches. We may need protection." "Well - I'm not, but let me know if you find somethin'. If you're right - we may need protection."

Sat there at the readin' table lookin' at pictures of witches. Library didn't have much. Did learn that they were in league with the devil and wouldn't be caught near Sunday School. And real good at doin' the devil's business. And most all of 'em were supposed to be ugly. Nel qualified two times over. And if she served Old Ned Smith - he was mean enough to be the devil himself. Leaned back in my chair and commenced thinkin' - which - as I said before - is dangerous for a boy my age. I felt uneasy about sellin' newspapers. And sellin' newspapers on a street corner had to be at the very bottom of the newspaper food chain. Willy and me were gonna' be raw meat for everyone above us. Somethin' didn't ring true about the way Nel was operatin'. But since we hadn't begun - I wasn't sure what it was.

Decided to ask Father about Old Nel and the Dayton Journal Herald. Besides - I needed his permission if I was goin' to miss Sunday School and sell papers. We didn't get the Dayton Journal Herald. Father preferred to read the Xenia Gazette and our weekly Osborn paper. I waited for Mother to lock up - so I could walk home with her. Decided not to tell her about our plans. She's the one who insisted I go to Sunday School.

Talked to Father after supper. Didn't pay to bring up a new subject to a parent on an empty stomach. Told him about our new job and asked him about the Dayton Journal Herald and Old Nel. He agreed - I could sell papers to make Christmas money. He wasn't much help on Old Nel, "I've never heard of Nel Smith. She could be Ned's sister. Who does she look like?" "The witch in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*." "That bad?" "And she smells like the inside of the Green Frog." "Have you been inside?" "Walked by it last summer - when the door was open." "Make sure that's all you do. Nel could be Ned's sister, but I'm not sure. I don't know anything about his family. And the Dayton Herald - well I don't care for

it. They run fast and loose with the truth - too much yellow journalism." "What does that mean?" "They don't lie - only tell the part of the truth they want too." I expected an argument over sellin' newspapers on the corner, but I didn't get one. I overheard a heated discussion in the kitchen about sellin' papers as a learnin' experience.

Mother talked to me later, "If you were out there on your own - I wouldn't let you do it. Make sure you stay in sight of Willy and run to the guardhouse for protection if Mr. Smith happens by." My sisters looked at me like I had lost my senses. I had to agree with 'em - only a fool would stand outside in the cold - tryin' to sell papers. Saturday night radio was mostly swing band music - the syrupy kind. You know - with wailin' saxophones. Worked on Dad's puzzle for awhile. He'd set a thousand pieces on the card table and we all gave it a try. Tell you how dull this Saturday night was - I did my homework for Monday. Went to bed early. Six o'clock wasn't far away.

Woke up before daylight Sunday mornin' - excited about my new career in the newspaper business. Cold outside - so the hot bran off the pilot light was more than a welcome meal. Ate two helpings before going out the door to Willy's. Didn't have to throw one pebble at his window. Willy was waitin' inside his side door - bundled up. We were both dressed in rags. Looked about as poor as anyone from the other side of the Ohio River and there were mighty poor folks down there. Least that's what Willy said on our walk over to Old Nel's place. We walked through the door of her garage at six-thirty on the nose. Sure didn't want to make the wicked witch of the news mad at us. No tellin' what spell she might cast on us. We might as well have been two hours late. She looked up - a cigarette danglin' from her mouth and a snarl on her lips. "You're late!" My mouth was in gear before my brain, "But we're on time. You said six-thirty." And Nel

snapped back, "Don't you ever get smart with me. Now pick up your papers and get outa' here." We took two bags off the wall - grabbed two stacks of papers and ran out together - runnin' into each other as we tryin' to squeeze through the door at the same time.

Stuffed newspapers in our bags as we walked to the Main Gate. Willy was so shook up he was stuffin' his in upside down. And he was talkin' a mile a minute, "Boy am I glad to get away from Old Nel. Did you smell her breath? And she almost knocked me over with her body odor. Bet she hasn't had a bath in a month of Sundays." "Don't mention it. If I had to stay a minute longer - I would've upchucked breakfast. We were talkin' 'cause we were scared. Cold morning air cleared our noses of Nel's smell by the time we reached the Main Gate. Will took the outbound walk and I took the inbound. We were a pathetic lookin' sight - with holes in our pants and shoes - wearin' patched up jackets and sweaters. Worked though - we sold all our papers and shared four dollars in tips. Chattered away like two magpies on our way back to Old Nel's garage.

We were full of ourselves - bein' so successful our first time out. Probably made too much noise when we entered Nel's garage. She opened the door leadin' to her house - scrambled down the steps - grabbed our empty bags - lit a cigarette and scowled at us, "You two good-for-nothin's don't know nothin' about the newspaper business. When it looks like you're gonna' sell out - one of you come back for more papers. Now hand over your money." We reached in our pockets and handed Nel ten dollars. Stood their waitin' for our pay, but she'd turned away. She turned back, "What are you two standin' around for. Get out of here. You're done for the day." "I spoke up, "Where's our pay?" "No one gets paid until the end of the month. Next Sunday you'll sell a hundred and fifty papers. I told you to get - now get!"

We ran into each other again - goin' out the garage door. We were doin' a lot of that lately with Old Nel after our hides. We were two blocks away and out of breath when I complained, "Jonsey didn't say anything about not gettin' paid until the end of the month. That'll be after Christmas. Be too late to do any good." Willy was madder'n I'd ever seen him, "You and your big mouth. Now we'll have to sell fifty more papers." "It'll mean more tips. It's a good thing we didn't mention 'em - or she'd have taken our tips - too." "Looks like bein' in the newspaper business is the same as makin' a bargain with the devil." "Could be. We're workin for a wicked witch."

Willy - with two dollars burnin' a hole in his pocket was anxious to spend it. Hungry as usual he said, "Lets stop by the drug store. We can get a milk shake at the soda fountain and still have a dollar-seventy-five left over for Christmas. Got pay comin' at the end of the month. If we need too - we can borrow against it from our parents." "By the looks of Old Nel - don't think we'll ever see our money." "She owes us fifty cents each." "We made more'n tips." "See - we're not that bad off and I'm hungry for a shake."

Sat next to Willy on the end stool - drinkin' a glass of water while he downed a chocolate milk shake. Boy - did it ever look good. When you're not havin' one and the other fella is - time stands still. I looked around at everything in the store from my stool. Soda Jerk kept askin' me to make up my mind - so I went outside. Willy followed a few minutes later. Don't know how he did it, but Willy was able to spill chocolate milk shake down the front of his shirt. Looked like he was in for it when he got home. Wind was freshenin' from the northeast. Felt a few drops of rain - so I decided against stayin' around and hightailed it home. Made it in front of a cold fall rain - that began with a slow drizzle and kept on comin'.

That took care of playin' outside for the rest of the day. I was still upset about not bein' paid - so I wrote down what Nel owed me in my ledger - dated and signed it to make it official. Knew it wouldn't do any good, but it made me feel better. Lollled around the house Sunday afternoon. Nobody asked me sellin' papers - until Father did at supper, "How was your first day as an independent businessman?" "We sold all of our papers in two and a half hours." "Did you learn anything?" "Not to trust Nel Smith." "How so?" "We gave her all of the money we collected and she didn't pay us our share. Said she'd give it to us at the end of the month. That'll be after Christmas." "That doesn't sound right. How much does she owe you?" "Fifty cents." "Do you need help?" "Don't think so - Willy and me can handle it." "Don't wait too long. If she is Ned Smith's sister you could be in for another round of trouble."

Mother had a surprise for me after supper. She handed me another book by Mark Twain - called - *Huck Finn*, "I was worried it might be too old for you. Like Twain's book about Tom - Huck's book is about folks who live on the Mississippi before the Civil War. Some of the language in it is a little strong and I don't care for the references he makes about slaves. But - it's true to the times. It portrays how a young man relates to other people. Huck is chased after by real scalawags. May remind you of your nemesis - Ned Smith." "Yes, Ma'am. If it's as good as his book about Tom - it'll be a good read. I liked *Tom Sawyer*. Seemed closer to how life is in Bellpoint than Father's books in Grandmother's attic." "It's the writer that makes a book - or play - or movie and Mark Twain is one of the best. The books your Father read when he was a boy were called dime novels and that's about all they were worth." "Like the comic books we buy today?" "Yes - let me know what you think of this book by Mr. Twain."



I didn't always understand grownups. My Mother knew Old Ned Smith was after me. Talked about it like it was a matter of fact. I knew Father was in tune to my troubles with Old Ned, but Mother? I didn't think she tracked me that well. She sure knew her books. And that Twain fella could write. Here we were a hundred years later and his stories still rang true. Mother said it was because things change, but people don't. They keep on makin' the same mistakes. Sometimes I was treated like a real person and sometimes like a boy. And sometimes people paid too much attention to what folks looked like instead of what they can do. Not that you shouldn't look as good as you can. No one would put rings in their nose - or cheeks - or belly buttons in a civilized world. Didn't pay to look too different. Didn't matter who you were or where you came from as long as you could do the important things - like throw - catch without droppin' - spit without havein' the wind blow it back into your face and most important - tellin' the truth when it counts. I dug into Twain's book under my bed covers. Nodded off again. When I woke up it was mornin'.

Next mornin' wasn't just another Monday - it was the mother of all Monday's - an Ohio gray day. Every place else has cloudy days, but not Ohio. Gray days here are grayer than coal soot on top of winter wash. Wasn't rainin' - it was drizzlin' - a cold wet winter drizzle. Time I got to Willy's house - he was gone. Found him at the top of the steps underneath the overhang above the schoolhouse door. He was stompin' his feet to keep warm, "Hear Old Nel is hidin' an escaped convict inside her house." "Where'd you hear that?" "From Jonsey - and from his description it sounds like Old Ned Smith." "Ned ain't escaped - he's on the run. Ain't been caught." "Jonsey says every time Nel opens her door - the odor of sulfur and manure floats out and it is overpowerin'." "Where's Jonsey?" "Soaked to the skin. Went inside." "He owes us an explanation."

The bell rang and Willy and me went in - so we wouldn't be late. Jonsey made himself scarce all day long. We cornered him after school - tryin' to sneak out the front door instead of the back. I caught him by the arm, "Hold on. We need to talk. Nel ain't payin' us until after Christmas!" Jonsey tried to pull away, but Slick got hold of his other arm and said, "C'mon - talk. Johnny and me sold a hundred papers and didn't get one thin dime from that old witch. Why didn't you tell us we wouldn't get paid?" Willy and me gripped Jonsey tighter. We were about to throw him to the ground and stomp on him.

Jonsey must've known. He finally fessed up, "Old Nel threatened me if I told. She's got two knife carryin' thugs workin' for her and *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* is inside her house. The odor of sulfur and manure is enough to raise the dead. I'm not about to cross her." I let go, "Slick says she had an escaped convict livin' with her. You remember Old Ned Smith - is it him?" "Could be - whoever it was looked out through her kitchen curtains." "Well - it has to be. He's the only one I know who has *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* for a friend." Jonsey tried to twist out of Willy's grip, "Turn me loose. You're cuttin' the circulation to my hand." Willy let him go and Jonsey took off - shoutin' over his shoulder, "I'm late. Old Nel will turn that red devil loose on me if I'm not on time."

Willy shouted after him, "Serve you right for turnin' on your friends." We walked off the school grounds - kickin' stones - not sayin' anything. Halfway to Willy's - he asked, "What are you gonna' do. Old Ned is your problem and I sure don't want to mess with *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*." "I don't think goin' over to Nel's and makin' a stink about not bein' paid is a good idea." "Lets go to my place. We'll shoot a few baskets and think about it."

A boy my age - thinkin' can be trouble. And two of us? Well - that can be a calamity. We sat on Willy's side porch steps - thinkin', but not talkin'. Ground was still too wet to bounce Willy's basketball, but if we caught it comin' through the net or bouncin' off the backboard we could shoot baskets. So we commenced, but it wasn't long before we missed as many as we caught - our pants had mud splatters all up the front. Gave up tryin' to catch the ball before it hit the ground and began a game of Horse. Had a surprise waitin' for Slick. I'd been practicin' lay-ups. Made everyone he did and beat him fair and square. Willy asked, "Have you thought enough about Old Nel?" "Yup - we'll check out Nel's place tomorrow after school." "Why not today?" "Too late - miss my radio serials." "No way. Best for us to find Old Ned before he finds you." "You must be tetches! If she's Old Ned's sister - he's found us. And if he's comin' after me - he will."

Couldn't wait for school to be out. Willy held me back until Jonsey left for his paper route, "We'll check Nel's place while her boys are busy foldin' papers." "I have to go home and get my bike." "How come?" "In case we have to make a fast getaway." "Better hurry or they'll be out on their routes and we won't have cover." Made it back to Willy's house in record time. We hid out in front of Nel's house. Wasn't much of a decision. Alley and garages didn't provide cover out back and Slick's forte' was knowin' where to hide and sneak. He'd done a lot of that. Found a hedge we could hide behind - two houses down across the street from Old Nel's. Didn't count on ground bein' so wet. Couldn't kneel or sit down and standin' would leave us exposed. Had to hunker down - bent over like. We stayed in a crouch position for almost ten minutes before we had to give it up. Willy thought he saw the curtains move a few times, but we couldn't see who it was. Hopped on our bikes and rode back to Willy's house to shoot baskets.

I was ready to ride home when Jonsey rode up - laughin', "Half the town saw you two hidin' behind that hedge. What got into you?" "Wanted to see if the guy stayin' at Old Nel's was Ned Smith." "It's him all right. He was in the garage when I stopped by to pick up my papers. Moved back inside as I was comin' through the garage door." "Are you sure it was him?" "Pretty hard to forget someone who looks that mean and ugly. Hes only one tooth - don't he? Not sure if he knows me, but he sure knows Johnny. I'll keep track of him for you since I gotta' be there every day. I'll let you know if he decides to stay put or come out." As Jonsey rode away home on his bike - I looked at Slick, "A lotta' good that'll do us. I'm gonna' call the police." Willy caught up with me before I got on my bike, "Osborn Police can't do a thing. Nel's house is in Fairfield. Hop off your bike and lets think this through."

We sat down on Willy's steps and thought a bit. Silence got to Slick, "I'm comin' up empty. What's your plan?" "Not sure. If two County Sheriffs and the State Police can't catch Old Ned - one Police Chief and a deputy aren't gonna' have much luck. I turned Old Ned in twice and he got away both times." "You got him on the run." "He's runnin' all right, but it's after me. Your turn - what do you think?" "If we turn Old Ned in - we'll lose our newspaper jobs." "If we don't - we stand a good chance of gettin' beat up or worse." "Not much of a choice." "Think about it. We're workin' for no pay as it is, but we can't take the law into our own hands. Old Nel has two pug uglies with knives. Between them and Ned? We wouldn't stand a chance. Only thing we got going for us is Ned doesn't carry a weapon. With his record - if he was caught with one - law would put him away for good." "Looks like you're in a box canyon with bandits blockin' the entrance. What would your pal Tom Mix do?" "Tell the authorities." "Can't - we don't know the Fairfield police." "My Father."

I waited until after supper to talk to Father. Tellin' him was a decision I could live with. When in doubt - always go to a higher authority. Father wasn't surprised. Word of Old Nel's visitor had spread through both towns. He called Willy's Father before callin' the Sheriff. They both agreed - it was too big for the Fairfield Police to handle. Sheriff promised to pick up Old Ned before mornin'. Didn't want to make a big fuss around Nel's place. Ned wasn't a bank robber or murderer - just a low life crook stealin' from doctors. With all the excitement - I couldn't get to sleep for an hour after goin' to bed. Couldn't wait for mornin'. Had to find out what happened to Old Ned.

I was up and dressed thirty minutes before Father came down for breakfast. Waited until he drank some coffee before askin', "Did they catch Ned Smith?" "Don't know. Sheriff didn't call back." "May take more than a Sheriff to catch Old Ned. Maybe I should write Tom Mix for help." "Tom Mix can't help. He may be a real cowboy, but he's an actor now. And he's in Hollywood and we're in Ohio. It's a long way to ride his horse. Take him two - or three months." My Father could really pull the plug on my fantasy world, but I knew he didn't mean any harm, "Wish he could. Old Ned is quicker than local law." "Hurry on to school - and Johnny?" "Yes - Sir." "Keep your eyes open."

Willy was waitin' outside on his side steps, "What kept you?" "I'm ten minutes early. Waited for my Father to tell me about Old Ned." "My Dad called the Sheriff this mornin'. You were right. Old Ned got away. He sure is a slippery ol' devil." "What happened?" "Sheriff stopped by Old Nel's, but Ned was long gone. Seein' Jonsey must have spooked him. Nel claimed that no one had been to her place. She told the Sheriff she never heard of him. Said she didn't have a brother." Just then the first bell rang and our discussion about Old Ned had to wait.

Jonsey made it in - just before the tardy bell stopped ringin'. We tried to trap him at noon, but he slipped away. Tried to get away from us after school, but we caught up with him. Slick grabbed his arm - so he couldn't get away, "Hold on Jonsey. We're your friends. Don't you remember?" "A lot of help you two are. You put me right in the middle of it with Ol' Nel." "What do you know about Old Ned's escape?" "All I know is she called my house last night and blamed me for callin' the Sheriff. Worse yet - I have to pick up my newspapers. She'll be all over me when I get there." I offered, "Slick and me'll get our bikes and ride with you." "A lotta' help you'll be. Her pug uglies carry knives." Willy opined, "But we're better'n nothin'" Jonsey broke into a wide grin, "Guess you're right - Nel might be quick on her feet, but she can't outrun a bike. Meet me in the alley a block away from her garage."

We rode up to where Jonsey was sittin' on his bike seat - fidgetin'. He got off, "Walk our bikes to Nel's garage, but be ready to take off. If her pug uglies try anything - I won't be standin' around." Nel's garage looked normal to me. Least ways - nothin' looked outa' sorts. Inside - Nel looked up and gave us a wide grin - which wasn't normal at all. Sat there smokin' her cigarette as if nothin' had happened. We helped Jonsey fold his papers and stuff 'em into his bag and Nel still didn't say one word - just sat there - smokin' and smilin'. As we walked out the door - Jonsey whispered, "Ride with me for awhile. Nel may send one of her pugs after me." Willy begged off, "Can't. Dad told me to come home right after school. I'm all ready over his time limit. Stop by after you finish." I rode along with Jonsey while he delivered papers. No one came after us and he didn't want to return to Nel's garage. So - we didn't.

We rode up to Willy's side yard. Slick was bouncin' his basketball on a dry spot, "'Bout time you got here. Any

problems?" "Nah - no one came after Jonsey. Game of Horse?" "Not since you learned how to make a lay-up. Where do you think Old Ned went?" "Probably across the Ohio River - back to Kentucky. Don't think he'll be around until after New Years - if he decides to come back. When the law is after him - Old Ned knows how to disappear." Jonsey asked, "Why would he go south? He can hide in Dayton or along Mad River?" I spoke up, "Law doesn't know him in Kentucky and he can sneak back and forth across the Ohio River. He worked on the Ohio River firin' a steamboat boiler this fall." Willy sat down on his steps, "My Dad says we better stick together for awhile. At least until we're sure Old Ned's not around." I shook my head, "How we gonna' know that? We don't know where he is or where he's goin'. But - if I know Old Ned - he sure won't be around here - for now. In a month or so it'll be a different story. I'm late - gotta' get home. I'll stop by in the morning." Jonsey said, "Wait up. I'll ride with you." "You need help tomorrow?" "Nah."

Rest of the week - Nel was as nice as she could be to Jonsey. By Saturday - we had forgotten all about Old Ned. Life in Osborn was back to normal. Well - better than normal. Willy was as excited as I'd ever seen him, "We got to go! Mother lode of all shoot-'em-ups is gonna be at the Saturday matinee. Gene Autry stars in the first and Tom Mix in the second." As much as Tom was my favorite cowboy - Gene was Willy's. He loved to see Gene strummin' a guitar and wailin' away - singin' through his nose. Not me, "No real cowboy would ever play a guitar. Might bop someone over the head with one, but play it? Never!" Knew I'd stepped over the line - so I added, "Autry ain't bad - if he'd cowboy and stop singin'." Willy wasn't buyin' it, "Gene Autry is too a cowboy!" "No real cowboy would ever be caught wearin' a guitar around his neck. Only hillbillies play 'em." Willy knew how to get even. He dropped a bombshell, "Tom Mix is dead." "What?" "Tom Mix died yesterday."

It was like tellin' a preacher the Bible he used had been recalled. I sat there stunned. Willy brought me back, "I said Tom Mix is dead. Got killed in a car accident." "Can't be true - you're kiddin' ain't you?" "No. My Dad heard it on the radio - yesterday." "Why didn't you tell me?" "Forgot." "Tom wouldn't die that way. He'd go with his six guns blazin' - die with his boots on - like a real cowboy." "But he did. He was wearin' 'em in his car. Nothin' wrong with goin' in a car. Can't ride a horse everywhere." "Saturday won't be the same with Tom gone. Movies will be taken over by guitar playin' cowboys." "What about John Wayne?" "There's hope."

Our Saturday mornin' walk to the gym turned into run and stomp - tryin' to keep our feet warm. Boy was it cold. Winter was a-comin' - ready or not. We raced through our games - just to keep warm. Afterwards we raced home - too cold to continue our game outside. And this time of year it was too cold to ride a bike anywhere. I finished my second Twain book - the one about Huck - before the matinee'. Both movies were darned good. Covered my ears when Autry sang and that made him almost palatable. After the movies - Willy wanted to read his Dad's National Geographic. Knowin' he'd leaf through the stack and look at topless ladies - I decided I'd go to the library and see if Mother had a new adventure book for me.

Weather turned cold - so I had time to read another book and maybe Twain had written three. Mother anticipated me. She had a Jack London book - *Call of the Wild* on the corner of her desk. She warned me, "Jack London can be a little rough around the edges at times, but it's time you expanded your reading horizons." "Does Mark Twain have another book?" She laughed, "He has many more and short stories, but you'll have to be older to appreciate them. You'll like London's book." "Yes Ma'am." I'd give London's book a good look.



With Tom Mix gone - I wasn't up to another lecture about it. So - I hightailed it to the readin' table and opened London's book and commenced.

Wasn't long before I was lost in the tale London was weavin'. Didn't look up until I noticed Mother turnin' out the lights. London was almost as good a writer as Twain. I'd read straight through for two hours - not noticin' what was goin' on around me. Jonsey rode by us as we walked home and gave us a wave. He had finished deliverin' his afternoon papers. Wasn't able to go to the matinee. It lasted too long with two movies. Didn't ask us to ride along after the first time. Nel was peaches and cream - all week long. I wasn't keen on goin' to her garage - Sunday mornin'. Had a feelin' - when her bad side got bottled up too long - it'd explode. I didn't want to be around when that happened. After supper - I picked up my book where I left off. Jack London's story was about the Yukon and gold. Now there's a tale that would get any boy's interest.

Woke up in darkness - Sunday mornin'. I was gettin' up earlier on weekends than durin' the week. That didn't seem right. Weekends were for rest - specially Sunday. Looked outside to check the weather. Our sour apple tree was coated with ice. Wind was pickin' up. I could see the limbs movin' and that the air was loaded with moisture. It was so cold inside - had to be worse outside. Almost went right back to bed, but I didn't. Willy would kill me if I didn't show up. It was goin' to be a two sweater morning. Bundled up with good clothes on the inside and torn ones on the outside. Willy was right about what we should wear. Worked - got lots of tips and tips might be the only pay we get. Milk and honey sure helped the bran go down. Tasted pretty good on a cold winter mornin'. Had to wear mittens 'cause I couldn't find a pair of gloves that matched. Gloves and socks are like that, but not mittens.

Didn't walk to Willy's house. Streets and sidewalks were coated with ice - so I ran and slid - ran and slid - ran and slid the whole way. Boy is that ever fun. Have to have leather soles and real shoes. Can't do it if you're wearin' sneakers. Don't get me wrong - I like to wear sneakers when I'm runnin' or playin' games, but they aren't any good for slidin'. Cloudy out and we were gettin' a few skiffs of snow - all in all a fine day for slidin' and a bad day for standin' around outside sellin' newspapers.

Didn't get a chance to knock on the door. Willy opened it, "Come on inside. Mom fixed hot chocolate and maple rolls for us." My feet were freezin' and the tip of my nose felt like soda fountain ice. Didn't take much encouragement to get me to the kitchen table. Chewed on hot roll and sipped hot chocolate while Willy complained, "If Old Nel doesn't pay us today - I'm quittin'. My Dad phoned the Dayton Journal Herald and guess what?" "Don't know - what?" "Old Nel's gotta' pay us out of our daily receipts. She's cheatin' us." I drank the last of my hot chocolate and put the cup down. "If you quit - I will - too. Father won't allow me to sell papers by myself. Besides - workin' for a relative of Old Ned is like workin' for the devil's daughter. Sure does explain why she's so ugly and mean. If were gonna' quit - lets wait until we sell our papers. I can use tip money. It's more than she pays. Ice storm will keep quite a few people out of the drugstore for their Sunday paper. We might sell a few more than last week." Willy stood up, "Tom Mix is dead - but he trained you well."

For someone who said we'd better hurry - Willy sure took his time puttin' on his coat and mittens. But, that was Willy. When he thought someone was tryin' to get the better of him - he'd get his back up and foot down. His favorite sayin' was, "Fool me once - shame on you. Fool me twice - shame on me." And Willy wasn't the only one. I was gettin'

to the point where I didn't want anything to do with Old Nel and her newspaper business. From what I'd seen - newspaper people - circus and carnival folks had a lot in common. Only problem - newspaper folks won't fold their tents and leave town. My problem was Old Nel. She'd be keepin' track of me for her brother. And I didn't want to be alone in her garage with her pug uglies lurkin' about. Trouble with thinkin' and not lookin' is I slipped on the ice coatin' Willy's steps and bounced on my hind end.

When Willy saw the ice coatin' on the sidewalks - he let his storm door bang - gave a whoop and a holler - and we ran and slid - ran and slid - ran and slid all the way to Nel's garage. We were late, but so were the papers. A delivery truck was outside unloadin' as we walked up. We pitched in and helped unload - stackin' newspapers in the middle of the floor. Nel - smokin' on her cigarette - was shoutin' nasty things at Willy and me. The language she used would made a parrot blush. I whispered to Willy, "Ignore her - we're safe as long as we're in a crowd." "Don't count on it - her pug uglies look old enough to be in the Army. Maybe Nel has another line of business and sellin' newspapers is a cover." Took our bags down off the wall and began fillin' 'em. Took seventy five each - just like Nel told us too last Sunday. I pushed Willy out the garage door. Old Nel looked like she wanted to bully us some more, but didn't. We were protected 'cause she had too many newsboys in the garage.

Didn't slide this time We walked gingerly on the ice covered sidewalks to the Main Gate. Couldn't run three steps and slide with a bag full of Sunday newspapers on our shoulders. Roads were slick - so we had quite a few walkers today and most everyone was buyin'. After half an hour we were jumpin' up and down to keep our feet warm. An hour and a-half later Willy hollered over, "Lets go across the street and warm up inside the diner."

The diner across from the Main Gate was made out of a real railroad dining car. Had a long counter with stools, but no booths. A real diner wouldn't be caught dead with frills like that. We ordered a hamburger and mug of hot chocolate. Wiped out a quarter of our mornin' tips. Had to order somethin' or the cook behind the counter would make us leave. We were in grownup's land - a land where there isn't any free lunch or warmth. A real diner doesn't have cups and saucers and this one didn't either. Had to drink out of a mug. Tough - cook would have served us coffee if we asked for it - or sold us cigarettes. Anyway - if you weren't buyin' - you weren't welcome here. Knew enough not to say anything, but we could listen and we did. There was nothin' else to do - if we wanted to get warm.

If words are gold - Willy and me had found a gold mine today. Sergeant from Patterson Field was talkin' about a German named Adolf Hitler. Said, "That man is plumb crazy. He's gonna' take over half the world if we don't stop him. Won't be long before we'll have to go back over there and whip him - just like we did the Kaiser." That really got me interested. Father had more'n one book in Grandfather Ropp's attic about boys my age goin' over to Europe and beatin' up on Kaiser Bill. I wondered if that fellow Hitler wore a spiked metal helmet and had a mustache like the drawin' of Kaiser Bill - on the cover of Father's books.

That fellow - the Sergeant was talkin' too - wasn't at all interested in fightin', "I'm not goin' over there and save Europe again. They got themselves into it - they can get themselves out. Germans and Frenchies are like two schoolboys darin' each other to a fight." "Might have been last time, but not now. Hitler is hell bent on exterminatin' anyone who doesn't have blonde hair." "That's a problem for Europe. We got problems here. Hoover's depression isn't over yet. We need to raise taxes and spend money on the poor

- not war. Roosevelt won't get us into a war. Why - he's a Democrat." "Wilson was a Democrat. If he had listened to Teddy Roosevelt we would've gotten in right away and the Kaiser would have backed off. Wouldn't have a Hitler around today - not if Teddy was in charge. Mark my words - we're going to wait too long - Hitler will do something rash and we'll have to get into it."

That conversation really perked me up. Filled me to the brim with high hopes. As we walked back to the Main Gate - I told Willy, "What great fun it would be - to go to Europe and whip that Old Hitler. We'll show those Huns a thing or two. Chance like this doesn't come along very often. We best be prepared to take advantage of it." Willy wasn't interested, "Fightin' is for fools. Only way I'll go to Europe is go to college over there. Won't ever see me in any uniform but a band uniform - carryin' a baton or playin' my saxophone." Now that stopped me in my tracks - the image of fat-assed Willy prancing around in front of a band. Had to smile at the absurdity of it.

It was after nine o'clock when Willy and me sold our last paper. We split five dollars in tips and walked gingerly back to Nel's - on ice that was gettin' slicker by the minute. Winter had arrived early and looked like it was going to stay around for a few days. Had to give Willy his due - he sure knew how to manipulate folks. Lookin' poor worked. We received more'n our fair share of sympathy and that meant tips. Standin' out in the cold with worn out clothes was our meal ticket. Didn't say much on the way to Nel's. Our teeth were chatterin' too hard to talk.

Nel was waitin' for us with her hand out. We handed over our fifteen dollars and started to hang our bags up on the wall. Nel stopped us, "Those bags belong to you now." Willy asked, "How come?" "You're buyin' 'em." I put my

hand on Willy's arm and whispered, "Don't start anything we can't finish. She's got two pug uglies sittin' in the corner." Willy whispered back between clenched teeth, "I see 'em." Sometimes Willy has no sense at all. He looked Nel in the eye, "Give us our pay. My Dad phoned the Journal Herald and they said you had to pay us from our collections. You owe us each a dollar and twenty-five cents. I'm not leavin' until I get mine." Nel's two pug uglies were on their feet and runnin'. She held up her hand and they stopped in their tracks. She looked at Willy - spat a stream of brown tobacco juice in the corner and gave him a wide grin, "Your pay is hangin' on your shoulder. Those bags cost what I owe you and that's what you owe me. We're square - now git!"

Never saw Willy get so red in the face before. He lost it, "'You're cheatin' us!" Nel got just as red in the face, "Mind your manners when you're speakin' to your elders. Why - you're nothin', but a snot nosed kid. Get outa' here or my boys will show you what's for!" Her pug uglies began to move toward us - so I grabbed Willy's arm and whispered, "Let's get outa' here. Old Nel isn't gonna' pay up." But - I was too late. One of the pug uglies pushed Willy to the floor and the other stood over him - ready to kick him in the head. Nel grabbed that pug by the arm and pulled him back, "Let him up. I don't want any trouble with his father." Willy got up sputterin', "Damn you Nel!" I pulled him out. Nel stood in the doorway and spit a stream of tobacco juice on Willy's shoe. Willy started toward her, but stopped when Nel poked her finger in his chest and whispered, "Don't push your luck - fat boy."

We walked away. Woulda' run, but we couldn't because of the ice. Willy was still mad - red in the face. I let him have it, "You got to learn to control your temper. You coulda' got us killed." "That damn witch is rippin' me off and there's nothin' I can do about it. Those newspaper bags

are supposed to be free." "You know what's wrong?" "There's a lot wrong with that old witch." "Besides that. We didn't get a chance to tell her we quit." Willy nodded, "Got to take care of that old hag. No damn ugly old witch is gonna' get the best of me." I looked at the clock on the steeple of the town hall, "Almost ten o'clock and the ice hasn't melted. What do you want to do?" "Get even with that witch if it's the last thing I do. So I'm gonna' think on it. I'll be over this afternoon. What are you gonna' do?" "Got a new book about the Yukon to read." "Yukon - where's that?" "Up north near Alaska." "We got snow here. Don't need to read about snow up there." "When will you be over?" "After lunch. Have to eat. It'll take me a long to warm up and get over my mad."

I ran and slid - ran and slid all the way home. I was gettin' used to maneuverin' on ice. Got my American Flyer sled down from the garage wall and gave it a whirl. Now that was fun - if you have a side street to do it on. Take about five to seven steps to get up speed and then belly flop on your sled. Slide about twenty yards. Learned one thing real quick - didn't have control of my direction on ice. Kept right on goin' until Mother called me in for dinner at noon. Just as well. Skies were turnin' from Ohio slate gray to Michigan coal black and snow was comin' down in confetti like flakes. I was so cold my body had the clanks.

Mother had hot tomato soup simmerin' on top the stove. I made a sandwich out of mysterious lunch meat. You know the kind - sorta' like bologna with red and black pepper embedded in it. Tasted all right, but I wouldn't make a habit out of it. Not as long as there is peanut butter and mayonnaise in this world. By the time I finished the second bowl of soup - my clanks were long gone. First thing I did - after climbin' the stairs to my bedroom - was put the two and a-half dollars I'd made in tips in my pig. I now had four dollars and fifty

cents to buy presents with. Sat there and calculated, "It'll take more than a few weekends to make that much money at a penny a paper. Experience hadn't been a total loss.

We were done with Nel and her newspaper business. My bag was hangin' up in the garage by the sled. Wondered if Old Nel would buy it back. It would be worth a try, but I'd have to wait for her to calm down. Opened up my Jack London book and took up where I'd left off. I was knee deep in the Yukon - walkin' in drifted snow with snowshoes when Willy called up from downstairs, "You up there - Johnny?" "Yup - readin' a book. Come on up. What did you come up with?" Willy walked into my room with his newspaper bag over his shoulder and a Chessy-Cat grin on his face. He sat down on the edge of my bed, "The way I see it - we quit. Only Old Nel didn't give us a chance to tell her - so we don't have too." "What are we gonna' do with our newspaper bags." "We own 'em - least ways that old witch Nel says we do. So - we don't have to return 'em and I don't want to keep mine. That old hag might have put a curse on 'em."

I was catchin' Willy's drift. His mind was quick when it came to parsin' devious thoughts, "I'm with you - so far. If she put a curse on 'em - or us - or both - we got to destroy our newspaper bags." "Good - you're gettin' with it now." "We don't really own 'em - they're the property of the Dayton Journal Herald." "Not anymore - not after that witch Old Nel sold 'em to us." "Got to get rid of 'em in a way that will destroy the curse she could-a put on 'em or us." "You read all the time. What can we do?" I read all right, but I hadn't read anything about gettin' rid of curses. I have an idea about witches though - fire! We'll destroy 'our bags by fire. That's how they did it in Salem. Burnt their witches at the stake. We'll burn our bags and bury 'em." I took down one of Father's Shakespear books from his bookshelf and copied a witches chant.



Willy and me practiced the chant on our outside to my garage. I found Father's two gallon can of kerosene and a shovel. I looked around for matches, but couldn't find any. Willy asked, "What are you lookin' for?" "Matches." "I got some. Always carry a tin of waterproof matches. Never know when I'll have to build a fire." We walked outside - snow was comin' down thick as a white sheet on the clothes line. We couldn't see more than five feet in front of us. Willy asked, "Where do we go to burn 'em." "Got to be in a public place - or it won't take." "How about Waterworks Park - in the middle of the football field on the fifty yard line?" "Okay by me, but hurry. Snow is really comin' down."

We crossed the railroad tracks behind my house. Had to guess where we were. Lines on the field had been washed away by rain - and snow was coverin' the grass. Willy poked the tip of our shovel into the ground. Had to peel back a three foot strip of sod before we could dig a hole. Took turns diggin' a two foot deep hole. Willy stuffed our newspaper bags into the hole and I poured kerosene on top. Then Willy struck a wooden match and dropped it in on top - *Whoosh!* Flame jumped up out of that hole and singed our eyebrows. Willy had a silly grin on his face, "Damn, Johnny - isn't that somethin'?" "Now we got to chant and dance or it won't do any good. I handed him a sheet of paper -

*Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.  
By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes.*

"Where'd you get this chant." "From someone who knows a witch or two - Shakespeare." "It sure should back-curse anything Old Nel puts on us." We chanted and danced around

that ol' fire - makin' a circular path through the snow. Me and Will were hoopin' and hollerin' like an Indian war party gettin' ready to go after settlers. After a bit - I warmed my hands over the fire while Willy danced and hollered on. Couldn't help but feel a little guilty. I knew Nel had done us wrong, but I knew the newspaper bags weren't hers to sell or ours to burn. Finally reasoned, "Nel sold 'em to us - so they're ours - we just converted 'em to somethin useful. We got rid of her curse and the bags - too."

Burnin' my newspaper bag was one of those things I'd keep to myself. Some things you can talk about to grownups and some things you can't. This was somethin' they wouldn't understand. I wasn't the only one who learned a lesson around that fire. Willy learned that he could eliminate anything from his past - all he to do was hide the evidence. Willy finally wore down and stopped his dancin'. I looked up from the fire and asked, "Almost time to bury the ashes?" "Right - so the curse will be put to earth."

As we began to cover 'em up I asked Willy, "Somethin' wearin' on your mind?" "I overheard my Mom and Dad talkin' about your Father." "What about?" "School Board isn't going to renew his contract next summer." "He knows about it, but don't say anything. You're the first one I've told that he knows. Did they say why?" "Uses a T formation when everyone else uses a single or double wing. My Dad says it'll be a long time before Osborn has a football coach as good as your Dad. Do you think you'll move away?" Didn't know what to say to Willy - so I decided to swear him to secrecy, "This is between you and me. Tell anyone else and Nel's witch's curse is back on. We're movin' to Grandfather Ropp's farm on the Scioto River if the Board doesn't renew Father's contract. Mother says it's five times the money that teachin' is, but Father would rather coach. My sisters will be goin' to college soon and teachin' doesn't pay enough." "My Dad says

that before your Father came here - Bath High School's team was a doormat." "We better finish fillin' it in and get home before we freeze to death." Willy shoveled and I laid the sod back on top. We jumped up and down on it, but we still had a small mound.

Willy ran on home and I returned to the garage carryin' my kerosene can and shovel. Willy and me grew up around that fire. As for me - I knew for sure we were leavin' now. This would be my last winter in Osborn. If I had to be up at the farm. Decided I might as well make the best outa' bein' there. Workin' could be fun. I'd make the basketball team and Bellpoint was too small to have a band. Wouldn't be embarrassed about not knowin' how to play music. Funny thing about snow - you don't know you're wet until you get inside. My coat and pants were soaked. Sat near the register - so I'd dry off. That was a plus for the farm. I'd dry in a minute - sittin' next to Grandmother's Cast-iron range. When I was dry enough - I climbed the stairs to my room and dove back into my Yukon book. With the snow outside and the great white north in my book - I had the shivers. Wondered if Ned was inside where it was warm or huddlin' by a fire in the woods with *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. You can bury a problem, but never forget.
3. Workin' in a grown-up world ain't always fair.
4. Don't hang around - cut your losses.

# 8

For the next two weeks I woke up each mornin' in a cold sweat. It was a horrifyin' dream. Could almost swear that Old Nel put a curse on me. In my dream - I was on the other side of the New York Central railroad tracks - burnin' and buryin' bodies. Like I was tryin' to hide the evidence of a crime. And try as I may - I couldn't remember what the crime was - no matter how hard I tried to recall the dream when I was awake. Wakin' up in a cold sweat and not knowin' if a dream was real or not isn't a pleasant experience - not at all. That old witch Nel must have put a curse on Willy and me. He was havin' nightmares too. After burnin' and buryin' our newspaper bags - no way we'd forget. Then again - it might be we put a curse on ourselves. Least I felt that way - 'cause deep down inside I felt guilty. Like Nel and Old Ned should, but didn't.

Never went back to Nel's garage - though. Didn't phone or write a letter, but I told Jonsey to tell her, "We quit." He said he did, but waited till he was goin' out the door so she wouldn't throw a brick at him. Old Nel got on Jonsey's case somethin' fierce after that. He woulda' quit too, but with his Father gone - his Mother needed money. Nel told Jonsey she wanted her newspaper bags back. Jonsey didn't bother to correct her - that she'd sold 'em to us. Wouldn't do any good. He knew we paid for 'em and that was good enough for him. One thing for sure - I didn't miss standin' around outside in the cold sellin' papers.

A week before Christmas - believe it was Friday - right after supper - Father held a family meetin' around the

kitchen table. I was expectin' to be told and so were my sisters, but it still hurt, "Hate to be the bearer of bad news. We're moving to your Grandfather's farm next summer. I know you'll miss your friends in Osborn, but it can't be helped. The School Board informed me they won't renew my contract." My older sister couldn't understand, "You've been here almost ten years. And you're one of the highest rated math teachers in the State. Don't time and results count?" "Not in public schools - only colleges have tenure. The School Board is political and elected. If they decide not to renew my contract - there's nothing I can do." She wasn't one to give in, "Can't you find work here?" "I can, but you're going to college next year and your sister soon after. I won't be able to pay for your education on a teacher's salary. Your Grandfather wants me to take over the farm and one of the county schools has asked me to coach part time." I asked, "Will our Grandparents stay on the farm?" "They purchased a home in town several years ago. If we don't take over - Dad plans on selling the farm. He'll still help out, but like my coaching - only part time." "Can we tell our friends?" "No - things may change. We still have over half the school year to complete."

Spent the next week after school in the dime store. Our first snow melted away less than two days after it arrived - our sleds stayed up on the wall. Wasn't much else to do and it wasn't easy buyin' presents. I allotted myself two dollars for gifts and I had eight to buy. All things being equal - that meant spending twenty-five cents for each present. This was an improvement over last year when I could spend only a dime. But - makin' up my mind on what to buy with all this new found wealth took time. Then came the wrappin'. When I was finished - my oldest sister said my presents looked like they were wrapped by monkeys in a zoo. I thought I'd done a pretty good job until I set 'em under the tree next to theirs. Had to bag 'em all up for the trip

north to Bellpoint. Willy was stayin' home and we didn't exchange presents - just compared 'em. His were better. His Dad wasn't livin' on a teacher's salary.

Just my luck - the day we drove north to Bellpoint it snowed. I'd miss a week of sleddin' if we stayed until New Years. Least ways the roads were clear of snow, but the fields were white - still pristine and unmarked. Christmas and New Years Day were both on Sunday - so we had a whole week off from school. If the weather held - we'd stay for a week. If more snow was on the way - we'd come home early. My sisters and I kept our eyes open for white horses - not too many horses out in the snow. Not many animals of any kind out. It was hard to see 'em in the gatherin' dusk - anyway. Most of 'em were inside or in the barnyards. First one to see a white horse had to lick her palm and smack it with the a fist made by the other hand. Then you made a wish. Seein' a white horse was supposed to bring good luck. With Old Ned Smith chasin' after me - I needed all the luck I could get.

Didn't stop at the Amish Dairy. It was closed until spring. Plain City - looked like it might as well be closed - too. Didn't see more than two or three cars on the street and none of the black Amish buggies. City would be busy tomorrow - Saturday - the day before Christmas. Almost everyone would shop then. Later - we looked for and found Uncle John's maple syrup cabin. It was as cold and empty as the Amish Dairy. Be open in spring - when sap ran again. Brown pasture grass was showin' through the snow - like lumpy boil-dried oatmeal under moonlight glitterin' through the trees. Father opined, "Looks like Bellpoint didn't get as much snow as we did. Any of you kids see a cow or horse on the way up?" My eldest sister said, "Not even a white one." "Horses stay close to the barn this time of year. Wouldn't want your livestock to come down with a cold. Animals around

here are all tucked in for a long winter's nap." When we drove over Mill Creek Bridge into Bellpoint - Christmas had begun and our minds turned into maple sugar candy.

As soon as Father set the parking brake - we all tumbled out of the car and ran for Grandfather Mac's front porch. Bellpoint may be celebrating Christmas season in silence, but my sisters and I weren't. Tried to duck inside, but I was too late. Grandfather picked me up with a sweepin' motion and gave my cheeks a Dutch rub. I could smell the aroma of pipe tobacco in his beard stubble, "You're almost too big to pick up - or I'm getting too old." He put me down on the floor and placed his hand on the small of his back, "Think I'll just tousle your hair from now on. Get into the kitchen and give your Grandmother a hug." Grandmother was removin' a roast from the oven of her Cast-iron range, "You look like you could use a good meal - young man." With Grandmother a greetin' was meant to be formal - even among family. She and I were almost the same height. She held me at arms length after givin' me a kiss on the cheek, "My - isn't our Johnny growing like a weed." I wasn't all that thrilled to be compared to a weed, but I smiled and kept my thoughts to myself. I associated folks like Old Ned and Nel Smith with the weed family.

Sat in the parlor before supper and stared at the tree. It was a big one. Filled up one corner of the room - reached almost to the ceilin'. Modern too - had electric lights on it - instead of candles. If you squint your eyes just right - lights look like they come from fairyland. Didn't touch one of the packages under the tree. Touchin' one before it was time brings bad luck. Grandmother called us into the dinin' room for a supper of meat and potatoes. Said it would stick to my ribs until day after tomorrow - when a giant tom turkey came out of her oven. After dinner - we placed our presents under the tree. Played Monopoly with my sisters

until bedtime. My Parents were whisperin' to my Grandparents about movin' to the farm. Tried to listen in, but was shooed outa' the kitchen. Next day - Saturday it was cold and windy. Didn't do anything special durin' the day except stay inside to keep warm. So I'll skip it and get right to Saturday night - Christmas Eve.

That jolly old elf - Saint Nicholas wouldn't sneak down the chimney until everyone was asleep. So - after supper - the whole family exchanged presents. Now about Old Saint Nick - well I believed in him and I didn't. All of my family got so excited over Christmas - I didn't want to spoil the fun for 'em. And if believin' meant presents under the tree - well I was a believer. Not Willy - he stopped two years back when he discovered his house didn't have a chimney. Willy got all upset, "How can that fat old man get into my house. Doesn't even have a chimney and all the doors and windows are shut tight. No way that fat fella' can get in." Tried to tell him there was magic involved - like Harry Houdini or Blackstone. Not that I didn't have doubts then - and certainty now. I kept my non belief to myself. I'd rather enjoy the season and let Willy argue with the wall. Told him, "Willy - you got to learn to compromise. You'll never get results if you try to have everything your way." "Don't care - for me winnin' is everything!"

It was after eight by the time the rest of the family arrived and eight-thirty when we gathered around the tree to open presents. All of the adults had a little libation - they call it Christmas cheer - before we began. Least ways - that's what they call mixin' whiskey with hot lemonade. My sisters and I got the hot lemonade, but none of the hard stuff. Did make 'em more cheerful. Everyone shared presents except me - my sisters and cousins. We weren't expected to give. Uncle Bus handed me a long thin wrapped box. I opened it and my heart skipped a beat. A Red Rider BB gun!



I always wanted a Red Rider BB gun. Havin' one made me feel real grown up. Had a lever action - just like the one Tom Mix carried, 'cept his was a Winchester. I turned it over in my hands to have a better look and was about to bring it to my shoulder - to check the sight. Mother appeared out of nowhere. That BB gun was outa' my hands and back in the box faster than I could say, "I'll be careful." Mother put it up on Grandmother's closet shelf and was scoldin' her brother, "Now - Bus - Johnny's much too young to have a BB gun." "Can Johnny shoot it after I teach him how to handle it safely?" "Only if he's supervised. Until then - it stays up on Mom's closet shelf."

The next gift was in an even longer box. Almost as tall as I was. I opened it up. Inside was a pair of wooden skis and two ski poles. I tried 'em on - certain I could ride 'em downhill on the lane by Doc's house. My only concern was how I'd stop. Shouldn't have worried - Scioto River would stop anything - includin' a car. Wasn't any snow on the roads and none in the forecast - so it didn't look promisin'. Each ski had two leather straps attached to the center point. One fit over my shoe and the other around my ankle. Tied 'em tight and they cut off the circulation to my feet. That wouldn't stop me. I had a pair of skis! Did notice that I was none to popular with my sisters and cousins. Bein' the only boy around had its advantages and disadvantages. Didn't argue about goin' to bed early. There would be more presents under the tree in the mornin'. Came up to Bellpoint in the trunk of our car. We weren't allowed to look.

After a BB gun and skis - Old Saint Nick's presents were a disappointment. My sisters and I woke up too - shirts - skirts - sweaters - pants - socks - handkerchiefs and for me - a matched set of mittens. That jolly old elf must have read Mother's mind - not ours. Still - with all the scrapes I'd been in this year - I was lucky I didn't get a switch and

a lump of coal. Tried to hide my dissatisfaction, but wasn't too successful. Mother could see it in my face, "Time for you to put away childhood toys - Johnny. Sooner than you think - you'll have to shoulder the responsibilities of being a man." It was a hard lesson to learn - bein' weaned away from fun and games, but I knew she was right. My sisters were smilin' - like they got even with me for not gettin' skis last night. I climbed the back stairs and put on my new clothes - warm wool sweater and trousers. Nothin' like wearin' new clothes to keep a dawn chill from givin' one the winter clanks.

It was a fine crystal clear Christmas mornin' - perfect for a hike along mill Creek. I pulled on my jacket and snuck out the back door - so no one could stop me. Turned my coat collar up over my ears and walked downhill toward Mill Creek. Temperature was a few notches below freezin' and the air was still - not a breath of wind. Smoke curled straight up to the bottom of the sky - from Bellpoint's wood burnin' fire place chimneys. I had to be the only person on the road this mornin'. 'Most everyone was inside their homes - around the trees - openin' presents. Not me - I'd spent two months full of anticipation - just waitin' for Christmas day and now that it was here - it was like a balloon losin' air - slowly. Had an hour to explore - before Sunday School began. Passed by the Old Mill and walked half way out on the bridge. Didn't look like anyone had been here, "Maybe Old Ned Smith really is down south on the Ohio River."

Around the next bend - I found my four stone markers. All four poplar logs were right where I hid 'em. Leaves were off the branches - so they weren't hid as good as I thought I hid 'em. Lifted the end of one. It was much heavier than I remembered. Worried a bit about whether they would support me without ridin' under water. Sat down on one of the logs and watched the creek flow slowly by. Water level had to be

a foot lower than it was at Thanksgivin'. Leaves were tumblin' along on top the water as it cascaded over rocks and stones on its way downstream to the Old Mill. When my feet and hind end were the same temperature as an Eskimo's nose - the spell was broken. Looked up at the sun, "Better get a move on or I'll be late for Sunday School. Wouldn't pay to be late - not on Christmas day. And we'd be leaving soon for Christmas dinner at Grandfather Ropp's. Brushed the dirt off the seat of my pants and walked back down the road.

I turned the bend above the Old Mill and stopped in my tracks. From the direction of the concrete bridge came a sound - one I'd never heard before. It began as a moan - became a low growl - turned into a roar - a noise that sent a ripple of shivers up and down my spine. Could only come from a devil - somethin' half man - half animal. I hugged the tree line along the bank so I could see who was at the Old Mill and still stay hid. I saw movement and heard a roar that would shatter glass. I crouched even lower - hidin' behind a burnt out tree stump. I peeked around the corner. I should have known. Darned if it wasn't Old Ned Smith and his devil's helper - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* - howlin' like a pack of wolves. Old Ned was madder than anyone ought to be. He lifted the wooden cover - the one that hid his gold coins - high over his head and brought it down on the Old Mill's foundation. Chunks of wood scattered all over the Mill's dirt floor. Ned turned red - shoutin' at the top of his lungs, "Someone stole my gold!" I crouched down - frozen in place. 'Fraid if I made one sound I'd be caught. Tried to crouch lower - till my legs almost cramped.

Old Ned began to use words that would vaporize a bar of Grandmother Mac's lye soap. His voice got so loud - I was certain it would carry all the way to the Church. Then he made a mistake only a disciple of the devil would. Old Ned drop-kicked what was left of the wooden cover - all the way

to the creek. He doubled over in pain like he busted his toes. Didn't help his appearance any - rollin' around in the dirt - screamin' like a wounded lion. He limped up the hill on the far side of the creek - swearin' a blue streak, "Got to be that damn Johnny Ropp. Got to be. I'm gonna' get that little snot and feed him to you my red friend." I crouched down so low my knees touched the ground. Old Ned's friend - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* - had grown even larger. He was big enough to eat a cow in sixty-six bites. Decided right there and then to stay out of his way - if I could.

Ned stopped at the top of the hill and turned around - his silhouette outlined against a gray winter sky. Branches from an old elm above his head made it look like he had horns of the devil - growin' outa' his skull. That was enough for me. I ducked down behind that burnt out stump and didn't look up until I heard his flatbed Ford truck roar to life. I stood up and shook off the leg cramps. Ned was gone, but his evil odor was hangin' in the air. Darned if he didn't smell like brimstone and sulfur. 'Course it coulda' been Mill Creek. Always had a little sulfur smell when it was runnin' low, but I wasn't sure. And his red devil smelled of manure and sulfur. If Ned was a witch - Old Ned had to be a witch's helper. Not bein' smart - I made both of 'em enemies. Worse yet - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* looked like he was growin' out of control - dinin' on farm animals. I resisted the temptation to cross over the bridge and look at the mess Ned made. I'd be late for Sunday School. Had to get a move on. Even though Ned's truck was goin' upstream - he might cross over the bridge and return.

I wasn't more'n a hundred yards downstream when I heard Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck engine - comin' downstream on my side of the road. I jumped off that road like a jackrabbit jumpin' a log and hid behind a big elm. Ned's truck slid to

a stop on my side of the road - across the creek from the Old Mill. He sure wasn't about to give up lookin' for me. I couldn't help it - I peeked around the elm. Old Ned's neck was stickin' out the window of his truck - one of those long necks that made him look like a cross between human and vulture. And *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was beginnin' to make a noise like a panther makes when it's hungry. I ducked back behind the tree when Ned's head swiveled slowly on his giraffe like neck toward my hidin' place. Looked like I was in for it - Old Ned was not about to give up lookin' for the one who stole his gold. Stayed behind that big elm until I heard Old Ned's flatbed truck accelerate and fade away. I was more than nervous now. I started walkin' downstream on the gravel road with one eye and both ears open for any sign of Old Ned. Began to run - faster than I'd ever run before. Ned might decide to turn around and come after me.

I jumped off the road and hid behind trees twice - as cars rolled by - nervous as a cat on a porch full of rockin' chairs. Turned the corner by the general store - looked both ways and didn't see Old Ned. Hightailed it across the road to Sunday School. Teacher was closin' the door as I walked in, "Just in time for you to read from the Bible - Johnny." I opened the bible on the table and read the first thing I saw - at random from Mathew 3:7 - "O generation of vipers - who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Now I knew what I read didn't fit the season. But - what Mathew wrote sure did fit my predicament. Old Ned was a handful of vipers. Teacher gave me one of those looks like I was actin' too smart for my own good. So - I stayed outa' trouble - sat pretty quiet and listened for the rest of the class.

When Sunday School was over - I made sure I wasn't the first one out - or the last. I hung around - so I'd be in the middle when I walked out the door. Checked three points of the compass and the general store. If Old Ned was around

- he was hidin'. With the trouble he was in - I didn't expect to see him hangin' around the general store. Didn't waste time runnin' up the hill to Grandfather Mac's house. My Parents and sisters were the only ones there. Passed everyone else walkin' to Church. Father frowned as I came in through the back door, "Almost left for the farm without you." "Sunday School ran over today. Saw Ned Smith drivin' in his flatbed Ford truck." "Which way was he going?" "Up Mill Creek Road toward Ostrander. I imagine he is lookin' for his gold." "Did he see you?" "No - when I heard his truck I hid." "It's Sunday and Christmas day - won't do to call the Sheriff. I'll telephone after we get to the farm. Tell your sisters we're ready to go."

When we stepped outside to get in Father's car - wind was pickin' up. Billowin' clouds on the horizon were like great black sailin' ships with tall white sails - gatherin' in a noreast sky. The temperature was on its way down from winter warm to Christmas cold. The first snow flurries began to fall as we crossed over the Scioto River and drove to the east bank and River Road on our way to Grandfather's farm. By the time we turned uphill on the lane - snow was comin' down in earnest. Drove through the two concrete pillars and could barely see the farmhouse. We piled out and ran to the back porch - wind whistlin' through the elm tree branches. The snow flyin' sideways in horizontal sheets. Grandfather Ropp met us on the porch, "Come inside and warm yourselves by the range. Looks like we're in for a old fashioned noreaster this afternoon." Grandmother held the kitchen door open as we stomped snow off our feet, "Hurry - don't want to let in too much cold. Wipe your shoes on the throw rug."

I warmed my hind end on the heat comin' from the great Cast-iron oven. I could smell the aroma of a Christmas goose cookin' inside. Smelled wonderful. Too bad it wasn't to my taste. Checked the other oven and sure enough - there was my

favorite - a sugar cured ham. Grandmother shooed me away, "Let it cook Johnny - or you'll have to eat goose." I closed that oven door right away. I would never grow old enough for goose to be my likin'. Soon as I warmed up - I ran into the parlor to another skyscraper of a Christmas tree. Top angel almost touchin' Grandmother's farmhouse ceilin'. Underneath were more presents - to be opened - as soon as we settled in. Grandmother passed out two packages to each of us. Mine had a scarf and two pairs of farm gloves. There would be no excuse for me to have blistered hands next summer. I looked outside. Snow was stickin' on the yard. Had to be at least six inches on the ground. I'll be able to try out my skis on Doc's lane this evenin'.

Now - except for presents - fruit cake and cookies - Christmas was pretty much the same as Thanksgivin'. Enormous meals of ham and goose at Grandfather Ropp's and a giant tom turkey at Grandfather Mac's. I was polite as I could be. Ate a sliver of goose - a plateful of ham and a slice of mincemeat pie with fresh whipped cream on top. Stayed away from anything green and didn't load up on potatoes. While the rest of the family discussed our move to the farm next summer - I snuck away from the table and rummaged through the pantry for apples. I stuffed four in my pocket - stopped in the kitchen - cut off several pieces of greasy goose for Spot and loaded 'em into a paper napkin and carried it out on the back porch. Spot was curled up in the corner - near the house - warm as toast - layin' on a blanket on top a bed of corn cobs and straw. He gobbled down the goose - half the napkin and was still able to catch and pass me as I ran to the barn. By the time I slid open the barn door - he was covered from nose to tail with a blanket of wet white snow. Couldn't even see Spot's spot.

Grandfather's wooden spoked - iron rimmed wagon stood like a giant sentry in the middle of the barn floor -

guardin' the back barn and keepin' his work horses company. Pieces of corn and corn cobs were scattered around on the wagon bed. Talk about friendship - both Sandy and Clyde nuzzled me when I gave them their Christmas apples. Spot raced with me to the corn sheller. Their Christmas dinner was going to be topped off with a second treat. Gave that Farmall tractor an extra wide berth. I stopped in my tracks and wondered, "Will I have to drive that monster next year? Maybe I'll be able too - long as I don't have to turn the crank to start it." I made friends for today - when I gave Sandy and Clyde shelled corn. Enough to get them winter fat. Sandy didn't try to pin me to the side of his stall. He must have known it was Christmas day, "Can't be - has to be the treats I gave him. Horses can't read - or write - or talk. If they could - wouldn't be locked up in our barn."

Spot and me sat down on some straw in the middle of the barn floor and leaned up against the front wagon wheel. He was still wet from snow - even though hed shook most of it off when we came inside. Looked up at the horse stalls and thought, "This won't be too bad a life. Lot of work to do, but there'll be a lot of satisfaction - like plantin' things and watchin' 'em grow. And the most important thing about movin' here. Give me a chance to grow up - too. Decided right there and then to clean up my language. And I'd start by using a G on words - where it belonged. Don't want to be thought of as a hayseed or sod buster when I move from the city. Trouble with using proper English is - not only have to talk and write it - have to think it."

Grandfather's barn had a pleasant aroma - that of aging hay. A smell I'd always remember and associate with this farm. Hog manure after a spring thaw - now that's an odor I could do without. Climbed into the front haymow, but didn't find one egg. Hay was easier to walk on. Time and drying had packed it down flat from the loosely shaped contours of



last fall. Easier to get to the back haymow. Door to it was completely uncovered. I could almost stand up. Wasn't any eggs in it either. Looked out the hay door. Steam was rising from the manure in the barnyard. Grandfather had mixed in more than enough wheat straw and corn stalks to give it substance. Cows were closer to the overhang than they were last fall - when Grandfather brought them in from summer pasture. Snow was piling up in the corners of the barnyard - thicker than corn flakes in a cereal bowl.

Climbed down out of the front haymow. Spot was still curled up beside the wagon. He greeted me with the thump - thump - thump of his tail on a packed dirt floor. I looked out through a crack in the barn doors. Snow was coming down - so thick I couldn't see our farmhouse. Whistled for Spot to come along. He ran through the barn door opening like a fox after a jackrabbit. When I climbed the back porch - he was all ready sitting there - barking at me for being slow. I aranged his blanket - so he'd be sheltered from snow and wind. Spot curled up again - warm as toast.

I closed the door soon as I entered the kitchen - hung up my jacket - stuffed the mittens in my pockets and stood with my backside to the Cast-iron stove - to warm up without catching on fire. I was getting the hang of using Gs where they belonged. Wasn't going to be as hard as I thought it would be. Mother said language is the thing that separates man from beast - and high from low. Ned could speak - sort of, but *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* could only roar - rumble and moan. When I got warmed up enough - I wandered out of the kitchen into the dining room. Father and Grandfather were still planning how to run the farm next year around the dining room table. Didn't pay attention until I heard Old Ned Smith's name. I listened up when Grandfather mentioned, "Folks at the County Seat said Ned Smith was in Dublin last week - hanging around the general store. Said he was looking

mighty thin - and meaner than ever. Running from the law must be taking a toll on him. Seems plain folks can find him, but not the Sheriff. He's been looking for him all week long and hasn't gotten a single whiff of where Ned's hiding." "Johnny saw him in Osborn three weeks back at Ned's sister's place." "Didn't know Ned had a sister." "Names Nel - a newspaper distributor in Fairfield. Sheriff couldn't catch him there either. Johnny saw Ned's flatbed in Bellpoint this morning. Thinks he saw Ned driving it. I promised to phone the Sheriff after we arrived, but it slipped my mind." "It's a holiday - won't make any difference when you phone. No one in the Sheriff's office will come out through all this snow for a common thief." "You're right - probably only a deputy manning the phones. I'll call anyway. Ned may have slipped on the ice and broke a leg." "Could be. If he's lame - it's the only way that bunch at the Sheriff's office will be able to catch him."

When Father hung up the telephone - Grandfather asked, "Sheriff going to chase after Ned?" "Talked to his deputy. He didn't sound very enthused about going out after Ned in a snowstorm. Can't blame him - we'll be lucky to find our way back to Bellpoint. He did say he'd send out a bulletin." "A lot of good that will do. Are you sure your comfortable about taking over the farm?" "Ought to be a challenge. I'll need another tractor and Johnny can help." "What about my horses?" "You can exercise them when you come out from town. They've earned a good retirement. Can you arrange for hired help to assist in planting this spring. I have to finish out the school year. It will be June before we can move." "Are you increasing the number of fields under cultivation?" "Have too if this farm is going to support two families. How soon do you plan on moving to town?" "Not until the crops are planted. Shouldn't leave it empty. Why not a week before you move up?" "Good idea. Think Johnny will make a farmer?" "No - he has wanderlust in his soul."

I climbed the stairs and looked up wanderlust in the old dictionary in the attic. Found it - without too much trouble - "strong or unconquerable impulse to wander." That pretty much defined me, but most of my wandering was confined to books. Knew that would change when I got older. I looked along the shelf and found the book I'd read about two boys my age whipping Kaiser Bill. The conversation between the Sergeant and the pacifist triggered my interest. Sergeant said we ought to get to Europe and kick old Hitler in the rear end and the pacifist said it wasn't any of our business. Stuck in my mind like gum on a beadpost. I opened the book to the last two chapters. Read both and closed the book, "If that Hitler is as mean as the Kaiser - we'll have to go over to Europe and whip him."

Went back downstairs to the parlor. My sisters were listening to records on the windup Victrola. Mostly waltzes - nothing I could relate too. Father saved me from terminal boredom, "Bundle up - we're going back to Bellpoint early. If we don't - we'll get snowed in and your Mother doesn't want to miss Christmas supper at her home." Spot didn't move a hair on his tail as I ran by on my way to the Chrysler Airflow. It looked like a giant igloo - covered with snow. I used the whisk broom to clear away snow from the windows. We crept down the lane. Father had to stop halfway to River Road and clean off the windows again - and again before we crossed over the Scioto River Bridge into Bellpoint - and again before we turned up Bellpoint Road. Couldn't make it up the hill. Had to park at the bottom - a hundred yards from Grandfather Mac's house.

I ran on ahead and opened the front door to the vestibule. I was covered with snow from my head to toes. Held the door open for the rest of the family as they came stomping in - snow flying every which way. The aroma of Grandmother Mac's roast tom turkey - fresh from the oven -

cooling on the kitchen table filled the house. All of the ladies were in the kitchen or setting tables. It was going to be a big holiday meal. But - it could wait. I made a beeline for my skis. I was almost out the front door when Mother caught me, "Hold on there - young man. Put those skis away. We're going to eat early because of the winter storm." That put a damper on my fun, "Yes Ma'am. Can I try them out after supper?" "Just where do you plan on testing your skis." "On the lane by Doc's house. It's not too steep - no traffic and it's close." "That will be fine, but look both ways when you cross the road. Ice has formed underneath the snow. Cars won't be able to stop." "I'll carry my skis across and put them on at the top of the lane." "Wash up. Supper is in ten minutes." I set my skis in the corner and walked reluctantly to the kitchen.

Trouble with Christmas - it's too close to Thanksgiving and right on top of New Years. Seems to me it should come in July. Don't think I ever saw snow in the desert where Jesus was born. Heard the early Roman Christians moved it to the first of the year to preempt a Roman festival celebrating the return of the sun. Yes sir - Christmas in July would be just about perfect. As it is - from the fourth week in November to New Years day - there are three major holidays within a five week period. Four holiday dinners in that short time span took the edge off celebrating. Eating Christmas supper called for a new strategy if I wanted to eat turkey and avoid green and purple things. I noticed that beets were being served to everyone. And Willy said beets would turn your insides the same purple-red color, "Can't be good for you - they're full of dye." Instead of being first - I hung around the parlor where the card tables were set up and followed my sisters and cousins - the last one in line. Got lucky. I was allowed to serve myself - which I did in grand style. First came turkey white meat and second - more turkey white meat and third - more turkey white meat.

Barely had room on my plate for mashed potatoes and gray. Made it to my seat at the last card table in the parlor without anything green - yellow or purple on my plate. My cousins and sisters glanced over from their table and laughed, but didn't tell on me - it being Christmas. I tried to eat real slow, but no one can - not with turkey this good. Cleaned up my plate and didn't ask for more. I was stuffed. Took my plate out to the kitchen. Couldn't resist nibbling on a Christmas tree cookie for desert. Always liked them better than stars. Knew I'd get chewed on - if I ran outside and skied too soon after supper - so I wandered into the living room and turned on the radio.

Fred Allen and Jack Benny's radio programs saved me from another case of terminal boredom. Leaned back in a big easy chair and listened. Now that was a mistake. Woke up an hour later - almost missed out on testing my skis. Almost made it out the front door when Father stopped me, "We'll shovel the car out - and the front walk - and make a new spot for our car in front of the house." Snow had stopped - stars were twinkling between the remaining wisps of clouds that were floating by. Wind hadn't kicked up, but it would by morning. Shovels were in the livery stable - hanging up on the back wall. Only too a minute to shovel the car clear. Father brought it up the hill. Took more than three tries - kept slipping back. Needed a good head of steam to crest it. I set my shovel against the front porch wall - my skis in hand and across the street before anyone could stop me.

Tied both skies on my feet and gave it a go. Didn't go more than ten yards when I lost my balance and sat down on my duff. Got up by using my poles. This time I leaned forward and bent my knees. Stayed up to the bottom, but had to sit down to stop - or I'd sailed right out into the Scioto River. Had to take the skis off to walk back up hill. Tied them on and came downhill again - out of control and had to sit down

to stop - or I'd sailed into the river. Sat there - on the banks of the Scioto - thinking, "Has to be another way to stop." If there was - I didn't find it. Made ten more trips down and had to quit. My hind end was getting soaked through from too much snow on the seat of my pants. Walking back uphill after each trip wasn't much fun either. And tying and untying leather straps was a pain in the neck - too. And I had to take off my mittens each time, "This skiing isn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. Seems like a whole lot of bother for a few seconds of fun." I was worn out - like I was after I shoveled corn last fall. So - here I was - wet and tired - carrying my skis up the lane for the last time. Stopped at the top of the hill to rest - looked at all that snow and then it hit me - right between the eyes, "Igloo. There's enough snow here to build an Eskimo's igloo. Come morning - that's the first thing I'll do after breakfast. Yes sir - I'll build me an igloo."

Climbed the steps - so tired I looked like an old man on a long walk. Propped my skis up against the Grandfather's front porch. Thought a bit more, "I could build a fort and fire my BB gun from behind the walls - just like a settler. No - Mother won't let me take my BB gun down from the shelf in the closet." Looked down and saw snow sticking all over my clothes. I was soaked almost through. Walked around to the back porch. Had to use Grandmother's broom to brush it off. Wind was coming up. I was cold soaked - clear through to the skin. Mumbled to myself as I brushed the snow away, "Hope that Cast-iron stove is still warm. Wet as I am - it'll take me half-an-hour to dry off."

Peeked inside the door. Grandmother was cleaning her spotless kitchen. She saw me looking in, "Come on in and close the door - Johnny or you'll melt all the snow outside." She took my jacket and hung it over a chair near the range. I placed my mittens on top of the jacket. She looked me

over, "Looks like you took a snow bath - young man. And the seat of your pants - why you're soaked clear through to your duff. Stand next to the range and dry out. Did you learn how to ride those skis?" "Rode them all right. Stopping was the problem. That's how I got the seat of my pants wet. Need to find a hill with a longer run-out. Wish we had a coal fired range at home like your Cast-iron stove. It warms your kitchen winter mornings - heats water to wash up - bakes bread - percolates coffee and cooks pancakes." Grandmother shook her head, "I'll trade the whole kit and caboodle for you Mother's gas stove. Why - I can't control temperature within fifty degrees with this Cast-iron monster. There's milk in the icebox and bread in the bread box for making sandwiches. Imagine you're hungry after working outside and climbing Doc's lane."

Grandmother believed white bread was made out of paste. All I could find in her bread box was whole wheat. Took out two slices - covered them with mustard and piled the turkey high. Poured a glass of milk and went back to the stove - so I could continue drying my hind end. Don't believe I'd agree with Grandmother. Her Cast-iron range sure warmed up the kitchen on a cold winter night. And was it ever cold. Last night the water in the pitcher on my bedroom dry sink had an inch of ice on top. I hung around the Cast-iron range for half-an-hour - until I was warm as toast and dry as sand. Then I scooted up the back stairs to my bedroom. Fell asleep when my head was on the way down to the pillow.

I was anxious to return to Osborn and sledding hill, but not for a couple of days. The week after Christmas was a special time for me. Left over turkey - hot sweet rolls and best of all - coffee diluted with milk and sweetened with honey. Grandmother knew how to spoil a young boy. And I didn't leave any wash back. I was able to talk her out of a second cup of coffee - to help wash down pecan roll. It was

as sticky as ever. Hot pecans tasted better in cold weather. Stuck my head outside. Not a breath of air. Stars shined bright as pinwheels in a moonless sky. So bright you could see right past them - almost to forever. It was a magic beginning. In two weeks the Wolf Moon would make the night brighter than noon on an Ohio gray day. Came back inside. I'd need to dress warm if I was going to build an igloo. Grandmother hung my outergarmets on a chair in front of the Cast-iron range last night. They were dry all right, but stiff as a board. Jacket went on without much trouble, but I had to pry open my mittens to get them on. Grandmother smiled at me as I ran outside. Thought I heard her say, "Don't fall down - or you'll be like a turtle on its back and won't be able to get up."

Made flat roll-ups out of the snow to build the igloo foundation. Worked fine until I finished stacking the third row. Even remembered to leave an opening for a door. But - that was the end of it. Couldn't get the fourth row to stay on top and lean in. Stepped back and took a look at it. I had a small snow fort with three foot high walls. Shook my head, "Wonder how the Eskimos get the top part to close without the snow falling inside." I had a fort - I needed ammunition. Had to forget about a BB gun. Mother would never take it down from the top closet shelf. Nothing left to do, but make a dozen snowballs and stack them inside. Now all I needed was an enemy to throw them at. Just then - I heard a rumbling sound and ducked down behind the wall of my fort. A flatbed ford truck idled by. Didn't look out. Didn't have too. I knew who it was. As soon as it crested the hill and roared away - I ran to the back porch door and ducked inside. I needed a safe haven and a warm up. Old Ned Smith was my problem. I wouldn't wish him on anyone else. And even though he was an enemy - last thing in the world I'd do is throw a snowball at Old Ned. I looked out the window. All that was left of Ned was the fumes of his truck.



Put my backside up to the Cast-iron range to warm it up and placed my wet mittens over the oven handle. I was going for a cookie when Father peeked in the kitchen, "Warm up and dry off best you can. We're leaving for home in an hour." "I'll be ready. Why are we leaving early?" "Bad weather is on the way. Snow line is just south of Plain City. South of there the roads are clear, but we have a major storm system moving out of the west. It'll pass through here late this afternoon. Can't take a chance on getting snowed in." I turned around to warm my front. Just as well we were leaving now. With my snow fort and snowballs waiting outside - it wouldn't be long before I was lobbing them at my cousins. Talk about big time trouble. That would be it. Will and Jake were gone to Lake Erie. Wasn't any boy around to have a fair fight with. Took my jacket off and hung it over a chair to dry. I could smell Grandfather Mac's pipe smoke drifting into the kitchen from the parlor. I followed it and sat down in an easy chair near the edge. Listened to a conversation that was becoming familiar.

Grandfather reassured Father, "World won't come to an end if you give up teaching as a full time profession. Did I ever tell you why I quit teaching?" I'd heard it a few times and Father many more. The story about Grandfather riding horseback to the County Courthouse for his years pay and being told there was no money was family lore. Father was polite, "Yes - something about back pay - isn't it?" "It was a terrible time. We were paid once - after the school year was over. And sometimes we had to wait months after that. Almost punched out the County Treasurer when he said not to spend it all in one place." "Hasn't improved with local School Boards. The least informed tells us what to do." "Well I'll be darned - school administration hasn't changed since the turn of the century. And they won't let married ladies teach." "Silly isn't it. I'm looking forward to farming. Clouds are coming in. We better get a move on." I

figured now was not the time to ask if I could take my BB gun home with me. So - I returned to the kitchen and retrieved my jacket and mittens. They were warm and dry. Remembered to retrieve my skis off the front porch. My sisters looked at my damp clothes and waited until I was in my allotted space - in the center of the back seat.

Going downhill from Grandfather Mac's gave us a taste of what was to come. Our car slid to the right and when Father overcorrected - we slid to the left - coming to a stop just before reaching the main highway. The roads were packed smooth with snow. We moved gingerly across Mill Creek Bridge and uphill toward Uncle John's maple sugar cabin. The skies were clear and sun helped keep our windows free of frost. But - it melted the top layer of snow on the road and ice formed. Great for sleds, but not cars. Father helped push five cars out of the drainage ditch on the S curves between Arnold and New California - villages smaller than Bellpoint. Our drive from Bellpoint to New California usually took less than twenty minutes. We were on the road for over an hour. today. After we cleared the S curves of New California - I noticed a familiar vehicle trailing us - the front end of Old Ned's flat bed truck. I turned around and hunkered down in the center of the back seat - hiding.

As we drew abeam Plain City Fairgrounds - I heard a rumble as Old Ned's flatbed came roaring by. I looked to my left and saw Old Ned sitting behind the wheel. His teeth were clamped tight - face red as a beet. Ned's flatbed fishtailed in front of us as he tried to bring his truck back into the proper lane. Father called out, "That fool will kill himself if he keeps driving like that." I leaned forward, "That fool is Ned Smith." "If it is - he's driving much too fast for the conditions. Wouldn't be surprised to see him in a drainage ditch up the road. Are you sure it's Ned?" "Positive and he didn't look none too happy." "We'll

stop at the restaurant up ahead - on the corner where we turn to drive through town. I need a cup of coffee and we can call the local sheriff. Let him know he has a wanted man driving through his county. He might catch up. Ned still has fifteen miles of ice and snow ahead." That was all right with me. I was feeling cramped.

Only thing worse than being in the back seat - squeezed between two sisters - is being trapped there for over an hour. Father parked on the street in front of Plain City's only restaurant. It was well located - on Main Street right where the highway made a right angle turn to the west. My Sisters and I sat at a table and drank weak hot chocolate. Must have been made out of water. Mother and Father had coffee that looked like dishwater. Father called the Union County Sheriff's office and gave them Old Ned's description and the direction he was traveling. He returned to our table for a refill, "Sheriff didn't sound too interested." I knew Old Ned would luck out again. Then it dawned on me. London Prison Farm was right up the road. Ned was going to visit German Jerry and One Eyed Jack, but how could he? He was a wanted man. Father stood up, "Time to move on. I imagine Ned is all the way to Madison County by now." I didn't say anything about where I thought Ned was going. Grownups were never interested in speculation - not from a kid.

Almost stayed too long in Plain City. Dark black clouds were boiling on the western horizon. Father wasn't worried, "Should drive south of the storm before it hits Osborn. Be a problem if we started later - though." We drove west through Plain City and turned south - crossing over the railroad tracks. Couple of buggies were parked outside the Amish Dairy, but it wasn't open. Wasn't a other horse and buggy on the road today. Amish were a practical sect. They won't venture out on ice covered roads. Too many fools like Old Ned driving autos and trucks out of control. The Amish were

a mystery to me. Wouldn't use anything modern - like electricity - tractors or cars. They were a plain people in dress and custom. Took care of their own - though and maybe that was good enough. And if the rest of their food was like the trail bologna - summer sausage and cheeses we bought at the dairy - they led a pretty good life. Amish had to be as rich as the land around here.

Wasn't long before we drove by Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. He was stuck in a snow filled ditch about six miles past the dairy. An Amish farmer had hitched his horses to Ned's bumper and was about to pull him out of the ditch. Ned had *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* hid under a winter coat with its collar up to the neck. Neither Ned's red devil or Ned looked up and we didn't stop. I asked Father, "Do you think Ned will harm that Amish farmer?" "Ned may be stupid, but he's not crazy. By the looks of that Amish fellow - he could bend Ned in half. Amish don't have phones. We'll have to call the Madison County Sheriff at West Lafayette."

Lafayette's general store was open. The one with those thick and greasy potato chips I liked. Lucky for me that Father liked them as much as I did. He phoned the Madison County Sheriff and passed on the information about Old Ned. Didn't waste any more time. Those black clouds out of the west were sinking slowly south. We drove downhill by the cement plant into Osborn - barely ahead of the first snow flakes. Snow was coming down with the consistency of a white tapioca pudding when Father turned into our driveway.

Soon as I helped unpack - I hightailed it to Willy's house, but no one was home. Came back and curled up with a book. After dinner - the radio carried news about an escape from the London Prison Farm. A wild eyed red devil rammed the prison fence in a flatbed Ford Truck and two inmates escaped under cover of a blinding snow storm.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Watch out for Old Ned Smith.
2. Skiing down hill is easier than walking up.
3. Fun can be harder on you than work.
4. Without friends - you're on your own.

## 9

Woke up happy as a snowball in an icebox. Still had six days of vacation left and things were looking up. Twelve inches - a foot of fresh snow - had fallen last night and it stuck on top of frozen ground. Sledding hill was packed with enough snow to last for at least a week and the forecast was for below freezing weather. Couldn't find anyone in town more up than me. I was up before dawn - up and dressed - up fixing a hot bran meal breakfast - up and about while the rest of the house was down - asleep. Looked outside through a frost covered window at a whole wide world of snow. Poured one - then another bowl of hot bran. I needed fortification if I was going sledding. Had a wet cold day ahead of me and lunch would be five miles away. Bundled up in sweaters - jacket and mittens before going outside to the garage. Sure wish I had brought those farm gloves home with me. They would be just the thing for holding onto my sled.

Took my trusty old American Flyer sled down from its place of honor - above Father's work bench. Turned it over and rested the wooden side on the work bench, "Darn - forgot to oil the runners after sledding on ice." Not only that - the wood needed a good coat of wax, "Should have waxed it when I put it away late last winter. Now I'll have to sandpaper the rust off the runners. Can't wax - it's too cold for that." My skis could use a coat of wax too, but that could wait. I could ski a gentle slope, but not sledding hill. It was too steep and there was no run-out at the bottom. If I couldn't stop - I'd cut myself to pieces on the wire fence. Worked for the better part of an hour sandpapering the wax off those runners. Oiled them, but knew it

wouldn't last. Not in wet snow. Later - when it warmed up - I'd put a coat of wax on runners and skis - if I remembered too. Took another look at my skis. I wasn't keen on being the only one with a set. Willy might take it into his head to run me down with his bobsled. And I still didn't know how to stop - other than sitting down. Besides - I'd waste my time tying and untying each time I climbed up the hill. Sure would like to try them out, but I knew better.

Put a rope on my sled and pulled it on top the snow - all the way to Willy's house. Slick and bob - his bobsled, weren't home. He was long gone - on his way to sledding hill. I could forgive him for not waiting. He didn't know I returned last night. Where there was snow or ice - I ran and slid - which was most of the way. About halfway there - as I crossed the highway that goes to Springfield - I heard a distant rumble that sounded just like Old Ned Smith's flatbed truck. Started walking faster and the rumble faded out. Got to thinking, "If I was Old Ned and just broke my gang out of prison - I'd hole up at Old Nel's house." Seemed only Father and me believed she was Ned's sister. Arrived at the bottom of sledding hill and soon forgot all about Old Ned. Slick was all ready coming downhill. He stopped at my feet on bob - ten yards short of the fence.

Willy looked up with a grin on a face covered with snow, "You got back early. Leave your American Flyer at the bottom and help me pull bob to the top. We'll come down together." I leaned my sled up against the fence, "Can I steer?" "Every third time." "How close have you been coming to the wire fence?" "That was my first time down. We'll go further with two of us. How was your Christmas. Get any good keepers in Bellpoint?" "Got mostly clothes - mittens and gloves for farm work. Oh - I got a BB gun and a pair of skis - poles and all." "Bet your Mother has that BB gun up on a shelf." "You got that right. It's in Bellpoint at my Grandfather's

house. Tried the skis out. I can ride them all right, but they're the dickens to stop." "Just as well you didn't bring 'em. No place to ski around here except this hill and the wire fence at the bottom would eat you alive."

I helped Willy pull bob uphill. He was curious, "Did you see Old Ned in Bellpoint?" "Not only there - I saw him on the way here. He was in a ditch outside of Plain City - heading toward London. Father called the Madison County Sheriff, but it didn't do any good. Did you here about the jail break at London Prison Farm yesterday?" "No - what happened?" "Old Ned rammed the fence with his flatbed Ford pickup truck. German Jerry and One Eyed Jack escaped out the hole he made." "They're still friends with Ned? Didn't he desert 'em and leave 'em for the law to catch?" "Sure did, but no one ever accused German and One Eyed of being overly smart. They were last seen heading south toward Kentucky on US #40." "US #40 doesn't head south toward Kentucky. It goes west to Indianapolis." I stopped pulling bob, "Darn, Old Ned's coming here. Probably hole up at Nel's place." Willy started pulling again, "Maybe, but they can't get after you on this hill. There's too many of us."

Slick climbed on the front and I pushed off - jumping on behind him. Bob was all wood and slicker than owl stuff. No metal runners on the bottom - like my American Flyer. Had less than a half inch of wood between our bottoms and the hill. Fast - with two of us on it we flew down sledding hill. We both dragged our feet to stop and lucky we did - less than a foot from the wire fence. Willy looked back as he climbed off, "Damn - Johnny - that was a close one." "Sure was closer than ten yards away." "Sure is. Must be the extra weight with two of us riding. Ready to give it another go?" I nodded, "Yes" and we began another trek back to the top of sledding hill. "And it's a whole lot easier with two of us pulling bob up the hill."



After two more wild rides - we climbed back to the top and Willy said, "Lets stand over to the side and rest a bit while I catch my breath. Are you certain Old Ned will lay over at Nel's?" "Don't know where else he can go. He's running out of friends. Everyone who cozies up to him winds up behind bars." "If he had any brains he'd hightail it across the Ohio River into Kentucky. Has to be a pretty good sized manhunt going on. Breaking convicts outa' Ohio Prisons is frowned upon." "Imagine it is. Last ride - then I want to try my Flyer."

Sledding hill was getting packed down and slicker with each ride down. Only thing that kept us from going into the wire fence was the grass that was showing through the snow where we dug our heels in to stop. I took my American Flyer away from the fence where I'd leaned it. Willy took it out of my hands, "Looks like you cleaned her up. Runners sure are shiny." "Got rusty after I put her away. Sanded them down this morning and oiled them. I'll help you pull bob up to the top. How many of us can ride down on him?" "Three, but I get top speed with two. Any more or less and she slows down."

Came down like a bullet on my American Flyer, but I stopped ten feet short of the fence as my runners dug into the grass. She was a whole lot safer than Slick's bob. And it was easier to bail out if the wire fence got too close. After two more trips I was satisfied that my runners were working properly. So - I rode with Slick on bob the rest of the morning. We reckoned it must be about noon on our last trek up to the top of sledding hill. And sledding hill was getting slicker with each ride down. Looked like we were going into the fence for sure on our last ride down. Willy bailed out. I followed just before bob went under the bottom wire. I brushed the snow off - stood up and got all over Willy. "Darn you, give a yell if you're going to bail out."

I almost took that bottom wire. Would have broken my neck." Slick pulled his Bob out of the fence, "My fault. Guess I froze up." "You have to take responsibility when someone goes along for a ride behind you." "Won't happen again. Put your Flyer on top my bob and we can pull together."

Halfway to town - I offered, "Lets reconnoiter Nel's place and see if Old Ned is holed up there." "That's as stupid an idea as splittin' up while searching a haunted house." "Old Ned isn't a ghost." "Might as well be. No one sees him or can catch him. And Old Nel has to be a witch. They both look like they've been through the jaws of hell." "How about after lunch?" "Maybe - sure would like to ride my bike if we do." "Too much snow for that." "What if we have to make a run for it?" "We'll sneak up. Won't get close enough to get caught." "Leave your American Flyer at my place. I'll meet you after lunch and we'll see. I want to go sleddin' this afternoon." "Okay, but I'll take my Flyer home and hang it up. We can both ride bob."

Really began to cold soak on our walk to Willy's house. While sledding we were warm. Not now - melted snow was soaking through our clothes. I left Willy off at his house and began to run, "See you after I get a bite and dry out." "Okay - I'll go with you to Nel's, but lets not get real close." "In an hour?" "In an hour." Went the same way I always did when I was in a hurry. Took a shortcut through the alley behind Willy's house. It emptied across the street and up the block in front of my house. For some strange reason an odor of sulfur and manure seemed to penetrate the air. I sniffed and stopped short. Looked around the corner - before walking out of the alley. Pulled up short. Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck was parked across the street from my front porch. Ned was sitting behind the wheel. I jumped back in the alley - in case he checked behind through his rear view mirror.

Didn't have to get up close to make sure. It was Old Ned and his devil - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* sitting in his car. I wondered, "What in the dickens is he doing here?" I answered my own question, "Ned's looking for his gold and he's looking for me. One of the Sheriff Deputies must have told him about Grandfather turning it in." His engine wasn't running. "Old Ned can't sit there too long - he'll freeze to death." I put one knee on top my sled the way I used to ride my little red wagon - staying low so he wouldn't see me. Saw my opening - a driveway opened up on the alley and took it. I'd cut through the back yard.

When I had cover - I stood up and ran. Pulled my sled as fast as I could across the neighbors front yard. Wound up on the street that dead ends into my street - just past my house. Odor of sulfur and manure was getting stronger than ever. Made me wonder, "Old Ned must really be a devil's disciple and his friend? Never seen anything like him - so who knows - might be the devil - or the devil's helper." Now - my house is like - in the center of a cul-de-sac - so Old Ned couldn't see me cross the street. I ducked through another back yard - around the corner and ran to the railroad spur. Followed the tracks to the back of my house. Snow was piled up on the tracks - so the train that carried supplies to Patterson Field hadn't been this way. Couldn't walk on the rails or ties. Had to walk alongside until I got to my backyard.

I was careful to keep the back of the house between me and Old Ned when I crossed the yard to our back porch. My Sisters were over at friends houses and Mother was out grocery shopping. Father must have been at school - working in the wood shop. Lucky for me no one locked their doors in Osborn. Didn't have too, but if Old Ned stayed around that would change. I ducked down in case Old Ned as looking in and duck walked to the front window and peeked out. Old Ned

was still there. His truck windows were beginning to steam up. I thought about phoning the law and then thought better. No one would believe me - they hadn't yet.

I was so nervous I was beginning to talk to myself, "It's freezing outdoors. No way Ned can sit there all day. He'll take off when Mother comes home - or will he? He could have walked right in. Wonder why he didn't? Looks like he's not going to quit chasing after me. Has to know I took his gold and he'd have to know I wouldn't keep it. There's no way out for me. Ned's going to keep after me and try to do some harm. Won't stop chasing me until he gets even. Wish someone made a big eraser. I'd erase him out of my life. He's alone with his smelly friend. I wonder where the rest of his gang is? They have to be holed up at Nel's."

I heard a rumble as Ned's engine sprung to life. Peeked out again. He was turning his flatbed truck around on two wheels - sliding into the curb. Ned sped away - a-sliding and snaking in the direction of Fairfield - and Nel's. I felt a sense of relief. Opened the front door to get a better look. Took a sniff. The odor of sulfur and manure still hung in the air. Had to be a devil. Closed the door and climbed upstairs. Took off my wet clothes and hung them over a chair. Changed into warm pants - another sweater and dry mittens. Only had one jacket - so it would have to do. Back downstairs - I made two peanut butter sandwiches and poured a large glass of milk. I downed the last of my milk, wash back and all and hurried out the door toward Willy's house. Waiting for Old Ned to leave had taken the better part of an hour.

Knocked on the door and Willy let me in. He wasn't thrilled about sneaking around Old Nel's garage. But - he was putting on his jacket, "We can outrun Nel, but three outlaws in a truck? No way." "Won't have too. We'll stop

in the alley - a couple of houses away. Ned was sitting out front of my place at noon." "No need to go over there. You know he's in town." "Have to make sure Ned's at Nel's before we call the law." "Won't make any difference - he'll still get away. As soon as Ned broke his friends outa' prison, the Sheriff should have watched Nel's house." "Law hasn't made the connection. No one believes Nel is Ned's sister - except you - me and my Father." "Well - if were going to play hero - we better get going. I still want to go sledding. Sure we can't ride bikes?" "With all this snow? Mine's hanging on the garage wall at home - same as yours." "We can get 'em down." "Tires are flat. Be nightfall by the time we got to Nel's." "You're catching on. We'll be harder to see at night. Willy was still a reluctant camper as he opened the door to his side yard, "Okay, but be ready to run."

As we slowly crunched through the snow toward Nel's, I couldn't get Willy to move faster than a snail. When we both sniffed the odor of sulfur and manure - Willy looked over at me, "You smell what I do?" "Sulfur and manure?" "Don't tell me Old Ned isn't a devil right outa' hell." Stopped right there - further away than I wanted too, but Willy would go no further. "Johnny - first movement I see - I'm outa' here. You're always going after Ned. It's no wonder he finds you." The only problem with stopping where we did was Nel could see us out of the window on the side of her garage. We both hunkered down, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. First thing I noticed was Ned's flatbed Ford truck parked in Nel's side yard - where it couldn't be seen from the street. I was about to tell Willy I saw movement through the garage window when a hand came down on my neck. Someone grabbed us by our collars and pulled us up. We turned around and looked right into German Jerry's two toothed grin.

German turned his head and spit out a stream of tobacco, "Well lookie' here what I caught here. Two snot nosed kid

sneaks. Just what are you two doin' - hangin' around here?" German didn't give us a chance to answer, "Old Ned and me are sure gonna' have fun with you two." Looked at me up close - in the face - nose touching mine and the smell of his breath - had to come out of a cesspool pit. He spit another stream of tobacco, "Why - you're Johnny Ropp. Ned has been lookin' for you. Looks like you're gonna' meet Ned and your maker at the same time. Where'd you hide his gold? Talk - or I'll feed you to *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing.*"

Me and Willy moved at the same time - almost like we planed it. Couldn't kick him - because our feet were off the ground. Our elbows weren't hindered - so we buried them both deep into German's gut. He let go of us - doubled over - howling in pain. Then we finished him off - kicking him in the shins. Had to hurt - we were both wearing winter shoes - not sneakers. Our blows to German's gut set us free and kicks to his shins brought him down. He fell to the ground like a tree falls in a forest.

Willy and me were halfway down the alley by the time German was on his feet. We could still hear him howling as we crossed over the street - hightailing it to the Fairfield Police Station. Only problem with telling the law about escaped convicts is they don't believe kids. Fairfield police called my Mother and she set them straight. By the time they got over to Old Nel's garage - Ned and his gang were in the next county.

As Willy and me walked down the City Hall steps I got philosophical, "Law didn't believe us before - maybe they will now." "Don't put any money on it." We won't have to worry about Old Ned for awhile." "Not me, but you will. What's this about Old Ned's gold?" "Found his stash at the Old Mill in Bellpoint." "What did you do with it?" Turned it over to the Sheriff." "Ned's never gonna' stop chasin'

after you." "You still want to go sledding?" "You and me - walkin' all the way out to sledding hill by ourselves - with those convicts on the loose? No way." "Think I'll go to Mother's Library and browse through a few books. Want to join me?" "No way. Why don't we shoot a few games of pool in my neighbors basement?" "Will he let us?" "His boarders are at work - so the table should be open." "Did he replace the tips on the pool cues?" "Had too. We broke the last two good ones."

Only knew two games of pool - eight ball and nine ball, but that was enough for any boy. Willy didn't like to play nine ball - so he racked the balls for a game of eight ball. And he broke, but didn't make any. I sank a high numbered ball - one with stripe - so he had solids - one through seven. Didn't call our shots. Tried that one time and never did finish the game. To tell the truth - we were terrible at being pool players. Maybe that's why the game was so much fun. It was a challenge to our undeveloped coordination. The clock was at four-thirty on the wall behind the table. Willy racked the balls for one more game, "Give me a chance to get even." I hung up my cue, "Can't - I'm going to the library and walk home with Mother. This evening is not a good time to walk home alone - not with three convicts looking for me."

After we were outside - Willy smiled, "What happened to you? You sure are talking funny. You sound almost like the grown ups do." "Decided I didn't want to spend the rest of my life sounding like Old Ned Smith. Mother says language separates the educated from the lazy. Do you want to be like Old Ned?" "You made your point. I'll give it a try, but it won't be easy. Have to think before I talk." "You made my point. I'll meet you early tomorrow morning and we'll ride your bob." "Get here right after sunup. It was fun getting the best of German - wasn't it?" "Sure was."

Mother was turning off the lights when I opened the door to the library. She looked up, "Good - I was worried about you after the Fairfield Police called. Did they capture Ned and his escaped convict friends?" "Not sure, but I don't think so. None of the deputies made a move out the door when Willy and I left town hall." "You better stay close as long as they're on the loose. Oh - I have another book for you to read. It's a new collection of short stories by Jack London and other well known authors." "Any by Mark Twain?" "One about a celebrated jumping frog. I think you'll like it." I turned the pages to the table of contents as Mother locked the door.

Our walk home was quiet except for stepping on newly frozen snow. The only sound we heard this evening was the crunch of snow under foot. Not many people out on an evening like this. I kept looking over my shoulder - listening for the rumble of a truck engine - or headlights, but didn't see or hear anything, but the sound of our feet on frozen snow. We walked home without one car or truck passing us. Looked like all of Osborn's folks were home by the fire. My Sisters had prepared supper - so we ate as soon as we arrived. I was pushing myself away from the table when Willy's Dad called. I overheard one end of the conversation, but was able to tie most of the pieces together. German Jerry and One Eyed Jack were picked up in downtown Fairfield. Seems like Old Ned saw our altercation with German and took off - leaving his friends to fend for themselves. They were waiting in the city jail for transport to Ohio State Prison.

Father shook his head as he hung up the phone, "German Jerry and One Eyed Jack must have no brains at all. Can you imagine - they only had six months of easy time left at the Prison Farm. Now those poor saps face five more years of hard time at the State Penitentiary." He paused and turned serious, "Johnny - I want you to stick close to home. Ned is



still on the loose and dangerous." "Yes - Sir" trying to hold back a grin. I was still full of myself - for besting German Jerry. I was certain any two Ohio boys could beat Old Ned Smith and his devil's helper - too. Wasn't any danger to me - I was certain Old Ned had gone south. He wasn't known to stick around with the law chasing after him.

Christmas vacation started out with great anticipation - had a pretty fair middle, but was ending up in the doldrums. After Mother told Father about us sighting Ned and his gang - I was grounded. Couldn't go anywhere alone. It was a good thing I didn't tell either one of them about Willy and me getting away from German Jerry. I'd of spent the rest of the time at home or in the library. Not that it would make any difference. Willy said our snow wouldn't last and he was right. Temperature snuck up above freezing in the daytime - so we only had two days of sledding before the snow was gone from sledding hill. Shooting pool was good for one day and Saturday - we had a double feature matinee. Then it was back to school.

Willy said, "Won't snow any more." His prediction was better than the newspaper's. Except for a few days of snow and six good sledding days - weather was mostly cold rain and sleet. And the sun didn't shine for days and days on end. Our Ohio skies were blacker than a Michigander's heart. Can't sled in slush. Can't roller skate either. And the roads were too wet and muddy to ride bikes. Didn't mean me and Willy didn't try it. All we had to show for it was mud splattered up our backs from the rear wheels. It was too early for maple sugar and too warm for ice skating. With one gray Ohio day after another - the ground around Osborn had a consistency of mud soup. If we weren't careful and stay on the pavement - we'd sink up to our knees. Tell you what - I read more library books than any time I can remember. And Slick? His nose was in National Geographic.

So - for the next two months our weeks went like this. Wake up to fog - drizzle - muck. Go to school in the dark and come home when it was getting that way. Go outside and everything we touched was wet and slippery. Monday through Friday - our days were spent inside school. Saturday morning there was basketball and Saturday afternoon a movie matinee. Our routine was getting as boring as the weather. Now this wasn't out of the ordinary. Cold - damp and dark without a hint of spring is typical winter climate north of the Ohio River. But - March arrived sunny - carrying with it the winds of opportunity.

Father announced we were going north to Bellpoint Friday evening - right after school let out. We were going to make our final arrangements for our move next summer. Mentioned something about contracting out the spring planting. Knowing that my days in Osborn were growing short - I should have been sad, but I wasn't. My Daisy Red Rider air rifle was coming down off the top shelf of Grandmother Mac's closet. And better yet - Uncle Bus was going to meet us in Bellpoint. He'd give lessons Friday evening. And I'd be on my own with a real BB gun for the weekend.

On our drive up to Concord Township - I could tell the seasons were about to change. Activity at the Amish Dairy had increased. It would be open for weekends only - the first weekend of March - which was tomorrow. And as we passed by Uncle John's maple sugar cabin - smoke was pouring upward from the chimney - it was sugar time. Breathed a huge sigh of relief as we pulled up in front of Grandfather Mac's. Uncle Bus's Chrysler Roadster was parked out front. Supper was waiting inside - roast pork - reduced gravy - mashed potatoes. Doesn't get any better than that. After supper - Uncle Bus walked directly to the closet, "Time to train you on firearms - young man." He took the BB gun down and opened the the box.

I hung on every word as he explained how to operate it. When it was my turn - I held it in my hands - so proud. It looked just like Tom Mix's Winchester - the one strapped to his saddle - lever action and all. Did I ever feel grownup. Uncle Bus took me outside to the livery stable. Lucky we had a full moon and calm winds. Two targets came with my air rifle. He thumb tacked one to the side wall of the livery stable - the side facing away from Bellpoint Road. We backed off twenty paces. Then he showed me how to load the BBs. With the lever - he pumped compressed air into the rifle - took aim at the target and pulled on the trigger with his forefinger. Mind you - in his hands my BB gun looked like a toothpick - so it must have been difficult to operate - being so small. We walked to the target. His BB was lodged dead center in the bull's eye.

After helping me load aim and fire - Uncle Bus gave me double instructions on firearm safety measures, "Never walk with a loaded gun. Never pump compressed air into it until you're ready to fire. Keep it pointed down at the ground until you do. And always walk with the barrel resting on your shoulder - pointing upward." All of which made sense - because a BB gun can do damage - like put an eye out. After he left - I stayed outside to practice target shooting.

I stepped off ten paces and turned. Fired a shot and checked the target. I aimed dead center, but the BB struck the bull's eye an inch below center. Backed off twenty paces and fired again. Checked the target. Now my BB was lodged in the first ring - four inches below dead center. I'd have to allow for fall - or drop at longer distances. Practiced what Uncle Bus taught me - take a deep breath - let it out slowly - aim and squeeze the trigger. Wasn't hardly any recoil and it hit pretty near where I aimed it. Emptied the remaining BBs into a glass tube and made sure the gun was empty. I set it against the livery stable wall and took down

the target. Took my gun and target back inside for Father and Uncle Bus to inspect. They quizzed me on firearm safety - just to make sure I knew what I was doing. I passed with flying colors. Returned my Red Rider air rifle to its box. I was ready for big game - a flock of pigeons in the rafters of Grandfather Ropp's barn.

Pigeons in the city are a nuisance. No one bothered with them - except to feed them. On a farm - pigeons brought trouble. They'd fly inside the barn and roost high up in the rafters. Then their droppings would get all over the hay. Feed that to animals and they'd get sick. If a farmer had chickens - almost all of the ones I knew did - pigeons had diseases that could wipe out an entire flock. County Agent had a bounty on them. Five cents a pigeon head - brought to him. Now that alone should have alerted me, but it didn't. I had a BB gun and I'd been asked to clear out a hazard to Grandfather's farm animals.

We left for the farm right after breakfast. Grandfather had Sandy and Clyde hitched up to the wagon - ready. Spot was dancing in circles as we drove through the two stone pillars. Didn't waste any time - except for pulling on the farm work gloves I got for Christmas. Ground was frozen - so it was a good time to clean out fence rows. Spent most of Saturday helping out - until the sun turned the frozen earth to mud late in the afternoon. Clearing out fence rows - straightening fences and repairing gates is hard work. Must of been boring to Spot. He didn't go back out with us after lunch. That dog is smart - he was waiting for us when we returned with the wagon.

It was after supper that the slaughter began. I had one night to get rid of the pigeons roosting in the rafters of Grandfather Ropp's barn. Now shooting birds at night ought to be against the law. Pigeons sat still. It was like

shooting ducks trapped in a barrel. I bagged twenty-four - all of them. Won't describe how I felt doing it, but inside - I was sick to my stomach. Like Old Ned should feel, but never did. Just wasn't fair to shine a flashlight up at a pigeon and shoot him off his perch. They sat still - didn't move. It hit me in the stomach right after I shot the first one. This should be fun, but it wasn't. Maybe that's why Tom Mix fired his guns only as a last resort. Using moral authority was the ticket - not BB gun pellets. Didn't seem right to be shooting defenseless birds - not without giving them a sporting chance. But I had my orders - get rid of those pigeons and I did - one by one. I cut off the heads and buried the rest of the birds behind the barn. When I returned to the kitchen to wash up - I couldn't get my hands clean - no matter how hard I scrubbed.

Grandfather offered me candy from the white sack above the refrigerator, but I refused. He asked, "What seems to be the problem - Johnny?" "I'm not a bounty hunter. Wouldn't mind shooting birds if they had a sporting chance. But - shooting sitting birds isn't fair." He placed his arm around my shoulders, "Not easy doing what must be done - Johnny." "Only time I'm going to shoot another sitting bird is when I'm at a carnival - or a shooting gallery." "We had to get rid of those pigeons - Johnny. Your Great Uncle Tim lost all of his chickens to a disease carried by pigeons. Where did you leave the heads?" "In a sack on top the wagon in the barn." "I'll collect the bounty from the County Agent next time I'm in town."

I placed my BB gun back into its box. I couldn't take it back to Osborn. There wasn't anyplace there where it was safe to shoot it. And Willy was scared silly of anything that looked like a gun. My BB gun would have to wait here at the farm - until I returned. Took it upstairs and placed it on the top shelf in the attic. Right above the book that

told how two boys my age whipped the Kaiser. Took the book down and reread the first chapter. To see if it said how we got into World War I - the war to end all wars. Chapter one didn't. Read chapter two because the first one didn't say how we got in to it and this one didn't either. Father called, "Turn off the light and get ready. It's time to go back to Grandfather Mac's." Decided to ask Father how we got into World War I in Europe. He wasn't certain either, "Maybe it was the Hearst papers that got us in - or indecision by Wilson."

Talk about having a hard time getting to sleep. Have you ever seen a pigeon ghost staring at you in your dreams? I was relieved to wake up before daylight. Hoped Sunday School would remove the weight of twenty-four helpless dead pigeons hanging over my head. Looked outside the bedroom window and couldn't see past my nose. River fog had moved in from the Scioto - all splotchy like a dirty white blanket - covering shrubs - trees and lawn. It was too damp and cold to play outside and too warm for snow. I figured I could take a hike up Mill Creek after Sunday School to check on my logs. Shooting defenseless pigeons had been a wake up to me. It left a bad taste in my mouth and a ten ton weight on my conscience. Grandmother - never could figure how she was always up before me - had breakfast waiting. Even let me have a cup of half milk - half coffee. Father stopped me before I escaped out the back door. I didn't have Church going clothes on, but he didn't say anything about that. "Johnny - don't stray too far. We're going to return early to avoid the late afternoon fog."

Believe it or not - going to Sunday School helped. Nice to know there is forgiveness in this world for someone like me - someone who had done something wrong. Walked out on the Church steps after Sunday School was over. Sure glad I was concealed by fog. Flying out of the the general store's side

yard with a hellish roar - came Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. It dug deep ruts into the soft ground as its tires spun. And when they hit road - rubber burned - Ned flew around the corner up Mill Creek Road. Knew better, but my curiosity was overwhelming. I had to find out what Old Ned was up too and I just knew it had to be at the Old Mill. I looked up Mill Creek Road, but couldn't see anything. Fog was beginning to lift, but I still couldn't see more than thirty feet in front of my nose.

Decided to play it safe. Crossed over Mill Creek Bridge and followed a fisherman's path up the bank on the other side. It was an adventure - walking over a slippery slope on wet packed mud around fallen logs. Had to be careful where I planted my feet. Bad enough to have muddy shoes - worse yet to have a muddy bottom. Mother would tan my hide if I returned with mud all over my pants when we were going back home. As I approached the bend in Mill Creek - just around the corner from the Old Mill - I stopped short. Three distinct odors were hanging in the air - riding downstream on the current - sulfur - smoke and manure. Old Ned was hiding at the Mill - all right.

Fog gave me fairly good cover and a dead tree furnished concealment. Peaked around it. Saw Old Ned unload boxes from the back of his flatbed and haul them one by one across the bridge to a lean-to shelter. Had to admire his work. He built it on this side of the river - leaning up against what was left of the chimney - so no one could see him from the road. Must have ripped out the stone on the outside - filled in the fireplace on the inside and made himself a new one. Old Ned had found a good hiding hole. Nearest house was a quarter mile away and no one would notice he was here unless smoke coming from the chimney gave him away. Couldn't see where it was unless you walked down the bank on this side. From the looks of the trash - he'd been here since his gang

got captured. As soon as Ned finished unloading his truck - he backed it down below the bank - off the path leading down to the bridge. Then he covered it with branches. Just enough to camouflage it from the road.

Stacked outside Ned's lean-to were twelve boxes with food - beer and tobacco. Ned wasn't inside more than a minute when the aroma of bacon frying - mixed in with sulfur and smoke - drifted downstream to my nose. He stepped outside with a second skillet and carved holes in four slices of bread. Then he broke open four eggs and popped each one into the holes he'd carved. Must have been a hobo at one time - because that's the way they cook eggs. Least ways - that's what Willy told me. Made me hungry just to watch. I'd seen enough. It was time to hightail it out of here. Fog was lifting above the trees. If I hung around - Ned would spot me - sure as a hawk sees a chicken.

Before I could move out - Ned popped back outside with a skillet in one hand and a knife in the other. Sat down on what was left of the foundation and ate like he'd not had food in a month. As long as he was outside - I didn't dare move. So - I leaned up against the dead tree and waited. When he popped back inside his lean-to - I moved quick as I could - without sliding on my pants - downstream toward the Mill Creek Bridge. If Old Ned heard noise - he'd look downstream on the other side - first - so I should get away Scot free. When I was about to disappear around the corner - I looked back. Ned heard the noise I made and was looking on the other side - just like I figured he would.

I had to smile at my good fortune and good thinking. Hardly anyone used this path except folks who liked to fish on this side of the creek and there weren't many who did. This late in winter - with all the leaves gone - I could see at least a quarter of a mile. Unfortunately - so could Ned.



I could here him crashing through the brush on the other side of the creek - so I moved out - fast as I could without sliding and landing on the seat of my pants. I followed the path and didn't stop until I no longer heard his thrashing around in the bramble on the other side.

Stopped before I got to Mill Creek Bridge - so I could catch my breath. Looked back upstream, but I didn't see anything. Had to be a mile and a half downstream from the Old Mill and I could still smell the aroma of sulfur - smoke and Ned's bacon. Had to wonder why no one found Ned's hiding place. But those thoughts didn't linger in my mind. There's something about cold morning air and bacon frying over an open fire that gets stomach juices going. All I could think of was food. I ran a hundred paces and listened - ran a hundred and listened - until I was past the general store and walking uphill to Grandfather Mac's house. Opened the back porch door - greeted by the aroma of fried chicken.

I was so hungry - I almost forgot to tell Grandfather Mac about Old Ned's new hiding place and about his truck leaving the general store with boxes of food and tobacco. Grandfather telephoned the Sheriff and this time a deputy arrived at the general store before the clerk opened its doors. Old Ned had robbed it - all right. Broke in through a side door. By the time the deputy got to the Old Mill - Ned was long gone. Must have left in a hurry. Most of the grocery boxes were recovered. Old Ned must have supernatural powers to keep getting away from the law. Whatever powers he possessed - none of them were good enough to prevent being discovered.

Nothing better than Sunday fried chicken dinner. And I was feeling safe again - knowing Old Ned was on the run from the law. Ned wasn't the talk of the table - our move to the Concord Township farm was. Grandfather asked Father, "Settle

on a date for your move from Osborn?" "After my Dad moves to his place in town and we sell our place in Osborn. Be late June at the earliest. Can you take care of Johnny while we pack up?" "Send him on up. He's my number one crawdad catcher and we have a lot of bass to catch in the pool below the dam. You don't mind staying with us - do you Johnny?" I was beaming. I'd be able to hike Mill Creek and build my raft, "No Sir. I'll fill your bait bucket and maybe I can catch a carp or two down Doc's lane." That made Grandmother frown, "If you do - throw them back in. They're not fit to fry." She talked softly to Mother, "Make sure Johnny keeps and eye out for Ned Smith. He's never robbed the general store before. He's acting irrational." Father looked outdoors, "Fog's setting in. Time to pack up."

We were past the Plain city Fairgrounds before two. My mind was preoccupied with an irrational Old Ned Smith. I could smell *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* up Mill Creek, but I didn't see him. Ned's hiding places were under surveillance. He needed shelter and Old Nel lives in Fairfield." Must have been talking out loud - because Father asked, "Did you say something?" Had to think quick, "Said I'll miss my friends in Osborn."

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Being a thief is a hard way to live.
3. We are what we speak.
4. Ohio winters are a test of your sanity.

## 10

Spring - wonderful spring - when this round ball we live on starts to warm up and begins an incline toward summer. Flowers begin to bloom and spring is the time for sap to run out of maple trees and sappy boys play hooky from school. If it wasn't for sap draining from maple trees - there'd be no syrup. If it wasn't for sap clouding a young man's brain - there'd be no June brides. Weather warmed up and thirty-one days crawled by - from the first of March to the first of April. It was spring to Willy and me - even if the calendar said it didn't arrive until the twenty-first of April. These days flowed by like molasses in winter. Grass was growing - the world was turning green - and here we were stuck in school. Thirty-one days of March crawled by like the devil's sixty-six. By the middle of March - Old Ned had faded into memory. He wasn't here - nor there - and nobody knew where. Middle of March and Willy and me were like caged animals - pacing - antsy - full of it.

Willy and me were getting on Teacher's nerves. So much so - she snapped at us and sent us to the Superintendent's office for discipline. Yanked us up by the scruff of our necks and sent us down the hall. We were four doors away from getting ours when Slick was slick. Had to give Willy credit. I'd never thought of it. He looked behind to see if Teacher was watching us. She wasn't. She had gone back inside. Willy walked right past the Superintendent's office and around the corner to the gym. He whispered, "Hurry up - we'll shoot some baskets and then go back to class." "What if we get caught?" "Won't - I've got it all figured out. We

don't have hall monitors." "What's that got to do with it?" "Only one who knows we've haven't been to the office is the Superintendent and our Teacher doesn't speak to him unless he speaks first. She'll think we got what's coming and that'll be the end of it."

For once - Willy was right. Took off our shoes and shot baskets in our stocking feet for fifteen minutes. Couldn't wear street shoes on the gym floor. They'd make marks and the basketball coach had the world's biggest paddle. We had worked up a sweat by the time we pulled our shoes back on. Willy peeked around the corner and checked the hall to see if anyone was around. He gave me the all clear sign - so we walked back to class like we were supposed too. Got away with it because we stayed in one classroom all day. Wasn't any need for hall monitors. No one was allowed in the hall - except to go to the bathroom. Had to smile to myself as we walked back to our desks. We were tousled and red in the cheek. Looked like we had been given a severe dressing down by the Superintendent. Our class gave us a look - like where were you when brains were passed out.

Mind you - wouldn't have gone along with Willy's scheme if it wasn't for the dressing down I'd get at home for going to the Superintendent's office in the first place. Warm weather must have effected my thought process - too. Sap had clouded my brain. Least ways - that's what Willy said was doing it. Walking to his house after school - I asked him, "How did you ever come up with that idea?" Willy - still flushed with success could hardly get it out, "Didn't have a choice. That was going to be my second trip. I'd been paddled for sure. And I'm going to be a lawyer." "What's that got to do with it?" "I got us out of being punished even though we're guilty. That's what lawyers are supposed to do." "If there's a way to weasel out of work - trouble or blame - you're the best I've ever seen. If I ever need a

lawyer - I'll pick you for sure." Willy was wound up tight, "And I'll get you off. I didn't earn my nickname - Slick working my fingers to the bone. You'll never find a lawyer with blisters on his hands. They get paid for talking - not doing honest work."

Willy may have been certain about not getting caught, but not me. I was having a bad case of the doubts, "Think we really got away with it? Maybe the Superintendent will speak to our teacher." "Don't believe he will. Why should he. He hasn't spoken to a teacher in years. My Dad says he'll only talk to the school Board. Besides - he hasn't the foggiest what happened. And you know what?" "What?" "We've pulled off the trick of the year." "But - what good is it if we can't tell anyone about it." "We can't tell or we'll both get paddled for sure." "Tell you what - if helping folks avoid punishment is what lawyers do best - you're going to be a great one." We shot a few baskets and sat down on Willy's steps - too excited to play and too keyed up to sit still. I ran on home. It was time for my radio serials.

It is great fun to get away with something, but then comes the guilt - tripping through my mind. We'd pulled the stunt of the year and couldn't say a word about it. I was being punished - all right. Just didn't know the form it would take. Sat on pins and needles through supper. If we'd been caught - that would be the main topic at the table. Not a word was said. I was about ready to burst. Tell you what - a dressing down or paddling would have to be better than my slow mental torture. When Mother signaled supper was over and we could leave the table - she stopped me. "You've been on pins and needles all evening. What happened in school today?" Mother knew how to read me. Now - I couldn't lie and I couldn't tell the whole truth - so I settled for half a loaf. "I opened my mouth when I shouldn't have. Teacher got mad at me and Willy for talking in class."

Mother smiled at me, "You know the rules." "Yes Ma'am - the teacher is always right." And that was it - nothing else was said. I didn't lie - but I didn't tell about not going to the Superintendent's office when we should have. Mother had done her share of teaching. She knew that with the first sign of warm weather - a teacher was more like an animal trainer than an instructor. Needed a whip and a chair to control the young ones when sap was flowing.

March normally is a whole lot like February in Ohio. One slate gray day after another. Clouds would almost touch the ground. And sky would be the color of dirty white - like sheets that had been washed with black socks. If this March had been like that - me and Willy would never have got in trouble again, but it wasn't. We had one sunny day after another. Willy and me minded our P's and Q's until the very end of the month. It must have been important at the time - or it had to be the warm weather. Anyway - whatever it was made us talk out of turn. Words came bubbling up from our lungs and sprang out of our mouths - two tongues out of control. Teacher must have felt the pressure - too. She snapped at us again and we were on our way down the corridor to the Superintendent's office with our tails tucked between our legs. Willy looked back over his shoulder. Teacher was standing in the doorway - halfway in - halfway out - making sure we went inside.

I looked back before closing the door. Teacher's eyes were still on me - her hand was resting on the door knob. We had no choice - had to enter the Superintendent's office. We got lucky. His secretary was in the other room running the school's copier. No one else was around and the door to the Superintendent's private office was closed. Willy opened the outside door and looked down the hall. He motioned for me to follow, "Hall's clear." We hurried around the corner to the gym and took off our shoes. We had been shooting lay-ups and

running ourselves silly for about ten minutes when the sky fell in. A voice thundered from the entrance tunnel, "What are you doing in the gym?" We looked up into the eyes of Father's quarterback - carrying his symbol of authority - a hall monitor's paddle. His voice was loud enough, but it was his paddle that got our attention. Worse yet - it looked like we had strayed into his domain.

That darn Willy - he sure is going to be a successful lawyer when he grew up. He looked that hall monitor in the eye and told a whopper, "Teacher sent us out of the classroom to work off steam. It's time for us to return. Sorry if we made too much noise. Won't happen again." The quarterback looked at Willy and smiled - like he knew what we were up too and maybe he'd done it himself, "Next time you work off steam - go outside. No ones allowed in the gym." We pulled on our shoes under his watchful eyes and scooted down the hall - back to our classroom.

I whispered, "Looks like we'll have to place tape over our mouths. Won't be shooting baskets in the gym anymore." Willy frowned at me, "It's going to be difficult, but not imposible. Tell you what. Why don't we try to get Teacher on our side - so she'll go easier on us?" "You're something special - Slick. Got us out of two scrapes. You're too good at this to be just a lawyer. You ought to move down a notch and become a politician. You can tell lies and your face doesn't even turn red." Willy stopped with his hand on the doorknob and whispered, "The secret is not to lie - just don't tell the part that gets you in trouble."

And Willy did just that. He went up to Teacher after class and asked if we could help out - clean the blackboards and erasers - stuff like that. By the time we left - he'd sweet talked her over to our side. That saved us in April - because it was darned hard for us not to say something when

we shouldn't have. April brought spring showers - the gentle kind that makes flowers grow. The grass turned a bright green and the air was fresh - washed clean of winter's dust and dirt. Life was popping up out of the ground. I was counting my lucky stars. Old Ned was less than a memory, but more than a worry. No one had heard hide nor seen hair of him. Willy figured he'd gone underground. To see his boss - the devil.

We didn't have time to go north to Bellpoint. Mother and Father were too busy - getting ready to move - selling our house - things like that. Just as well with me. The barnyard would be ripe after a winter's accumulation of manure. Warm air and rain would bring the aroma of hog manure to my nostrils. Now there's an odor that took getting used too. I was anxious to begin building my raft, but it would have to wait until school was out. Roads were dry - washed clean of mud and dust. We could ride our bikes out to Mad River and hike around. It was too cold to jump into our swimming hole, but we could check it out. And Willy had a new bicycle - one with gears. He wanted to give it a spin in the country.

We walked our bikes to the corner gas station. My tires were nearly flat, but not quite - after a winter on non use and Willy wanted to check his. Really envied his new bike. His tires even had tread on the bottom. Didn't know if I'd want a gear shift - on a bicycle? Who'd want one of those. We had to use our own gauge. Attendant wouldn't let anyone use his. He'd lost one too many. And he wouldn't help us. Wouldn't help anyone who wasn't a regular customer or didn't buy anything. Wasn't anything fancy about my balloon tired bicycle. Only had one speed and coaster brakes. And only one color - red. Willy's new bike had smaller tires and his brakes were controlled from the handle bars. It would be a year or more before Willy learned how to use his complicated



piece of machinery. And I had a bicycle seat large enough to be comfortable. Sitting on Willy's seat was like sitting on the edge of a razor. Anyway - after several fits and starts - we got the proper amount of air in our tires without blowing them up and were on our way to Mad River.

First stop was sledding hill. We counted six dents in the wire fence at the bottom. Our hill had become either faster or shorter. This season was a bust. Didn't snow enough and what came down melted as fast as it fell. Can't slide downhill on mud. We tried that and gave up. As bad as sledding season turned out - spring was making up for it. Trees were still without leaves, but the buds were popping and the air was filled with pollen. When we were out this way - late in the fall - there wasn't much traffic. There was today. We had to hug the side of the road or we'd get run over. A car or truck went by at least every five minutes. Had to be at least twelve in an hour. Never ever saw it this busy. Took us the better part of an hour to get to the path we used to Mad River. Willy insisted on bringing his bike further on the path than we had ever done before, "Might get stolen. Got to hide it so no one can find it." We hid our bikes a hundred yards away from the road - behind a fallen tree

Trail was still a bit too damp. Trees - wood on the ground and natural forest mulch kept the ground from drying out. I led the way - jumping from one clump of grass to another to keep my tennis shoes dry. We gave up and walked along the side of the trail - being higher was dryer. We walked directly to Mad River and then downstream to our swimming hole. I grabbed Willy's arm as he began to slide down the bank and pulled him back up. Mad River wasn't living up to its name today. Heavy spring rains had not materialized. Not being overly smart - we took off our shoes and rolled up our pants legs.

Water looked mighty inviting. Stuck our toes in to test the water. Willy let out a yelp, "River isn't more than two degrees above ice cubes." Didn't stop us from wading along the bank, but didn't last. Fish were on vacation or dormant. Only thing moving in the water was our feet and our toes were turning blue. Climbed up the bank and sat down on a log to dry our feet. Willy checked his watch. One he'd got for Christmas. It still worked, but didn't look like it would last until summer, "We have a little over two hours before the matinee begins. If you want to check out the remains of Old Ned's still - we better get moving." I wasn't ready, "My feet aren't dry yet. Don't want to pull dry socks over wet feet." Willy had an answer for every situation, "We'll walk them dry."

The same log that blocked the trail to Old Ned's still hadn't moved. Be hard for anyone to move it now - lodged into mud and wet ground. Willy asked, "Are you sure you still want to check the damage the Sheriff did to Ned's still?" "Yes - we'll be careful." "Has anyone seen Old Ned around after we spotted him at Nel's." "I saw him holed up in Bellpoint, but he's gone now. No ones heard where." "Nel is still upset about not getting her newspaper bags back." "Too late - we burned them." "Jonsey says she has her place locked up tighter than a drum. Bet Ned is holed up there. She and her favorites clam up when Jonsey's around. It's all mighty suspicious. Still yells at him about our newspaper bags." "I think she knows we set them on fire - so she can't put a curse on them - or us." "You're probably right. Fire cleans a witch's curse." "You been reading too many books. Fire doesn't clean - it burns."

Trail dried out as we got closer to the river. Trees thinned out and more sun came through. This path showed no sign of people. Hadn't been disturbed since we'd been here. Still - we walked slow - in a crouch. Had to be careful.

Old Ned might be around. As we drew nearer - I sniffed the air for the odor of sulfur, but didn't notice any. We both attempted to sneak up on the clearing, but failed miserably. I tripped over a small log in the trail and cried out, "Darn! That smarts. Cracked my shin good on that one. Almost landed on my knees." Willy put his finger to his lips, "Sh, Old Ned may be about." "No way - nothing here. Sheriff cleaned him out."

Willy took the lead until we stopped at the edge of the clearing where Old Ned's Still had been. I stepped out into the clearing, "Nothing here. Looks like the Sheriff put Old Ned out of business. All that's left is a stack of wood. His copper plumbing and kettles are gone. Not even any corn mash. Sheriff must have taken it all. No wonder Ned keeps chasing after me." "You have his gold - too. Think that takes priority." "Got his gold - took away his livelihood - sent the law after him. I imagine he has a right to bear a grudge." "Or two."

Willy nosed around the wood pile. He picked up a piece of fire wood and uncovered a plank. "Hello - what have we here?" "What did you find?" "Fire wood is stacked on top of planks." I brushed the dirt aside, "Doesn't look right. Help me clear the wood off and I'll see what we have." We had to unstack several feet of wood and move it out of the way to get a good look. Willy cleaned the rest of the dirt away. Underneath was a crudely made door with leather straps for hinges and handle. I pulled on the strap, but it didn't budge. "Give me a hand. Got to find out what's behind this door." We pulled together and the door came up. Reason it didn't come up when I pulled the first time was we didn't brush away enough dirt.

Willy and me were looking at a set of stone steps that led down into darkness. I walked halfway down - to get a

better look, "Must have been a storm cellar or basement at one time. House probably got swept away in the big flood. Want to make a torch and see what's down here?" "No way. Lets get out of here. Might be snakes or who knows what down there. Might even be ghosts." "Now who's been seeing too many spooky movies? Got to have people to have ghosts and fire will chase away any snake we find." I climbed out, "We'll need a torch."

Poked around the clearing - looking for wood and cloth to make a proper torch. I checked down below and found a rag that would do and Willy found a two foot tapered piece of wood to attach it too. I wound the rag around the wood and fastened it with several granny knots. I checked down below by the steps where I could see and found a jug of moonshine whiskey. Called up to Willy, "Bring it down here. I'll pour some of this whiskey over it - it'll burn." Willy handed it to me, "Not coming down there until our torch is lit." I poured whiskey over the rag - soaking it good - passed it back up to Willy to light. He still had a water proof tin of safety matches - in case he needed a fire. He lit it. Made a whoosh as the flames shot up. Almost singed his eyebrows. Slick let out a, "Damn! That was close. You soaked too much whiskey on the rag. Don't spill any on us or we'll have the dickens to pay. Take it - don't want any whiskey dripping down on me."

I took the torch from Willy and walked down the steps. Wasn't any whiskey dripping down. If it did - it would be on fire and I would too. Willy asked, "How long do you think it will last?" "Should burn for ten to fifteen minutes. If it goes out - we have more whiskey and rags. We'll make another one - just in case. Hand me another piece of wood. I'll tie a rag on and soak it good." Willy looked around and handed me another likely candidate. I tied a rag on it and soaked it good, "You coming down?"

Willy inched his way down the steps, "Torch sure does light up this place. Someone has been here before us. See the footprints in the dust?" "Sure do." I grinned at Willy, "Let's split up and explore." "You crazy? That'll bring ghosts out for sure." "Just pulling your leg. Look - over against the wall - to our right. Do you see what I see?" "Copper kettles and pipes. Looks like Old Ned outfoxed the law again." "No wonder they didn't find his still. He dismantled it and put it down here." Willy inspected the pipes along the side wall as I followed with the torch. I looked around, "Old Ned didn't dig this cellar out and by the looks of the ceiling - it didn't have a house on top. Had to be out back of the cabin." "Cabin? Has it been around that long?" "Sure looks like it. Don't have many storms. Has to be a root cellar or where settlers hid from Indian attacks." "Looks like an old basement to me. Except where Old Ned put his kettles - it's full of cobwebs and dust." "Maybe - maybe not. Lets check the walls and see if there's a tunnel that leads to the woods or river. Settlers would want another way out during an Indian raid." Willy frowned, "You've been watching too many Tom Mix movies." "Nothing wrong with listening to Tom. He's a real cowboy."

I stopped in my tracks, "Did you hear something?" "No - what?" "Listen - I hear steps and muffled voices." I handed the torch to Willy and crept back toward the steps. Almost jumped right out of my skin when I looked up into a one tooth grin. It was Old Ned - staring down at me. He spit a stream of tobacco juice at my face and missed as I jumped out of the way. Ned had the door in one hand and his body blocking our way out, "Now I got you Johnny Ropp and there ain't no way anyone is ever gonna' find you. You're gonna' rot in hell - if *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* don't eat you first!" The door came crashing down. Dust flew in my eyes as hellish laughter rained down through the cracks, "You're not gonna' be little more'n a snack for my red friend."

I looked over at Willy and whispered, "We still have our torch. We'll wait him out. When Ned leaves we can push the door up." Willy shook his head, "Too late for that. Ned's stacking wood on top of it. We'll never be able to push it up." I looked up - as if I could see. I couldn't of course, but I sure could hear the sound of wood dropping on the door. Shook my head, "From the sound of it - there's at least two of them stacking wood. The first thing Tom Mix would do is sit down and think." So I did.

Willy sat next to me on the bottom step, "It's your nickel. What do you think we should do?" "If you'd read one or two books at my Mother's Library - you'd know what we have to do." "Now that's as wild a story as I ever heard. How's a library going to get us out of this mess?" "Easy as apple pie. Look at the stones lining the wall." "Look like quarry stones to me." "Well they're old - real old. This basement had to be dug in the eighteen hundreds - before the Civil War. And we're near a river on a major north-south trail. Bet you a dollar to a doughnut this was a Way Station on the Underground Railroad." "Now you're really full of it. First you tell me it's to hide from Indians and now it's a train station. Only railroads built underground are subways in New York." I chose to ignore Slick. If I listened to him we'd be devil's meat, "If it is a Way Station - there should be an escape tunnel. Might even be two. One leading to the river and one out back to the woods. River one might have been destroyed by floods and Ned's out that way. Lets check the walls for a tunnel to the woods."

I got up, but Willy stayed put, "Torch is going out and I don't want to be down here in the dark." "Light the other torch while I check the walls for a tunnel." Decided to look behind the copper pipes stacked up against the right side wall. Found a plank door, but it didn't look right to me. Didn't look old or new - just strange. Had a stone against

it. Tried to roll it out of the way, but I could only budge it a few feet. Cracked open one of the planks and almost passed out from the aroma of sulfur and manure. Wouldn't you know it - Willy chose that time to put our first torch out before lighting the second one. I could still see by the red light coming out of the opening I made. Now that should have made me stop and think, but it didn't. Then I heard a rumble that kept getting louder - louder - and louder. And the smell? It was just awful.

I peeked through the crack. *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was outlined against a background of flames. He was coming our way. And by the noise he was making - must have been hungry enough to eat both of us. Tried to convince myself that it was a guy with a torch, but my mind was saying I'm looking into the jaws of hell. Closed the plank on a big red claw - or hand - couldn't tell which. I didn't have time to find out. Rolled the stone back as Willy struck one of his matches, "What's that smell coming from your side of the cellar. Darn near puked." Didn't want to scare Willy. One of us was enough, "You don't want to know." He got the torch lit, "Want some help moving that stone?" "No way - we better find another way out of here. Lets check the back wall - behind the copper kettles."

Willy noticed my hands shaking - so naturally he tried to hand me the torch, "Keep it while I move the kettles out of the way." We both stopped. The sound of wood being stacked had stopped. I handed the torch back to Willy and whispered, "Mighty quiet." "Must plan on leaving us buried alive down here." Willy wasn't laughing and neither was I. Being buried alive was the least of our troubles. Thought I could hear grunts - like something trying to push open the door I had just blocked. Willy heard it too. Now his hands were shaking, "Quit shaking and hold the torch steady. There has to be a way out of here."

I pulled both kettles away from the wall. Banged my fist along the stones until I heard a hollow sound. There - behind a false stone front - I found what I was looking for. Now I had to figure out how to open it. Willy was growing impatient, "Damnit Johnny - there are grunts and scratching sounds coming out of the wall where you rolled that stone. Smell of sulfur and manure is getting so strong - I'm going to gag. Can't you get a move on?" That was the incentive I needed. Pulled on the false front and nothing happened. I pushed it to the right - then left and it broke free. Wall slid open revealing a cobweb covered door that looked like it hadn't been opened in a hundred years. I pulled on the door to open it and the wooden planks crumbled in my hands. I pulled the pieces out of the away - took the torch from Willy and bent down. It was the tunnel out of here that I was looking for. Couldn't see how far it went. It was covered with cobwebs and darker than the bottom of the outhouse Cess Poole fell into.

I handed the torch back to Willy, "Hurry - have to cover our tracks or we'll wind up being dinner. Get in first and I'll close the wall behind us." "Okay but you lead the way through the tunnel. You got us into this mess - you can get us out." I pulled the kettle up to the wall and slid the false front shut, "Hope that gives us a head start. Stirred up a hornets nest when I cracked open that doorway to hell." I pushed Willy, "You go first. Your torch will burn away the cobwebs." Willy would have none of it, "It's your nickel - you lead." He handed the torch back to me and moved aside. Didn't have time to argue - with Ned's devil trying to claw its way out.

Had to walk bent over. Couldn't move fast - burning the cobwebs away to make a path. Tunnel was damp, but the floor was dry. Whoever dug it must've known about drainage. Sides were braced with wood that was as rotten as the door. Floor



was made of the same stone as the cellar walls. Checked the ceiling and then I began to worry. It was covered with wood planks as rotten as the side wall bracing. I turned around and warned Willy, "Don't breathe near the ceiling. Touch it - or the slightest bump and we'll be buried alive." Willy moaned, "Get me out of here - or I won't live long enough to sue the folks who built this tunnel." "I'll get you out, but you'll have to sue the dead." "Any lawyer worth his salt can do that." "Move - darn it. *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* is pushing on the false front."

Crept along for what seemed like two hundred yards. I looked back over my shoulder - Willy was lagging, "Get a move on Slick - or you won't have to worry about suing anyone." "Have you ever seen a tunnel this long before?" "Heard about one on *I Love A Mystery*." Willy brushed cobwebs away with his hands and caught up. He was breathing down my neck, "Back there - Ned's devil is coming through the wall we closed. I can hear it breathing. It's *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*!" "You got that right - right out of the jaws of hell and it sounds hungry." That was all Willy needed to get moving. He darn near ran over me, "Better hope we can find a way out." "I'm moving." "I can hear *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* a-coming up behind us."

I moved as quick as I could - hunched over with a torch in my hand, "Don't know why someone hasn't found this tunnel - or at least fallen into it." "Enough of your thinking - find the exit." I hurried on - bent over until I hit the wall at the end of the tunnel. Looked up, "Hold the torch while I open her up." The wooden door above my head came apart in my hands as I pushed. Parts of it were held together by brush and sod - so all of it didn't come down. I popped up out of there - like a rabbit scampering out of a hole - all covered with dirt. Willy followed me - like a cork popping out of a

seltzer bottle - eyes bigger than saucers. "Tunnel is coming down behind me. Did you hear the *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* scream? Sounds like a bat out of hell and God what an odor. You sure picked one hell of an enemy."

We stood up and brushed the dirt off our clothes. I looked around. We were in a large thicket of trees - hidden from the clearing. Willy grabbed my arm - put his finger to his lips - and pointed to the fire wood Ned piled on top the door. We saw two columns of tobacco smoke rising over the wood. Willy whispered, "Must be the two of them. Wonder why they didn't hear the tunnel collapse?" "Ned had to think it was *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* coming up out of his private hell for dinner. Times a-wasting. Lets make tracks before Ned finds out we're gone. Willy pitched what was left of our torch on top of the tunnel exit. We circled around the woods so we'd stay clear of Old Ned and still get back to the trail. Found it a quarter mile upstream.

We hadn't run more than a hundred feet when we heard a scream that stopped us in our tracks. Sent shivers up our backs and made our hair stand on end. Willy gasped - out of breath - "*The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* must have worked its self free." Our feet were moving before our minds told them too. We both vaulted over the tree blocking the trail like it wasn't there. We heard another scream and this one sounded human. Heard Old Ned shout, "They've escaped and we've no one to feed ... " His voice was cut off by another scream. Willy shivered, "*The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* must have eaten Ned's friend?" I kept on running, "Don't worry. No one will believe what happened here."

We were running as fast as our feet would go. Willy was having second thoughts about hiding our bikes so far from the road. Pushing them along the path slowed us a bit, but we

still made it down the road before Old Ned came crashing out of the woods after us. We were a quarter mile away when Ned came to a stop in the middle of the road - both arms raised to scarecrow height - yelling, "Damn you Johnny Ropp. I'll feed you to my devil's helper before I'm through with you!" I shouted over to Willy, "That Ned sure knows how to express himself when he's angry." "Did you recognize his partner?" "Don't know who he is and don't think it matters. From the sound of that second scream - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* must have eaten him for dinner."

We slowed our bikes down to just below racetrack speed. I asked, "You ever wonder how many slaves made there way to freedom using that tunnel?" "No - why should I?" "Had to be more than a couple of hundred - plus two." "Plus two?" "Us!" "What are you going to do about Old Ned?" "You saw *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. Ned's sold his soul to the devil. So - I'm going to stay away from both of them - as far as possible. Getting one up on a human is one thing - messing around with the devil - that's out of my league." "After what we've been through - Ned's your problem from now on. I'll help when I have too, but don't count on me making a career out of it. See you at the theater - I'm out of here." Willy shifted into high gear and took off on his own. Couldn't catch up if I wanted to - so I slowed down.

With Willy gone on ahead - I had time to think. Ned's flatbed Ford truck had to be parked on the other side of the river - so unless he could fly he wouldn't come after me. Had to wonder if that really was a devil's helper or just a trick Old Ned was playing on us. Had to be - even Old Ned couldn't invent *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. And the smell of sulfur and manure - I couldn't get it out of my nostrils. It was awful. No way around it - I had to tell the Sheriff. Might not catch Ned, but just maybe he'd chase him out of the

county for awhile. I took a roundabout way to the Library - past Old Nel's place in Fairfield. Had to see if Ned's flatbed was parked there. Nel was outside smoking her pipe. Spotted me right away, "You tell Jonsey he's fired. I want his paper bag and yours - too." I took off - peddling so fast my feet were a blur. Looked back and Old Nel was up on her feet shaking her fist at me. As I turned the corner - out of the alley - I saw Ned's truck coming in the other end. That ride to the Library seemed like it was the longest one I'd ever taken on my bike - and it was only four blocks. Got lucky. Old Ned didn't follow.

Mother took one look at my clothes and asked, "Where did you get so dirty? Why - you even have dirt in your hair. You can't go to the movie looking like that. What happened to you?" Here I was stuck again. Shouldn't have gone to Mad River without asking. And telling her about the Underground Railroad tunnel with a devil's helper in it was out of the question, "Willy and me found Old Ned at Nel's - his sister in Fairfield. Had to get down or get caught." "Is he still there?" "Was when we got away." Mother telephoned the Sheriff. After she hung up she gave me a scolding look, "Get on home - wash up and change clothes." She handed me my allowance, "Stop by after the movie. I have another Jack London book for you."

I was late for the good seats at the matinee. Willy was all ready inside. I had to stop by Jonsey's and give him the bad news. He took it - all right, but wouldn't come with me to the movies. Said he had a fire to build in his backyard. I told him, "Burn it good and bury it deep - or that witch will cast a spell over you." Willy must have been more scared than I thought he was. Didn't even save a seat for me. I had to sit all the way to the back. It was just as well. The cowboy movie was not to my liking. Gene Autry played his guitar and sang.

Tom Mix had to be turning over in his grave - a real cowboy doesn't do sissy stuff. Waited for Willy to come up the aisle after the lights came on. He didn't look happy, "Not sure I want to get near you. Can't ever tell when something might come up out of the ground and grab me by my foot." I didn't say anything as we walked up the aisle, but outside I did, "Rode by Old Nel's place to see if Ned had returned." "See - that's what I mean. You just had to stick your nose in it. We were almost devil's food this morning and you have to go and tease that witch Old Nel afterwards. Doesn't make sense." "Saw Old Nel and she yelled at me to tell Jonsey he was fired." "Bet she wants our newspaper bags. Did you tell Jonsey?" "Before the movie. Last I saw of him he was building a fire in his backyard. Told him to bury the ashes deep."

Slick didn't have a long attention span, "How'd you like Gene Autry. Better than Old Tom Mix - isn't he? And can he ever sing. Bet he has all the girls crazy for him in Hollywood." "That's the problem. Cowboys should only sing to cows - to keep them from stampeding at night." Just then - Jonsey rode up on his bike. He had a worried look on his face, "Old Nel phoned. Said she wanted my newspaper bag back." I looked at his hands. Still had ashes and dirt on them, "You bury the ashes deep?" "Sure did. Nel still owes me twenty dollars. Will you both ride with me so I can get paid without getting beat up?" Willy whistled under his breath, "Twenty dollars is more than a month's pay." "She's been holding out on me for quite awhile."

Willy looked at me, "I'm not going near her place if Old Ned's about." "My Mother telephoned the Sheriff. Ned will be long gone by the time we get there. Only one thing we have to worry about." "What's that." Don't let that witch get anything that belongs to us or she'll use it to cast a spell. That's why it's important to burn our newspaper

bags." Willy gave me one of those looks - then he remembered what he'd seen this morning. "Okay, but we'll check first to make sure Old Ned's gone. Go home and get your bike. We'll meet at my house in ten minutes."

I rode up. Jonsey gave me a look - like he wasn't sure he wanted to be around me. Knew Willy had told him about our escape and probably told him about *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* too. Jonsey whispered, "If it's true - Nel can keep my twenty dollars. I don't want anything to do with a witch or a devil's helper." I looked over at Willy, "Thought you were going to keep quiet. Said no one would believe us." "Kids will - grownups won't." "Lets get it over with. We'll stop at the entrance to her alley - check her place out and move in - slowly. We rode together - like three cowboys out after rustlers.

We stopped at the alley entrance and took a good look around. Didn't see Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. He had to be long gone. Walked our bikes up the Alley and peeked inside Nel's garage. She was alone. When she saw us she reached in her money apron's front pocket and pulled out two ten dollar bills. Smiled at us, but didn't say a word. I knew Old Ned had been here. The odor of sulfur and manure was still hanging in the air. Jonsey took the two bills in his hand. He was still stuffing them in his pockets as we rode away.

We stopped at the alley entrance and looked back. Willy said, "That was sure strange. She didn't fight with us or yell at us." I Pushed off on my bike, "Sheriff was there. She doesn't want anymore trouble. Jonsey?" "What?" "Get rid of those bills before nightfall." "I'll change them into a twenty at the drugstore." "Got to go to the library. I'll stop by on the way to Sunday School." Willy began to peddle, "Will it do any good?" "Won't do any harm."

I parked my bike in the rack outside the library and walked inside. Mother had *Brown Wolf, and Other Jack London Stories For Boys* waiting for me on the corner of her desk. Stuck my nose in it and didn't look up until Mother turned out the reading lights. I helped her close up and walked home with her - pushing my bike. I was bursting. Had to find out, "Is the Klondike river as full of gold as London says it is? I can't wait until I'm old enough to go up north and pan some for myself." Mother had to laugh, "It is a good book isn't it. The gold rush has been over for forty years. You won't find anything in the Yukon except broken dreams." "There has to be some gold left." "There is, but the large mining companies dig it out with dredges. Don't worry - there'll be enough adventure for you when we move to Concord Township. Are you looking forward to moving to the farm?" "Yes Ma'am."

Before this morning - it would not have been a truthful response. I would miss my friends, but it was beginning to look like they weren't going to miss me. Couldn't go out to Mad River - not with Ned and *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* waiting for me. Couldn't go up to the quarry - not without getting in trouble. My friends were deserting me. Going to Concord Township would be best for all concerned. Mother added, "You'll make new friends. You can join 4H and raise your own sheep." "Will Spot stay at the farm?" "Of course. He won't fit in the city. A Border collie needs room." That was a relief. Old Ned couldn't whip the two of us.

You're probably wondering what happened to Old Ned Smith. And you're not the only one. Sheriff didn't find him at Nel's and we didn't say anything about the cellar. Not to grownups - anyway. Jonsey was the only one that believed us. He traded his two ten dollar bills in for a twenty at the Fairfield drugstore. When it burnt down that night - well we

knew, but what could we do? It was the posters that took our minds off Old Ned. Circus was coming to town the first week of June. Willy and Jonsey were besides themselves. Slick was the most excited, "I hear they hire boys to help raise tents and carry water to elephants." I was a little less excited at the thought of carrying water.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Stay away from *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*.
3. Friends are temporary - family is forever.
4. Think before you act.
5. Then run like the devil is chasing you.



# 11

It was so slow in coming - seemed to me it was going to take forever. The circus posters were up on the telephone poles the last of April - and it hadn't come. Nailed up fresh and bright in red and white and now worn ragged by sun - wind and rain. May? Weather was warm and sometimes hot. Willy and Jonsey were giving me a wide berth. We talked, but wasn't the same. Not since he met *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* coming out of the jaws of hell. And Jonsey? Seemed like he was blaming me for burning the down drugstore when he knew it had to be Old Nel's spell.

I was learning that no one liked messengers carrying bad news. And how could we get in trouble at school? Couldn't get sent down for talking when we shouldn't - when we weren't talking to each other. It could have been our new teacher. Our old teacher left early one Friday afternoon and never returned. Superintendent had to get a temporary to take over our class. Now that was a real shame. Took most of the year, but Willy and me finally got on Teacher's good side and now she was gone. Heard whispers about her having a nervous breakdown. Knew that had to be a lie. No one could ever get nervous in Osborn. Had to be the most laid back place in the world. Liked our new teacher - though. She really cared for us and was she ever good looking. Willy took to following her around after school like a sick puppy. Tried to rub up against her every chance he got. Teacher would laugh at him and give him a little scold, but that didn't stop Slick. He had a one track mind.

First sign of spring meant it was time to oil up our baseball gloves and pound out the pockets stiff from a winter of non use. With the winds of hell blowing at Mad River and the worry of getting hell for going to the quarry - we were trapped in town. So - after school we played softball at the school baseball field or Waterworks Park. When Willy found out the circus was going set up there - he decided we would play nowhere else. He was adamant, "Circus isn't going to sneak into Osborn without me knowing. We either play ball at Waterworks Park or I'm going to sit here and wait for it." That was all right with me. My house was across the tracks from center field. I wouldn't have far to walk after the game was over. I could play a few more innings before my radio serials came on.

As soon as school let out for good - we played softball from sunup to sunset. Jonsey and me got halfway out to our swimming hole twice, but turned around. Maybe if Willy went along we would have, but he wouldn't venture outside town and not anywhere in the direction of Mad River. And he wouldn't go within two blocks of Old Nel's place. Willy said, "I'm not scared - just using my noggin. If the truth be known it was a little bit of both. And I was worried I'd be sent on ahead to Bellpoint before the circus arrived. Didn't happen, but it could have. Mother delayed my departure because she had too much packing to do and Father had to fix up the house to sell it.

A week after school was out an advance crew from the Arkansas Circus came to Waterworks Park. Believe it was a late Thursday afternoon. Willy and me were the first ones to see it. We were waving our arms - trying to volunteer before the circus truck came to a complete stop. The boss had one of those smiles - you know - a smile too good to believe. He was an oily one all right. Willy and I stared at his neck. It was as long as a baby giraffe's. He must have been used

to folks staring at it because he brushed us aside, "Everyone in Arkansas has a long neck - just like mine - so you can quit your starin' and get back in line" We found out later his Arkansas Circus wintered in Hot Springs. His crew called him, "Mr. Promise." And did they ever fawn over him. Did everything, but spread rose petals in his path. He looked right at Willy and me, "Now you boys move outa' my way." He pointed in the direction of the water tower, "Stand over there under those trees while my men measure this area for our tents. When we're finished we'll talk." By now half the boys in town were at our side and Willy and me had lost our advantage of being first.

Mr. Promise stepped off an in one direction and pointed at the ground. One of his men pounded a large stake where his finger pointed. He stepped off again and another stake was driven in. After twenty minutes of this - I could see the outline of the big top with its entrance and exit clearly marked by stakes. After the other tents were outlined - Mr. Promise walked with large strides to where we stood under the trees. Then he wrote our names in red ink with a flourish. Looked up at the sky and stretched his neck, "Tomorrow we'll put up our tents. Be here at six sharp in the morning and you'll have a job." He pointed at me and Willy, "You boys are too small to be of any help for my roustabouts. I have other plans for you. Show up at eight and look for me." He looked the crowd over - like a tiger selecting its meal, "My name is Mr. Promise and my word is as good as gold." He turned around and motioned for his crew to load up. In the blink of an eye they were gone.

Willy looked down at his feet and kicked dirt, "Damn! I wanted to help put up tents." "Not a problem - Mr. Promise said he picked us out special for important work." "Maybe we'll be clowns or animal trainers." "If we are we'll be the ones cleaning out the horse stalls and hauling elephant

manure. Did you see his long neck?" "Said it was because he came from Arkansas." "Wonder what that means?" "Don't know, but his helpers were calling each other cousin. Maybe that has something to do with it." Willy smiled, "He took our minds off what they were doing when he called attention to his neck. He should have been a lawyer." "Maybe he is." "My Dad says our court system is like a circus." "Keep talking like that and you'll be practicing law before we're out of Junior High."

I looked up at the sun, "Got to get home." Willy took off running, "I'll stop by your place before sunup." Kicked some dirt myself on the way home. If we weren't going to put up tents - wasn't much sense in going over tomorrow. Would be fun to see the big top go up though - like watching a city go up overnight. I'd go - all right. Circus is like seeing the world through oil coated lenses. Promise! That's what a circus is all about. Wonder if Willy smelled the odor of sulfur and manure coming from Mr. Promise's circus truck. All I could talk about was the circus at supper. Mother didn't seem excited and Father frowned when I mentioned that Willy and me had a job.

The Arkansas Circus pulled into Waterworks Park while we were going to bed. I heard the noise and looked out, but couldn't see anything. Willy showed up, but not before daylight. It was almost seven-thirty when he walked up to where I waited - on my front porch steps. He sat down beside me, "Slept in." "Not a good way to start a job." "That's why I'm going to be a lawyer. They don't have to show up until ten." "You'll do well - 'a dillar a dollar.'" Willy laughed, "A ten o'clock scholar." We got up and brushed off the seats of our pants. Crossed the tracks with our mouths open. Trucks and canvas were everywhere. Mr. Promise was haranguing a large group of men as they laid canvas where he placed stakes. Willy looked it over, "Looks like it will be

a two ring circus the way the canvas is laid out." "He's putting the smaller tents up first. That one near the entrance has to be for the sideshow. Wonder why they have a truck backed up to it."

We walked around the tent. Part of it - the side that was near the truck was rolled down - hiding the back of the truck. Whatever it was - they weren't letting it out. Willy walked over and looked inside the cab. When he checked the back, we heard a rumble from inside. Willy came away holding his nose, "Smells like *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* is locked up inside." We moved away quick as we could - walking real fast. Not looking where we were going - we bumped into one of the circus roustabouts and looked up - it was Old Ned Smith grinning down at us.

Ned didn't grab my arm and we didn't run. We were too surprised. He spit tobacco juice out of the corner of his mouth, "Want to apologize for locking you up in that cellar. Didn't know it was you. Thought it was someone stealing my copper pipe." I knew he was lying and so did he, but it was one of those times it was better just to say nothing. He smiled, "We captured *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* - so it won't bother you anymore. It's gonna' be in the sideshow. Look here - Johnny Ropp. You don't have to worry about me chasing after you anymore. I've joined the circus and its turned my life around. Show business is in my blood. Now - if you don't go calling the Sheriff on me - you and me can call it quits. I deserve a second chance. Lets shake on it." He held out his hand and we shook.

Quick as a wink he was gone. I shook his hand, but I didn't believe a word Ned said. I gave my word not to tell and I wouldn't. Ned looked back and gave us one of his one tooth grins - then turned and joined the other roustabouts -

raising up a tent. Willy just stood there rooted to the ground like he was an oak tree. I poked him with my elbow, "Just like we figured, "*The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* is in the truck backed up to the sideshow tent. Lets get out of here." Mr. Promise appeared out of nowhere, "You two! Where have you been?" He didn't give us a chance to answer, "Get over to the dining tent and help Cook set up. Do what he says and there'll be two free tickets to the show tomorrow night." We stood there - mouths open. "Didn't you here me. I mean now! Or I'll feed you to the *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* in our sideshow tent!" Me and Willy stumbled all over each other on our way to the dining tent. Mr. Promise was halfway across the circus grounds before we moved ten feet - and we were running. He turned his anger to the roustabouts setting up one of the small tents.

As we walked into the dining tent we were met by two dirty aprons flying through the air - thrown at us by the greasiest looking - hunched over - ugliest man I'd ever seen. "Put them aprons on and get to work haulin' water. Buckets are over there." He pointed with his bony finger and we scrambled. Cook was so dirty and ugly and mean - Slick and me were shaking in our boots. He was so ugly he made Old Ned look handsome. Cook had grease on his hair - his face - his apron and his shoes. And to top it all off - like a cherry on top a sundae - dirt was sticking to the top of the stains. And his cooking area in the dining tent smelled of sulfur. I was beginning to think this circus wasn't from Arkansas - it was from hell.

Cook ordered the roustabouts around as they finished setting up the kitchen tent and yelled at me and Willy while we hauled water to fill his kettles. We were each carrying two - two gallon buckets from the faucet under the water tower to the cooking area. Cook made Willy boil hot dogs and

stir greasy soup while I filled the tin dish washing bins. Lunch for circus folks was greasy soup and hot dogs and we weren't allowed to eat any of it. We bussed the tables and scraped food and soup off the tin plates - like ones I saw in prison movies. Cook made us wash - rinse and dry everything - including the kettles. Nothing really came clean - just less greasy. We hauled the dirty dishwater to the storm drain and hauled clean water back to wash grease out of the tin dish washing bins. Whatever appetite we had was gone. Cook didn't offer thanks - food - or anything. All he did when we finished was yell at us, "Get back here by four or I'll feed you to *Thing!*"

Willy and me stuck around and watched as the main circus tent was raised. Half the boys in town were helping, but not us. The circus elephant - only had one - was harnessed to the center pole. Roustabouts were scattered all around the tent - pulling on ropes to the other poles. Now that was quite a show. Of all the things connected to The Arkansas Circus - raising the big top was the only one that lived up to its promise. I'd seen carrying boards to set up bleacher seats - we did that before high school football season. And seen small tents go up before the Fourth of July carnival, but raising the big top - now that was a memory I'd keep. It was circus at its best.

We stopped by the dining tent before leaving for home. Cook was bent over a kettle mumbling to himself - stirring a mildew green broth. He looked like one of MacBeth's witches hunched over a cauldron. We stayed as far away as we could, but within shouting distance, "Can't work tonight. Parents won't let me. I'll be here to work breakfast and lunch tomorrow." Before Willy could jump in with his excuse - Cook looked at us with eyes - so red they must have come from hell - "You! - yes you! - the skinny one. Stick your nose in this

tent again and you'll be dinner for *thing!* Out! Don't you ever come back." I turned around to leave and couldn't find Willy. Looked up - Willy was halfway across the ball field - running.

Couldn't see any sense in running. I was bushed from doing more work than I'd planned on. Willy had stopped running anyway. He was leaning up against the center field fence. So - I leaned up against it with him, "Looks like I'm not cut out for show business. All the circus people we meet smell of sulfur and need a bath. From the red eyed looks of them most must have come right up out of the depths of hell. Makes me wonder." "Did you see any tails on them?" "No, but the food you cooked has to be greasy enough to make candles out of. From the looks of circus folks clothes - they must never get paid. And if I have to smell the odor of circus food one more time I'll up-chuck breakfast." "Got to get a moving if I'm going to make it back by four." Willy walked to my house with me, "Are you coming back?" "And get fed to *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing?*" "Know what you mean. Odor of sulfur is so strong - makes you wonder if Arkansas is really hell." "The jury is still out on his circus, but not Old Ned. Stop over when you get a break. I'll save supper for you." "Might take you up on it. You sure you're not coming back?" "I'm positive." "Think Old Ned has turned over a new leaf?" "No way!"

I gave Willy a wave as he ran on home. With Waterworks Park directly behind my house - I could see all of the tents - including the sideshow tent as they were raised without leaving home. Mother took one look at me and made me undress before I came in the house. She placed my clothes between her fingers and held them as far away as her arms allowed. She shooed me upstairs, "Soak in the tub until you get rid of that circus sulfur smell. How did you do to get so greasy?"



"Willy and me have a job in the dining tent helping the cook." "You'll not do that anymore. You're not going back. Get cleaned up" I scrubbed my hair and soaked my body until the grease came off my skin made an oil slick on top of the bath water. Should have seen the ring it made. Took five minutes of scrubbing to get rid of it.

I dressed and looked out of my bedroom window. I could see the big top and hear the band warming up for the matinee. A bath and clean clothes made me forget about my failed career as a circus pearl diver. Picked up my Jack London book and tried to get lost in the Yukon, but didn't. I was wondering, "How did Ned catch *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* without being pulled into hell? Couldn't - unless he's part of it. Old Ned must have sold his friend out to the circus." It was something to ponder about.

Tell you what - listening to circus band music is like listening to a siren's song. It was drawing me toward the big top. Mother heard the music - too and stopped me before I ran out the door after supper. She scolded me, "Those are nothing, but Pan Pipes calling you and every other boy in town. That circus smells of so much sulfur - it has to come from the devil." Now - my Mother isn't overly religious. She isn't a fundamentalist anyway. When she smelled things she thought came from devil's work - I listened. And she was right about the circus band music. I had all I could do to resist. When the bandwagon made its trip through town - most every boy in town followed it to Waterworks Park. I went upstairs and looked out through my bedroom window. The big top had standing room only - every seat was filled and folks were crowding the entrance. When Mother wasn't looking I ran outside and across the tracks. It was beyond my power to resist the pull of circus music. The evening show was about to begin. I ran across the ball field - drawn to the big top by Pan Pipe music like I was in a trance.

I walked around to the side entrance of the big top and peeked inside. Mr. Promise was in front of the band with a baton in his hand. His roustabouts were circus musicians. Even Old Ned was playing an instrument - the Pan Pipes. Took all my will power to break away and walk over to the dining tent. Willy was still there, but I could hardly recognize him. He was in the kitchen area - scrubbing the dish washing tins. Bent over - covered with grease and grime - he almost looked like Cook. Looked so bad - I was beginning to worry, "You all right?" "Hey Johnny - I'm getting used to the smell of sulfur." "You look awful. Are you going to stay the course?" "Not sure - it's a lot of work for just one ticket to the circus, but I've wasted one day - so I'll probably stick it out. You shouldn't be here. Cook wasn't kidding when he said he'd feed you to *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*."

Willy looked around, "You know that green stuff Cook was stirring?" "Yeh - it looked like puke covered with mildew." "He's feeding to Ned's red friend." Willy looked around again, "He made a second batch - ten gallons more. Cook told Mr. Promise that it wasn't satisfying it." Willy looked up - jumpy like. I whispered, "You look scared." "Damn right I am. You would be - too." "Why don't you quit?" "What? and leave show business? I'm about done. Wait on me outside and I'll walk home with you."

Before I could answer - Cook came back inside his tent from the truck with an empty kettle - green stuff glued to the outside. He saw me, "I told you I'd feed you to *thing* if you ever came back!" He dropped the kettle and came after me - screaming like a banshee. When I stopped running - I was up against the center field fence - wondering how I got there. Willy caught up ten minutes later, "Had to wash out that kettle. Can't believe the smell. If Cook had caught you he really would have fed you to ..."

Willy was so scared now he couldn't bring himself to say the name of what he'd seen. I asked, "Think Mr. Promise will keep his promise of free tickets?" "Hope so." "He sure is a smooth talker." "Like a politician. I'm learning a lot from him." Willy looked around to make sure no one was listening, "The clowns are in control here." "In control of what?" "The Arkansas Circus. No one ever sees them take their make-up off - or out of costume." "Not even Mr. Promise?" "He must - he's the only one I've seen talking to them. He and Cook are the only ones who feed *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*." "How about Ned?" "Forgot about him." "Do you think he'll try to rob the circus?" "Wouldn't put it past him. Saw him whispering to Old Nel before the show started." She had a grin so big - it makes me wonder." "No honor among thieves?" "Right."

Circus music stopped and we were released from its spell. Willy crossed the tracks with me, "Did you know Mr. Promise leads the band. Has a baton like a real drum major." "Saw him on the way over. There's something about circus music that's pulling all of us to the big top. Look at you and me - we couldn't leave until it stopped." "There's something about this circus that gives it the smell of sulfur." "You mean besides Ned's friend?" "Yes - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* has his own odor of manure and sulfur. The Arkansas Circus has a sulfur odor a thousand years old. It's soaked into everything." "If Ned tries to tangle with those Arkansas clowns - who do you think will come out on top?" "From what I've seen - if those Arkansas clowns were in a horse race they'd cut across the infield grass to win." "Old Ned wouldn't cut across - he'd shoot all the other horses. When it comes to a thieving contest - I'd put my money on Ned." "But what if the clowns aren't human?" "Like *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*?" "Do you think they're relatives?"

Willy took off for home leaving a trail of grease behind him. Bet his mother turned the garden hose on him. And I walked home thinking - which - as I said before is dangerous for someone like me. Circus got to have clowns and in most cases they're human - or close to it. Trouble with clown humor is it gets rough. And sometimes there's a fine line between funny and mean. Take a Punch-and-Judy show. Those puppet shows are full of mean. Judy is always hitting and humiliating Punch. Humor like that can be degrading. What kind of lesson are we supposed to learn from folks hitting each other? Church tells us to turn the other cheek, but circus clowns say if you do you'll get swatted.

Trouble with The Arkansas Circus is you can't tell who's lying - or who's telling the truth. If a circus can't be trusted - then who can be? Maybe Mother is right. It may be better for all concerned to run them out of town. Now this circus made a lot of promises and we believed all of them. An advance man nailed colorful posters to poles and we read them. And he provided stories to all the local newspapers that turned out to be flights of fancy. You know - acrobats from foreign lands - exotic animals - lions - tigers - bears and we believed it. And when The Arkansas Circus pulled into town - Mr. Promise jumped out in front of the band twirling his baton and we believed him. That's the problem with The Arkansas Circus - all promise and no performance.

Circus was in town less than a day and I'd all ready been shown the Egress. I'd worked hard and had nothing to show for it. And now I was going to get what I deserved. When I walked in the door - Mother was waiting. She shook her head, "You know what your punishment is?" "Yes Ma'am - I'm grounded." "And you'll remain that way until those circus devils leave town. Where were you?" "Went over to talk with Willy." "I warned you to stay away. That Arkansas Circus hasn't been in town a full day and all ready our

storekeepers are complaining about unpaid bills and broken promises. Mayor told your Father they're the most unsavory group of flimflam artists Osborn has ever seen. Why that's not a circus - it's - well - it's nothing, but a devil's carnival. Your Grandfather Mac promised to take you to a real circus. Barnum and Bailey's is coming to Columbus in a few weeks." Now that was like hearing I was getting a year full of free cotton candy. Knew I shouldn't, but I'd give it one more try, "Tomorrow - can I go over and watch the show if I don't go near any of the tents?" "Not after your escapade this evening. And the way you looked and smelled when you came home this afternoon - why your clothes looked like you had fallen into a grease pit. Sorry - Johnny, but you're grounded until that devil's carnival leaves town."

I climbed the stairs with my tail between my legs. Now - I wasn't any different from the other boys in town. We were all drawn to the circus the magic music and repelled by the cast of characters who performed in it. As twilight blossomed in a western sky and darkness enveloped Waterworks Park - the lights of the midway sparkled like a million fire flies. A barrel organ played merry-go-round music, but there weren't any hoses. Mr. Promise didn't miss a trick. That music drew throngs of paying customers - all waiting in line to enter his circus sideshow tent.

Alone in my room I looked out on the lights and sounds. I could smell sulfur carried in on the night breeze - an aroma found only in The Arkansas Circus. I could hear the sound of blood curdling screams coming from the sideshow tent. Mr. Promise had raised the canvas covering the back of *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing's* truck. Couldn't understand why folks didn't run away. I could see more of them lining up. I waited alone in my room long after the music stopped - with a sense of longing deep inside a chest. My insides felt like a bottomless pit.

Woke up to the heavy odor of sulfur and manure blowing into my window from the southeast - the direction of The Arkansas Circus sideshow tent. Closed the window - dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. This was going to be a long - long day. I was being held prisoner deep inside the boundaries of my yard. Couldn't play baseball - ride my bike - shoot baskets - or anything fun. All was not lost. I could escape in my mind. I had more than just a few tales left to read in Jack London's book. And after breakfast that's exactly what I did. Tell you what. There is nothing in the world better than a good adventure book. It will transport a boy from the humdrum of this world - out into the wilds of the unknown. Didn't stop reading until lunch and then - only took time enough for my Ohio peanut butter and milk special.

Willy drug himself across the tracks mid-afternoon. Mother wouldn't let him inside the kitchen. She held her nose and pointed toward our backyard pump. Felt sorry for poor Willy. He smelled like he fell into a tar pit and dried off in a manure pile. I pumped and he washed up - not minding that cold well water soaked into his skin - clothes and shoes. Mother took a good look at him, "Why Willy - you look like a little old man - all hunched over - and your clothes - they've gone from needing a good soaking to the throw away stage." "Yes Ma'am and it's worse than that. After working in the circus kitchen - I can't smell a thing anymore." "Are you hungry?" "Yes Ma'am. Cook wouldn't feed me, but I wouldn't eat circus food if I was starving."

Mother went inside to fix Willy a quick lunch. He kept on washing his skin like it was still dirty - which it wasn't - just greasy. He sat down on the back step and devoured a peanut butter sandwich - washing it down with milk - a lunch just like mine. He wiped the milk from the top of his lip, "You still interested in what's going on?" "Sure am. What's

Old Ned up too?" "Got fired this morning for mouthing off at Mr. Promise about not getting paid." "Where'd he go?" "No place. Came back an hour later with his tail between his legs. Mr. Promise took him back." "Did he get paid?" "No, but from what I understand no one has. Mr. Promise and him drove the truck with ... you know what in it to the next town." "Pounding in the stakes where they're going to place their tents?" "Yes and they're striking the tents they won't need for tonight's show. Only three left - dining - sideshow and big top."

I waited for Willy to throw out his washback, "Did you get a ticket for tonight's show?" "Asked for it and almost got my head torn off. Mr. Promise said I'd get it as soon as I finished helping Cook clean up after supper." "Sure wish I could see it, but Mother won't let me go anywhere near that circus. She's certain it's a devil's carnival." "She's right you know. I saw one of the clowns partially out of costume. It had a tail. And it's whispered that they fed one of the roustabouts to *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. And it's beginning to rumble and roar all the time. Don't think the bars on the back of the truck will hold it long." Willy drug himself back across the tracks. I went upstairs so I could have a better view. Didn't want to be caught outside - not if *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* got loose.

Willy stopped by after supper on his way home to clean up. And did he ever need cleaning. Smelled like the devil and looked worse, "What happened to you?" "Cook made me clean the inside of the ovens." "You hungry?" Willy turned a nice shade of green, "Don't mention food to me. You can't believe the stuff Cook feeds to the clowns. Ain't fit food for humans or dogs to eat." "Did you get your ticket?" "Not yet. Each time I bring the subject up - Cook threatens to feed me to *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*." "Bet you don't ever

get one." "Don't know. If one of us boys has one - he's making himself scarce. Mr. Promise and Ned came back with *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* locked up in the back of a circus truck. I could tell it'd been fed, but it's moaning like it didn't get what it wanted. Got to get home and clean up to be back in time. Mr. Promise told us all to meet him at the entrance to the big top ten minutes before the final show. Said he'd take care of us."

I sat by the window in my bedroom and looked out on the tents. Wasn't like last night. Music had lost its magic charm. Didn't feel it pulling me toward the circus. The Arkansas Circus must only be good for one night stands. The dining tent was all ready struck. Last show must have begun. The sideshow tent was coming down and there was a rumble - then a roar and then a scream that would shatter glass. And I knew it was on the loose. Willy flew across the tracks behind my house like he was possessed by the devil. He came around to my front porch, "Mind if I atay around here with you for awhile?" "Did it get loose?" "I heard the sound of metal bars spreading and breaking - I didn't hang around." "Didn't you see anything?" "Too dark, but I could hear it dragging something that was screaming." "Which direction?" "Away from here - up the hill toward Seven Corners." "Ned's friend is taking his dinner out into the country." "Then we'll be home free."

We sat and listened, but didn't hear anything. I asked Slick, "Didn't you get to see the show?" "Willy's face went from chalk white to beet red, "You were smarter than all of us. Mr. Promise didn't show up when he said he would. When me and the other boys tried to walk in - Old Ned and a group of circus thugs got between us and the entrance. They were carrying Billy clubs. Chased all of us away - yelling, "Get out or we're goin' to war." Had to be at least thirty of us that got stiffed. Wouldn't even let us peek through the



opening. They sure left in a hurry. Soon as an act was finished - it loads up in a circus truck and drives away." "Are you going to do anything?" "How can we?" I thought a bit, "You're right. Can't do anything. The Arkansas Circus has its own laws and they're above ours." "We can't touch them. Some of the bigger kids tried and they got threatened. Learned a lot though - so it wasn't a total loss." "Like what?" "Promise everything - give nothing and threaten those who try to interfere." "How about Mr. Promise?" "My hero! Got us to do all the dirty work and then stiffed us. He gets all the credit and his workers take all the blame." "Ought to run for office." "What? And give up show business?" We both laughed and it was to be our last one.

No! It wasn't *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. Don't know what happened to it. Must have devoured another roustabout because no one from town was missing. Fact is - I left for Bellpoint at the end of the week. I would have been down in the dumps, but Grandfather Mac made me forget about leaving my friends. He had tickets for the greatest show on earth - Barnum and Bailey's was going to be at the State Fairgrounds in Columbus. Willy and Jonsey? We talked, but to tell you the truth - they weren't too keen on being around me. What with Ned and his devil's helper on the loose. All they found was a blood spot and some hair where it fed. Darn thing ate bones and all. Willy didn't even come over to say good-by. Said he couldn't. Mumbled something about me being a Jonah. Our house was in turmoil anyway. What with everyone sorting and packing to move. Didn't phase me. Except for my bike - sled and bat - everything I owned fit into three boxes. With all the commotion - I was getting excited. Couldn't wait to go to Barnum and Bailey's circus. Had to be the greatest show on earth. At least that's what the posters said and they wouldn't lie - would they? They were coming to Dayton right after they left Columbus. So nothing happened - not until Friday when I left Osborn for good.

Afternoon trip north to Bellpoint was slower than molasses in January. Just Father and me, but I got to ride up in the front seat. Would have been a dull ride, but I thought about Barnum's circus and it helped to pass the time. Posters said it was so big it had its own train and more elephants than four zoos. It was the ultimate circus - the big time big top. If Barnum's Circus was a dream - it would be all in rainbow colors. Stopped by Grandfather Ropp's Concord Township farm to leave my bicycle - sled - bat and three boxes off. My room was going to be the one next to the attic - the one Father used when he was a boy. Farmhouse was in as much turmoil as our house in Osborn. Grandmother was still sorting things out to take to town. She put a smile on my face. All of the neat things I liked in the attic were going to stay. I'd have all those adventure books to read when snow was on the ground - or when it rained. And when I looked out from my window - I could see down the lane to the Scioto River.

On our way to Bellpoint looking at that river reminded me about the raft I was going to build. I'd have to get right to it. We were moving into the farmhouse in ten days. We arrived in time for supper, but Father didn't stay. He had to drive back this evening while there'd still be enough light for safe driving. I was on pins and needles all evening. Couldn't understand why I was the only one excited about the circus. Told Grandfather - as if he didn't all ready know, "Barnum's circus has acrobats - men on the flying trapeze - clowns - elephants - cowboys - everything." "Seen more than one or two - Johnny. I'll leave circus excitement to you young ones. Most of the ones I've seen are just a notch or two above carnivals. Now Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show - that was something to see. He even brought along Sitting Bull - the one who did Custer in. Did you know Custer was from Michigan?" "No - Sir." "Fool Michigander should have stayed out of the west. No - I don't care much

for circus. Just as soon take the train to Cincinnati and see a Mae West movie." Grandmother overheard and cuffed Grandfather behind the ear. Then she whispered to him and they both smiled. Mae West had to be someone real important. I'd have to remember to ask Grandfather about her movies when we drove to the circus tomorrow.

I was so excited about going to the circus I couldn't concentrate on anything after supper. Strolled down to the river bank, but the Scioto was too high. It was running too fast for carp to be sleeping near the edge. Spring run-off wasn't complete yet. If I did get that raft built - wouldn't want to ride the Scioto. I'd never survive a ride over the dam. Tried skipping rocks, but that wasn't any good. Current took them down after a few hops. Gave up and walked back up the lane - kicking dirt - picking up stones and throwing them at nothing.

Sat out back near the pump and looked up at the stars. Without a moon and city lights stars stuck out like midway electric lights. Will and Jake were gone and I'd moved away from Willy and Jonsey. I'd lost all my friends and I'd soon be working on the farm. Wasn't certain wanted to grow up as soon as fate made me. More fun being a boy. Thought about *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. Ned had lost control. Grandmother called for me, "Come inside, Johnny. You need your rest if you want to go to the circus with your Grandfather in the morning." Undressed and couldn't get to sleep - so I counted elephants instead of mildew spots on the ceiling. I was all the way up to seventy-six big fat gray marching pachyderms by the time I drifted off.

Woke up late - past eight and ran down the back stairs for breakfast. Grandmother had oatmeal waiting, "You'll need food that sticks to your ribs if you're going to the circus. I've packed a lunch for you and your Grandfather. You're

going to go early so you can watch them water the elephants." Grandfather poured another cup of coffee, "We'll leave about eleven." Grandmother wasn't finished with her instructions, "Now - Mac don't buy Johnny any of the greasy circus food. Remember when you took our children to the circus? They were sick for a week after you fed them." Couldn't go outside. Might get dirty. So I sat around the house reading magazines like the Saturday Evening Post - Collier's - Farmer's Almanac - Life - among others. Walked to the door a dozen times before the clock on the mantle chimed eleven bells. I was seated up front waiting when Grandfather climbed into his Plymouth roadster.

We drove down River Road past Grandfather Ropp's farm - the old Oler Church - Columbus Zoo - O'shaughnessey Dam and Whiskey Roadhouse. Turned east toward Worthington on an empty country road to High Street. I had to ask, "Why didn't the circus put up their tents next to Ohio Stadium?" "Tracks don't come near the University. Fairgrounds is on a spur." That made sense. We had a railroad spur behind our house in Osborn. As we drove south on High Street - I remembered Mae West. Had to ask, "Why would you rather see Mae West than the circus and why do you take the train to Cincinnati to see her movies? We have movie theaters here." He laughed, "You are growing up. Cincinnati is the only town in Ohio that will show Mae's movies. You have to be over twenty-one to buy a ticket. If I'm still around when you're twenty-one - I'll take you with me. Mae West is quite a looker - with a great sense of humor. With Mae West - what you see is what you get. With the circus - what you see is what you don't get." That didn't make any sense to me - being twenty-one before you could buy a ticket. I knew Grandfather would be around when I reached twenty-one, but Mae West might not. I'd have to find a picture of her. The main difference between me and Grandfather's circus expectations is that he knew I would be disappointed and I didn't.

As we turned into the fairgrounds I could see the circus train and smell the sawdust - among other things. But I did not smell sulfur and Grandfather told me the clowns weren't in charge. Had to be a better deal than The Arkansas Circus. And the big top was huge. Had to hold at least three rings. My eyes were like saucers, "This is the biggest circus in the world! Look at all those tents and elephants and giraffes. Bet Barnum delivers on his promises. Does it still have Jumbo and Tom Thumb?" "Not anymore - neither one is alive. But when I was your age they were and both were famous. So famous - when anyone traveled to New York City all they had to say was they were visiting the elephant. And we all knew it meant New York City. That Barnum was quite a showman." "Is he dead - too?" "He passed on many years ago. We're here early. We can pick our spot. I'll find shade so we can stay cool while we eat Mom's lunch."

Grandfather knew I was anxious to see elephants being watered and anything that was free - so we walked through the animal tents first. I saw enough elephants for a movie stampede and camels for a caravan. Didn't get to see the big cats. Had to pay to see them. Had to pay extra to see most anything. So we didn't. Grandfather paid for tickets to get in and wouldn't pay a penny more. I was getting hungry until we walked by the dining tent. We were greeted by the rancid odor of onions simmering in cooking grease - kept long beyond its useful life. Grandfather held his nose, "It will take a strong stomach to eat this food. It smells like their cook is deep frying the inside of a garbage truck." "All circuses must smell the same. This odor reminds me of The Arkansas Circus." Grandfather looked puzzled, "Don't believe I've ever heard of that one." "It was in Osborn at Waterworks Park last week. I helped the cook for a free ticket, but he stiffed all of us boys. I came home so greasy - Mother wouldn't let me go back." "Is that the one she called the devil's workshop?" "Yes - Sir."

Grandfather took my arm and hurried me away from the dining tent, "Lets walk a bit before we eat lunch. Need to clean out my senses from the grease and onion smell. Sorry that you won't get to see all the animals. Looks like most of them are in the sideshow tent. You can see them when the circus starts - inside the big top." "Is it worth the money to see the bearded lady and the two headed calf." "It isn't worth the dime they'll charge you to get in. You're learning - Johnny. Lets walk in the shade." Didn't tell Grandfather. After seeing *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* anything else would be tame.

Took a twenty minute walk to get the odor of circus onions and grease out of our system. We made it back to the Plymouth roadster a little bit before one o'clock. We were no longer alone. The State Fairground's parking lot was almost full. Running boards are a great place to sit while eating a picnic lunch of cold fried chicken - potato chips and potato salad. I was so full it didn't matter that cotton candy wasn't going to be on my menu this afternoon. Even better - Grandfather shared his Thermos of coffee and cream. I helped rinse our plates and utensils under a livestock barn faucet. Grandfather placed them back in the basket - leaned up against the running board and took an early afternoon nap. The circus wouldn't be a good place to get athletes heart. I stayed awake - too excited to sleep and too young to get athletes heart.

I wandered over to watch the elephants eat and drink. Barnum had so many I couldn't count them on both hands and both feet. Grandfather was awake by the time I wandered back, "Where were you, Johnny? I was beginning to worry." "Went over to watch the elephants get fed. Sure has a bunch of them." "Are you ready to see the circus?" I was two steps in front of Grandfather and gaining ground. We were so early for Barnum's circus matinee performance we didn't have

to wait in line. Purchased our tickets and walked right in. Tent was big and warm with the June sun shining straight down. We walked past the first ring - then the second ring - and then the third ring - to our reserved seats - high up in the bleachers at the far end. Looked out. We'd only get to see two rings clearly.

Inside the tent - ticket sellers were trying to get us to upgrade our seats to the bleachers in the center section. Grandfather would have none of it, "Oldest trick in the world - Johnny - bait and switch. Watch closely. You can learn a lot from a circus. Barnum might have the greatest show on earth, but underneath you'll find the larceny of a cheap carnival." "Learn about the larceny - so I won't get taken the next time?" "Exactly!" Grandfather had seen this scam many times - so we sat in the far end - where we were told to sit and didn't budge.

Performance was supposed to begin at two o'clock, but it didn't. When the seat scam was over a new one began. Candy butchers - don't know why they're called that - streamed through the audience holding boxes of circus candy high. The pitch went like this, "A prize in every box - diamond rings - hundred dollar bills - everyone is a winner." I watched one person after another purchase a box and pull out a marvelous prize - hold it up high - shouting, "I won! I won!" That was all it took. I had to have a box of that candy. I had a dollar burning a hole in my pocket. Reached my hand into my front pocket and felt Grandfather's hand on my arm." No - Johnny. Don't waste your money." "But I might win a hundred dollars." "Keep your eye on the winners. They're shills. When the show starts they'll disappear." "I've learned my second lesson?" "That you have. They work for the circus. There's nothing in the boxes, but carnival junk. The only winner is the circus." I wasn't all that convinced and it took all my willpower not to pull out my dollar. But - when

the first act began and the spotlight came on, Grandfather's warning came to pass. First one - and then another - and then another - and then the last winner - all left their seats and disappeared under the bleachers. I saw one crawl out from under the tent. Wasn't all bad. After the petty larceny was over - Barnum put on a show that was worth the price of admission.

My only complaint was the elephants. And there was enough for a small stampede. The trainers brought them in at the far end - paraded them around the tent and parked them in front of us. Never saw so many elephants' back ends in my life. And wouldn't you know it - that's right - one of them did just that - and the odor was beyond anything I had ever experienced. Smelled almost as bad as Ned's devil's helper. Couldn't believe the lion tamer. Wouldn't catch me in his cage with only a whip and chair - and holding the chair in front to keep the cats kept from coming after me. Wondered if it would work on Ned's friend. Probably not. It would eat the chair and whoever was holding it. Grandfather touched my arm, "Watch." He pointed toward a cannon. It exploded in smoke and flames. Out of the barrel flew a human cannonball across the top of the tent. He landed in the net above us. My mouth was open in amazement, "He's crazier than the lion tamer. If he'd missed by a couple of feet there'd be a new hole in Barnum's tent.

The men and ladies on the flying trapeze performed at the top of the tent. Now I wanted to do that - too. Of all the things I saw - they were the best. Elephants scared me. One misstep and I'd be jelly. And they ran around the tent - out of control. All in all - I enjoyed Barnum's circus - except the parade around the tent. Didn't seem to serve any purpose at all. Looked like they no longer held one outside to lure people in, but had to have one - so they held it inside. And they had two of them - as if one wasn't enough.



By the time the last act ran out of the tent - I was filled with wonder. It was a great show. I was bubbling over, "Except for the two parades - Grandfather - that was the best show ever. Thank you for taking me!" Grandfather was more practical. Of course he'd seen Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. "Johnny - did you notice that only half the seats were filled? Either we're having hard times or the petty larceny is driving folks away."

Thought came into my head - like turning on a light switch. It was no wonder Ned liked the circus. These were his kind of people. I mentioned this to Grandfather and he expressed surprise, "Ned Smith joined a circus? Good - maybe we'll be rid of him for good. You've seen the greatest show on earth. Think you can catch a batch of crawdads? Might go fishing at my favorite hole - the one below the dam later in the week." "Yes Sir I will" I'd been to the circus and seen my elephant. It was time to build a raft.

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. Stay away from *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*.
3. Promise is always better than performance.
4. There's a sucker born every minute.

## 12

Something very tiring about sitting in a tent on a hot summer day and watching a circus. It seemed late to me when we got back to Bellpoint, but it was barely five o'clock and I arrived dog tired. Went to bed early - not more than an hour after supper. Didn't wake up until the sun was shining through my bedroom window next morning. Still - I was up soon enough and almost out the door when Grandmother stopped me, "Whoa there young man. Where do you think you're going? And those aren't your Church going clothes. Get upstairs and into something decent to wear to Sunday School. Anyone who has been as close to that devil's handmaiden as you and your Grandfather were to Mr. Barnum's circus needs more than a full dose of preaching to cleanse their souls. And after Sunday School I expect to see you in Church."

Grandmother was right and I knew it. I could feel it in my bones. My mind was worrying on *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* when it should have been on going to Church. Devil can do that to me - you - anyone. Grandmother believed and rightly so - that circus wasn't more than a second rate - down and dirty carnival. And I'd found out the larger the big top the more sophisticated the flimflam games were. I knew going to Sunday School once wouldn't rub out the devil's thoughts. Add in Church and two for one might be about right.

Changed into Church clothes and bounded downstairs for breakfast. Grandmother had eggs - bacon and pancakes on my plate. I had a full stomach - going to Church clothes on and was carrying my Bible for protection when Grandmother stopped

me again, "Johnny - I won't abide with that. Anyone carrying a bible to Church is doing it just for show. Church has one for everyone in Sunday School and another one in the rack on the back of the pew. Anyone carrying a bible to Church is a devil's disciple. No decent person would and you'll not start now. Carrying a Bible to Church - only a damned fool or a self seeking politician would be seen doing that." This was not the beginning of a good day for me. Had a chance to do two things right and came up with two things wrong. Put that Bible back in the bookcase and scurried off before I made another mistake.

Tell you what - I listened real careful today. Our Sunday School lesson was about Jonah. That's the name Willy called me. After an hour of Sunday School and two hours of Church I felt sufficiently punished. If I had a devil inside me - he was too. Sunday noon dinner meant more fried chicken than anyone could hold. Rested a bit before changing out of my Church clothes. Then I climbed up into the livery stable loft. If I couldn't find boards to my liking at the Old Mill - there were still plenty stacked up against the wall. Had to remind myself - if I had to use Grandfather's I'd attract too much attention. Unless I was desperate - had to use the wood I found at the Old Mill. Climbed down out of the loft and checked Grandfather's work bench. He had six saws of differing types hanging on the wall above it. I'd need a rough cut to saw the logs - so I took the smaller of two down and sharpened it. Nothing worse than a dull saw.

Now I was ready to float my logs downstream to the Old Mill. No way to hide a saw as big as the rough cut I was carrying - so I circled around out back. Cut across the fields following the outline of the old road - the one that had never been built. Worked - too. Found my way to Mill Creek Road without being seen. Walked upstream - whistling a tune under my breath. Walked right on past the Old Mill. I

was in luck - there wasn't a sign of Old Ned. In fact - no one had been around here. Old Ned's lean-too was scattered about where the law had torn it down. Found all four logs were right where I left them. Bramble was beginning to grow around. Knew it was time to send them downstream or I'd have to abandon them. Couldn't saw them here - not with all the weeds and mud. I needed something solid to rest them on. Better to float them downstream on the creek and cut them into eight foot sections at the Old Mill.

I pushed - pulled and broke the log closest to the creek loose. Used a branch as a lever and rolled it down the bank until it plopped into the water. Followed it downstream as it bobbed along. When it butted up against the concrete bridge - I leaned over and steered it toward shore. Rolled it up on the bank to the Old Mill. Walked back upstream and repeated the process again and again - until all four logs were out of the water and up by the Old Mill. I didn't have to worry about losing them downstream. Concrete bridge was poured from the bottom up. Water flowed over the top - like a small dam. Wasn't deep enough for my logs to float over the top.

Now came the hard part - pulling the logs up to the Old Mill's foundation. Rolled them up using a plank as a lever. Being on short grass made the difference. If it had been mud - I'd never got them up to the foundation. I rolled them up on it - one by one. I rested a bit - feeling quite proud of myself. Measured an eight foot section and began sawing away. I was worn to a frazzle by the time I finished sawing my fourth and last log. Looked up - standing in a pile of sawdust at least a foot deep - at the early summer sun. It was kissing the top of the trees along the banks of Old Mill Creek. Trimming and notching would have to wait until Monday morning. If I didn't leave now - I'd be late for supper and I was hungrier than a hibernating bear.

Hung up the saw over the work bench and tried to sneak in the back door, but Grandmother was waiting for me. She shook her head and smiled, "I know a young man that needs a bath. Where have you been? We ate supper without you." "Up Mill Creek. Lost track of the time." "Supper's waiting for you in the oven. Careful - that plate is hot." She was right - plate felt hotter than a red poker that had been left in the fireplace too long. Had to use a towel to remove it from the oven rack. It was worth it - though. Plenty of leftover chicken - mashed potatoes and gravy.

Grandmother sat down with me while I ate. She asked me, "Have you seen any sign of Ned Smith?" Couldn't duck a direct question, "He was working in The Arkansas Circus as a roustabout." "Is that the one your Mother called a devil's carnival?" "Yes Ma'am." "Did he have a huge hairy red thing that looked like half-man half-goat with him." "Don't know if it was with him. It was in the circus sideshow until it escaped." "It escaped?" Didn't want to mention the missing roustabouts. No one reported them and no one would believe me anyway. "Yes Ma'am and that's about all I know." She picked up my plate and rinsed it, "Keep an eye out for Ned Smith. There's a report that he's come back. He was seen near Dublin. If you see him around - run on home." I was about to tell her that me and Old Ned were quits - even shook hands on it, but thought better of it. No one would believe that either - not even me.

Tried to listen to the Sunday night radio programs, but my mind was on my raft. My head was swimming with plans for tomorrow. First thing I'd do is select the wood I needed for the floor and sides of my raft at the Old Mill. If there wasn't enough - or it wasn't the right type - which I wasn't sure of - I'd have to haul boards from the loft. And I'd need two saws - a rough cut and one for finishing - a hammer - nails and a wood chisel. I'd need at least four - maybe

eight two-by-fours to bind the logs together. I'd need them before I notched the logs if I wanted to make them fit right. And I'd have to notch the logs at the ends and middle to make sure the raft wouldn't collapse.

Time was running short. Scioto was running high and fast, but Mill Creek wasn't. The water in the creek would be down to rocks in less than two weeks. I had to launch soon - or my raft wouldn't float downstream. By the time I had what I was going to do in the morning sorted out - it was time to go to bed. Tired - I was about to drag myself upstairs when Grandmother pointed to the kitchen. She had a washtub full of hot water waiting and a clean pair of pajamas in her hand, "Wash your hair good. Don't want that sawdust all over my kitchen floor. What are you building? A tree fort?" What I had could be anything - so I said, "Yes Ma'am." After a bath - I felt better, but I still dropped off when the lights went out - without counting anything.

Building a raft is hard work and my body knew it. I slept in. Grandfather had all ready left for work. I ran down the back stairs to the kitchen. I was the only one there. Grandmother was in the back yard working at her washing machine. Breakfast was on the table. Ate quietly and stuck my head out the door, "Do you need help turning the paddles on the washing machine?" "Don't mind if you do." Turning the paddles is hard work, but turning the crank for the mangler was fun. Mangler is two rubber rollers that squeeze water out of the clothes. Don't know why I'm telling about it. Everyone knows that. I carried the wash basket along while Grandmother hung the clothes on the line to dry. She placed her hand on my shoulder to steady herself more than once. Got me worried. Knew Doc was stopping by more than he used too. Stayed around as long as I was needed - so it was late in the morning - almost noon before I got back to the Old Mill.

First thing I did was look for two-by-fours and then planks. Found all the two-by-fours and planks I needed and then some. Remembered my Father's motto. The one he had hanging up on the wall in Wood Shop at the high school -

### *Measure Twice - Saw Once.*

So I did just that before I notched the logs. Good thing I did. The Mill's old two-by-fours weren't all the same dimension. Measured the two-by-fours by laying them on top the logs and making a mark with my finishing saw. Sawed the notch and chiseled out the wood on the first log. Checked it to make sure the two-by-four would fit before sawing a notch on the second log. I sawed - chiseled - measured again - and again and again until each log was notched to match its two-by-fours. Looked up to check the sun and knew it was time to head home or I'd be late for supper. Stored my tools away in the livery stable and made it through the back door - just in time to join my Grandparents for supper.

Grandmother took one look at me and shook her head, "Shake the sawdust out of your hair in the back yard and wash up at the pump before you come in." I did as she asked and came in all glistening with cold well water. She dried my hair with her dish towel, "Why in the world are you building a tree house?" That made me more than a little nervous. Grandmother had asked the same question this morning. She knew I was up to something and I knew if I told her about the raft - well you know - so I said, "Yes Ma'am," again. "Got the floor started." What I'd done so far could still be part of a tree house. Be the dickens to get those logs up in a tree though. I'd need a pulley and block and tackle to do that. I blushed, but didn't show it. My face was red from work out in the sun. She clucked at me like a worried mother hen, "Be careful - now. I don't want to explain to your

Mother how you fell out of a tree and broke an arm." Had to smile at that. I'd all ready done it. Thought I could fly like Superman. Jumped off our garage when I was younger and broke my arm. Flew all right - for about two seconds before I hit the ground.

Grandmother checked me over, "Clean enough for a waggly tailed boy. Come on in and sit down - we're ready to dine. We're having your Grandfather's favorite - meat loaf." Now that slowed me down. Meat loaf is not my favorite, but if you put enough ketchup on it I would eat anything - except liver. Willy hated liver - too. Slick was certain, "Ketchup won't work. Nothing in the world can disguise the taste of liver. Why - just the smell of it makes my throat close up and mouth go dry. Best thing anyone can do with liver is feed it to a dog." Mother gave up trying to cook liver for us. Father wouldn't eat it, but my sisters did. Willy's Mom kept right on cooking liver. She always made me stay over to eat when they had it. Thought it would make Willy eat his. Didn't though. I ate a little bit to be polite and Willy slipped his under the table to their dog when his Mom wasn't looking. Dog almost died of overeating. Meat loaf isn't like liver. It can be disguised. Mother mixed pineapple in hers and Grandmother used barbecue sauce. Me - I poured ketchup all over it. Even with all my doctoring I could only down two slices.

Grandfather called me into the parlor after supper. My first thought was he'd found out about my raft. He filled his pipe - packed it and lit it. He took a puff. Smoke curled to the ceiling, "I have good news for you young man. Sheriff phoned me this morning at work. Asked me to stop by on the way home and pick up a check for you." He handed it to me. I looked at it and gasped, "Four-thousand eight-hundred dollars. Why that's more money than there is in the whole County." "May seem like it. What do you want to do



with it?" "Give it to Father. Said we'll have to borrow money for a new tractor. Now - maybe he won't have too." "Maybe, but you'll need it if you want to go to college." "So will my sisters." "I see your point."

Popped into my head - so I asked, "Did the Sheriff tell you where Ned Smith is?" "Said he's been seen around Dublin. Stole a day's receipts from the circus he was working for when it was in Circleville. Didn't get charged though. That circus was as crooked as he was. Law was going to close it down, but couldn't find it. Not one trace - except for an odor of sulfur on the ground where it had been. Disappeared right off the face of the earth. Stay on your toes - Ned may come around Bellpoint. Circus he worked for had to be a strange one. Sheriff said it was run by Arkansas clowns. No one ever saw them out of their makeup and costumes. Met their match when they came up against Ned Smith." I handed the check back to Grandfather. Almost felt a bit of pride in Old Ned. He had challenged the devil to a thieving contest and won. Old Ned needed jail time, but I knew he'd never get what he deserved. Anyone who can beat the devil at his own game - law didn't stand a chance. I went to bed early with more than a raft on my mind.

I was the first one up Tuesday morning. Grandmother wasn't up and that was unusual. Now I was certain she wasn't well. Not like her to sleep in like this. She joined me in the kitchen soon after - though. I had the fire going in the Cast-iron range - so she went right to work making coffee. No one in the whole wide world can cook breakfast like my Grandmother. Not even my Mother. She fixed oatmeal and even gave me a cup of coffee - mixed half-and-half with milk. I ate all she gave me and then some. She stopped me as I was going out the door, "Clean up before you come in the house this afternoon. Sawdust is hard to get off the floor." "Yes - Ma'am - I will."

I picked up my tools and a pocket full of nails from the livery stable and ran all the way to the Old Mill. Wouldn't be long before I was rafting down Mill Creek. Two-by-fours were where I left them - all ready inserted in their notches. I nailed each one down - using two nails at each notch. Took twenty-four long nails - almost all I had. Stepped back to admire my progress. Pulled and pushed on it to see if it would collapse. It was as solid as Grandfather's brick outhouse. Looked up at the sun. It was at twelve o'clock and it was time for lunch. I needed more nails - anyway. Walked home in the shade along Mill Creek Road. Bellpoint looked as sleepy as I'd ever remembered. No one was about - not even a car.

I opened the back porch screen door as quiet as I could. Grandmother was in her room asleep. I made my Ohio special lunch of peanut butter - I won't bore you with the details and hurried back to the Old Mill. My next step was - measure and cut boards for the top or deck of my raft. Didn't take as long as building the bottom. Boards were easier to cut and I didn't need the extra long nails to hammer them into the two-by-fours. Stepped back to admire my work again. Had to admit - it was as good as Tom Sawyer could do. I had to build a centerboard for underneath and sides for the deck. Time to build the centerboard was now - while I could turn it over - so I did. When I had to turn it back over - that wasn't as easy.

Had to sit down to catch my breath. Then it hit me, "I'll need something to steer it with - besides the pole I found to push it away from the banks. Now I have two things left to do and supper time is nigh." I looked at my hands. They were dirty - so I imagined everything else was too. I had to be quite a sight with sawdust and dirt from top to bottom. Stripped down to my under shorts and jumped into the creek below the bridge. Almost came right back out like a

cork - water was that cold. Started to climb out when I remembered Willy's motto, "Repeat a thing often enough and it will come true - even if it isn't." So I ducked under three times and came out clean. I air dried my skin and shook the dirt and sawdust from my clothes. Checked the sun. It was ten - fifteen feet the tree tops. I'd be back in time for supper.

Strolled along Mill Creek Road - kicking stones. Almost jumped out of my skin when I heard a rumble that sounded like Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. Hid down in the trees along the bank until I discovered the rumble was coming from the other side of the creek. Whoever it was - couldn't see me. Got me moving though. I ran all the way to Grandmother's back porch door. She heard me coming and held it open, "Now that's better. You look clean enough to eat at the table." "What's for supper?" "Leftover meat loaf." I was on the home stretch. I might even launch my raft tomorrow and ride it downstream the next day. Even a meat loaf meal couldn't dampen my spirits. After dinner I walked down the lane to the Scioto River and skipped a few rocks. Sat on the log we pushed up last year. Couldn't help but wish that Will and Jake were here to share my adventure.

Made it to the Old Mill early in the morning. If I was going to nail on sides - I needed to install something to nail them too. Sawed two-by-fours into three foot lengths and nailed them into the logs as corner posts and two each along the sides and back. Sure would have liked to build a cabin, but there wasn't enough room. Sideboards would have to do. I used the flooring from the Old Mill - that Ned had pulled up for his lean-too - to finish off the sideboards. Took my time and made sure everything fit tight. Wasn't watertight, but it would take a sharp blow to dislodge them. Left the back open for a rudder and a way to get back on board if I fell into the creek.

Sideboards were on and I was done for the day. So I sat down on the foundation and tried to think up a way to steer my raft. If I made a rudder - how was I going to attach it? Maybe I wouldn't need one. Had a seven foot pole I was going to use to push my raft away from the bank - rocks and grass. I could use it to come back upstream - if the current wasn't too strong. Looked up at the sun. It was getting late. I wasn't going to have time to launch my raft today. Looked at my hands and arms. Brushed my hair and sawdust fell out. So I stripped down and jumped into the creek. I bobbed my head under three times and thought I came up clean. Stood there - water up to my neck and looked at my raft, "Not a bad piece of work for a boy my age." And work it was, but I wasn't tired - to me it was fun. I dressed - wondering, "How do I attach a rudder?"

Supper should have been perfect and it would have been if it wasn't for beets. Cooked - sliced or cold - beets are slimy. If you don't chew too long they'll slide down and be done with. Trouble is - beets take up room that should be used for good stuff - like roast pork - gravy - mashed potatoes - you know - real food. The kind that makes your stomach smile and mine did - once I dodged the beets. After supper I climbed the ladder to the livery stable loft. Had to find a piece of wood to make my rudder. I could figure out how to attach it later. Sorted through the wood stacked along the back wall and found exactly what I was looking for. Carried it down below to Grandfather's work bench. Now - all I had to do was build a holder - if I could figure out what one looked like.

I wandered down the lane to the log on the banks of the Scioto. Sat and thought and then sat and didn't. When I wasn't thinking it came to me - the raft Tom Sawyer rode - it had a rudderstock - didn't have a ship's rudder. Stood up and stretched my arms and walked home. My problem was

solved. All I needed was a sternpost to attach it too. I'd build it in the morning. Opened the back porch door and saw it on the table. A cereal bowl full of cold beets with a note, "You're not going to bed - young man - until you finish your beets." Grandmother didn't make me eat anything green - and beets weren't. They were purple. I sat at the table and gagged them down - one by one. They slid down all right and they filled up my stomach, but I'd just as soon have a cookie or a piece of angel food cake.

Woke up happy as a lark listening to the mourning dove's coo. Sun wasn't up yet, but the sky was. Grandmother was still asleep. I built a fire in her Cast-iron stove, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out how to make percolated coffee. Maybe that's one of those things you learn as a grownup. Did heat up what was leftover in the pot and mixed it with milk and honey. Figured if I was going to do the work of a man on the farm this summer - I better start early by drinking coffee. Don't know why it tastes so good. Maybe it's because I wasn't supposed to drink it. Like forbidden fruit. I spread butter on two pecan rolls and washed them down with half coffee - half milk. Had a big day ahead of me - a test sail - probably more like a test float.

Walked out to the livery stable and stared down at the workbench. The piece of wood I'd selected for a rudder wouldn't do as a rudderstock. Climbed the ladder and sorted through the wood stacked against the wall. Couldn't find what I wanted. Then it came to me. I all ready had most of it, "The pole at the Old Mill. Nail a flat piece of wood on one end and I have my rudderstock." Now all I needed was a thick tree branch that came to a V to make a sternpost to hold my rudderstock. Had to be sturdy though and I'd need a new pole to push off with. Checked back inside the kitchen to see if Grandmother was up. She wasn't. Last night beets and now - no breakfast. She wasn't well.

Carried my tools and piece of wood right through the center of Bellpoint. Figured no one would be up at this hour to ask me where was I going. Whistled a Civil War tune under my breath. Something about *Marching Through Georgia*. All I knew was the first few words, *Bring along your bugle, boy*. Great Grandfather Ropp used to sing it when he came home from his Grand Army of The Republic reunions. And that's about as far as he got - too. Got to thinking - which as I said before is mighty dangerous for a boy my age. My raft wasn't anywhere near as big as Tom's. But - then Mill Creek wasn't anywhere near as big as the mighty Mississippi. And I didn't plan on walking around. About all I could do on mine was kneel down or sit and then I'd have to be careful not to tip it over. I looked up. The morning sun was rising into the trees. I had to hurry. I ran all the way to the Old Mill.

Building the rudderstock was easy as pie. All I had to do was nail a piece of wood to the end of my pole and wrap it with twine to hold it secure. Finding the right branch for my sternpost wasn't as easy. Couldn't find a branch to my liking around the Old Mill. Then I remembered, "Trimmed some good sized branches off these logs upstream." Had to search through the bramble, but I found a likely candidate. Trimmed it when I returned to the Mill and nailed it to the stern. Wrapped it with twine to make it secure. Then I tested it. Felt solid.

Now all I had to do was push the raft down to the creek bed. This was easier said than done. Center board kept catching on the grass and digging in. So - not being smart - I went around to the front - lifted it up and pulled. Raft had a mind of its own. It broke free - gaining speed and knocked me over backwards. I tumbled into the creek - clothes and all. Crawled out on the creek bank soaking wet, but still proud of my achievement. Raft was floating upright

- riding high on top of the water. I tied my rope to the sternpost and around a tree and sat down to catch my breath. Had to admire my handiwork. It would be great fun guiding it downstream. Felt just like Tom and Huck did when they were about to begin a similar trip.

Stood up - soaking wet and began to unbutton my shirt. Heard a twig snap and tried to turn around. Couldn't because something hot - heavy and hairy was holding me down. Odor of sulfur and manure was overpowering. I looked up - right into the hairy red jaws of hell and the lights in my eyes went out along Mill Creek.

Came up from the depths - swimming in a deep pool of red blood - dodging hunks of manure floating along with me to the top. Tried to moved my head and tried to open my eyes, but couldn't. Odor of sulfur was enough to knock vultures out of the sky. I cracked one eye open and the other. I looked up into Old Ned's toothless grin. He spat tobacco into my face, "Got you - you snot nosed - no good - goody two shoes." I tried to sit up and shake the cobwebs out of my head, but I couldn't move. I was on my back hog-tied to the sternpost of my raft. My mouth wasn't gagged, "Thought we called it quits at the circus." "Not with the circus anymore - so it doesn't count. Me and my red friend stayed behind when The Arkansas clowns returned to their underground home."

I turned my head - *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was dancing a jig on the bank. Scared - I darn near passed out again. Ned laughed and I knew he was one with it, "Pretty ain't it. You were lucky you were wet or there would be nothing left of you, but a hunk of hair and a red spot. *Thing* here can't abide water. Fall in and all that would be left of him would be smoke and a yellow pile of sulfur. So - Johnny Ropp - I'm gonna' sen you on a one way trip down the Scioto." I tried

to break free. Figured if *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* went up in smoke in water - I could swim for my life. Squirmed and tugged, but couldn't move an inch. Ned cackled at me - a laugh that came right out of hell.

I turned my head the other way and looked over at Old Ned - out of one eye - that's as far as I could turn. Ned had the end of my rope - the one I tied my raft to the tree - in his hands. He cackled again, "Won't do you any good to squirm. You'll fall off and drown. Won't do you any good to scream." With that said - he stuffed a rag in my mouth and taped it over, "Even if you do - river noise will drown it out. Creeks high enough. You ought to float to the dam in three hours - maybe six. Know the sideboards you built? You'll be hidden by them. No one will see you. Reckon you might fall off when your raft flies over the dam. Hog-tied to the sternpost? Raft'll drag you quite a-ways through the rocks downstream. Won't be much left to bury. I'll be waiting at Whiskey Roadhouse. When I find pieces of raft down below the spillway - I'll know you're a goner and we'll be quits. Don't worry about anyone trying to save you. Scioto is running high and it's too muddy to fish - except below the dam and by then it'll be too late."

Ned cackled again as he threw the rope on top of me and pushed my raft off with his foot. I floated out into the middle of Mill Creek while he stood on the bank - cackling in laughter as he and the *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* linked arms dancing a jig - circling one way - then the other - singing, "*Float - float - float! Johnny Ropp is gonna' croak - croak - croak!*" I watched - nothing else I could do. Ned looked right at me - put his arm around the *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* and said, "Wink good-bye to my friend - Johnny. I know you can't wave - or shout. You see - I won't need him anymore. It's time to return him to his master."



Those were the last words I heard from Old Ned Smith. I tried to lift my head up, but couldn't move it more than two inches. I turned my head right and left. My raft was riding in the middle of the stream. Ned lashed my rudderstock so it would steer straight. My centerboard kept it pointed there. I'd built the raft too darn good. At least I picked the right time of year to launch it. Creek was running high and quick, but not too fast. I knew the current would slow down as I approached the Scioto. I rolled over on my right side. Ned knew his business about tying ropes. I couldn't see or feel any loose ends. I rolled left and the raft tilted, but held firm. I looked at the sternpost. Ned had the rope holding me tied to it. If I fell in - the raft would drag me along - dead or alive. I was in a pickle.

I thought to myself, "I sure picked the wrong time to build something right. Last thing I built was a soap box derby racer. And its axles collapsed on my sixth run down Seven Corners hill." Had to get my head together. Tom Mix would stop struggling - sit and think his way out. I was hog-tied - so I couldn't sit, but I could think. I relaxed and closed my eyes. Tried to remember what Tom did under similar circumstances. In one of his movies - Tom and two of his cowpokes were tied up and left inside a mine, "'Course they weren't gagged like me." Tom told his friends to quit whining while he thought things out. I had all the quiet I needed. It was time to think.

I was gagged and bound at my hands and ankles. Hog-tied rope was tied behind my back and I was flat on my back. I looked at what rope I could see and discovered it wasn't rope at all. Ned had tied me up with a clothesline he stole from the general store. I used it before. I knew I could escape. All I had to do was get it wet - without falling in and drowning. Time was on my side, but I wasn't sure how much. Ned said three to six hours. I checked the sun. It was

still hanging in the east - so it had to be at least two hours before noon. Had to get moving. The gag in my mouth was gagging me. Didn't taste all that good as I chewed on it, but I could feel the tape giving. Ned must have used a roll of Doc's medical tape. Turned my head and stretched my mouth until the tape came loose on one side. Spit the gag out and that released the other side.

I lifted up my head. My raft was floating out the entrance to Mill Creek. I was on the Scioto River. My mind was filled with an image of my raft going over the dam - me trailing behind - hog-tied to a rope. Talk about thinking scared. At the bottom is a ferocious back draft. I'd be trapped underwater and there is no way to break free. The suction is holding me underwater - against the base of the dam. Shook my head to get rid of those thoughts. Looked around. I was the only one on the river.

Tugged at the rope, but with my hands tied to my feet behind me - I couldn't do much. They loosened a bit, but not enough to break free. If I went over the side into the river I'd drown for sure before I could break free. If I didn't drown now - I'd drown when the raft went over the dam. What a choice! Rolled over on my back and looked up. Sky was growing dark. My only chance was for it to rain and soak through Ned's clothes line. Maybe it would loosen up enough for me to wiggle free. Should have built the raft twice as large. Every time I roll off center it tilts toward the river and if I get out near the edge it'll tilt over.

My body had three positions - left side - right side - and on my back. With my hands and feet tied behind me - I could only lay on my back for a few minutes. The other two positions were just as uncomfortable. I had to wait for rain. Couldn't do anything now except wear myself out. Tom Mix wasn't a quitter and neither was I. He'd wait it out and

so would I. Something was bound to happen. The sky was getting darker. It had to rain soon. I relaxed - rolled over on my right side and closed my eyes.

Drops of rain splattering on my face woke me up and a clap of thunder kept me that way. I lifted my head up. The ropes were loose. I was floating near the Girls Industrial Home - twenty yards off the west bank. I rolled over on my chest to expose more rope to the rain. Wasn't long before I was able to wriggle one wrist free and then the other. Rubbed my wrists and untied my ankles. Boy did that feel good. I was free. Looked down at the river and saw water rushing by - and up at water coming down. Lightning crashed all around. Measured the distance to the west bank and didn't even think about jumping in and swimming. Current would take me downstream.

I untied the rudderstock and tried to steer toward the east bank. That's when I learned a lesson in raft building. Rain had loosened the wrap holding the rudderstock wood to the end of my pole. In a second - the current broke it free. All I had left was a long pole, "If I ever build another raft - I'll soak the twine before wrapping it. When it dries it will shrink and hold secure." Rain was coming down in sheets and the lightning was dancing across the sky. Wasn't a fit day to be out on the Scioto. Sky was turning black as night and I was drenched and getting the shivers. Worse yet - I could hear the beginning of the roar of water crashing over a spillway. It was getting late and my raft was fast closing in on the dam. With all the noise going on around me - I couldn't steer and couldn't think.

Wondered what Tom Mix would do in a fix like this? If I didn't find a way out soon - I'd be meeting him up in heaven. Tried steering with my pole and it worked a bit. Moved the raft to within ten yards of the bank. Current was too fast

to move it anymore. Wasn't any use to panic. For all I knew my raft would stop on top of the dam or on the cable that stretched from shore to shore to protect boats. That was it! The cable! I tried one more time to use the pole to steer. Snapped in two at the notch of the sternpost. I wedged what remained between the planks and held it out in front of me. Hit the cable so hard it almost knocked me backwards. Raft bounced up and down against the cable - right above the spillway. I grabbed onto the cable and began to pull me and the raft toward the west bank. Closer I got to the bank - the higher the cable rose above the river. Ten feet from shore the raft broke free and sailed over the dam. I dangled from the cable - water grabbing at my knees. And it came out of my mouth on wings of its own, *"Christ all Friday!"* Wrapped my arms and legs around that cable and shinnied up - hand over hand - until I was over land - and then I let go - falling to the grassy bank.

Landed with a squish - water coming out of all sides of me - sneakers - trousers - shirt - and hair. Had to laugh - I had to have an angel in my pocket, "I'd beat that devil Ned Smith at his own game and won." I sloshed to the downstream side of the road over the dam for a look. Raft must have flown through the air. It bounced off rocks on the west side and wound up caught in the rocks on the east side - what was left of it. The rest floated downstream - bobbing along the rapids. When lightning flashed again - I saw rope hanging loose from the back of the raft and heard a hellish cackle floating through the air from the east side of the dam. Lightning flashed again and I saw Old Ned looking down at what was left of my raft - holding an umbrella over *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing.*

Strangest thing happened. A gust of wind - like it was sent from heaven - blew that giant umbrella out of Ned's

hand. As he ran to retrieve it *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* was uncovered in a downpour. It began a scream that went up four octaves and ended in one that shatters brains - smoke rose where it stood. Ned tried to get back in time, but lightning struck. It raised its claws - trying to fight off the inevitable. Ned was on a paved road that led over the dam, but I swore the ground opened up and swallowed *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing*. The smell of burning manure and sulfur cut right through the downpour dropping me to my knees. Here I was huddled against the rail and Old Ned couldn't be more than fifty yards away, but he didn't see me.

Ned threw his umbrella over the rail at my raft and screamed, "It's a good thing you're dead Johnny Ropp - or I'd raise my devil again and this time I'd cook you over a fire on a spit." He shook his fist at the sky and walked through the rain toward Whiskey Roadhouse. When he was out of sight, I inched over to where the *The Great Big Hairy Red Thing* last stood. All that was left was a pile of yellow sulfur that came to a point with a curlicue on top. Like soft ice cream in a cone. I touched it. It was raining like the dickens - and it was dry.

Shouldn't have - and I don't know what got into me. I kept right on going - through the downpour toward Whiskey Roadhouse. I was mad - madder than I had a right to be. Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck was parked outside. I walked right up - opened the gas cap and poured mud inside. Let the rain in too. Made sure all traces of mud were gone before I screwed the cap back on. Somewhere down the road - Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck was going to stall and never start again. He'd have to abandon it. Said I was mad - not crazy. If I took the distributor cap off he'd have known I was alive. This way he wouldn't - he'd lose his truck and I'd be quits - my way - not his. Now that I had gotten even - I began to

shiver and shake. Rain was coming down in buckets and I was wetter than - you know what. Took off running toward Grandfather Ropp's farm. When I passed the Main Gate of the Columbus Zoo - I ran out of a wall of water into bright sunshine. Slowed down to a walk. I didn't worry - Old Ned wouldn't be coming this way.

I was late getting back to Bellpoint. Stopped by the farm, but my Grandparents were in town. Grandfather Mac had crossed the Bellpoint Bridge an hour before me. Knew I'd be late for supper and knew I'd get a talking too, but after what I'd seen and done - well I needed one. Wasn't supposed to be on the river and no one knew about my raft. Tried to sneak in through the back porch, but Grandmother Mac had an eye out for me. She took me by the shoulders and looked me up and down, "Why you're as wet and dirty as Old Ned Smith. Where have you been?" "Up Mill Creek." "Take those shoes and socks off. Shouldn't wear them if you're going to splash in the creek. You look like you fell in." "I did. Sorry - it won't happen again." Get on upstairs and get out of those clothes and into pajamas."

Didn't take long for me to change out of those clothes. Still had an odor of sulfur lingering on them. No wonder Grandmother wanted me to change. I took them downstairs to the back porch and deposited where Grandmother pointed - in the washtub. Grandmother had my plate on the table - ham - biscuits - gravy and ugh - beets. She smiled at me, "Johnny - you look like something the cat drug in." She didn't need to tell me any more and I didn't have to tell her. After I washed down the remains of those beets - I ate them all - I hopped upstairs to bed. I barely made it under the covers when my eyes closed.

Must have been the witching hour - two in the morning when I sat up in bed - bolt upright! Thought I heard Old

Ned's cackle. Moon was full! Looked out the window and breathed a sigh of relief. It was Grandfather's big elm branches - brushing against the eaves. Even if Old Ned never came back - it looked to me like it would never be over. Not as long as I was alive and remembered. I searched my brain and found comfort in Grandmother's Cornish Prayer,

*From Ghoulies and ghosties  
And long-leggety beasties  
And things that go bump in the night,  
Good Lord deliver us!*

What did I learn from this experience?

1. Stay away from Old Ned Smith.
2. If that doesn't work - look over your shoulder.
3. The devil only wins temporary victories.
4. God helps those who help themselves.