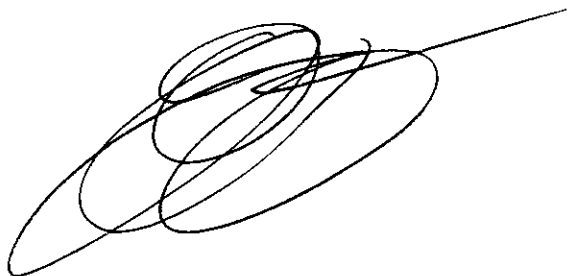


The Big Ol' Hairy Red Thing

Owen - James Owen

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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The Big Ol' Hairy Red Thing

*"Blessings on thee, little man,
Barefoot boy with cheeks of tan!
Health that knocks the doctor's rules
Knowledge never learned in schools."*

Kidnaped

*"Beware the Jabberwock my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that snatch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"*

The Chase Begins

*"Quarry mine, blessed am I
In the luck of the chase."*

Swimming Hole

*"Oh! the old swimmin' hole! When I last saw the place,
The scenes was all changed, like the change in my face."*

Harvest Moon

*"From the hag and hungry goblin
That into rags would rend ye,
And the spirit that stands by the naked man
In the book of Moons defend ye!"*

School Days

*"I have had playmates, I have had companions,
In my days of childhood, in my joyful school
days -"*

Old Ned's Gold

*"Here we are on Tom Tiddler's ground
Picking up gold and silver."*

Witch's Brew

*"Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble."*

Poor Old Ned

*"Christmas is coming, the geese are getting fat,
Please to put a penny in the old man's hat; "*

Winter Solstice

*Winter's hard
North winds blow
Winter's soft
White with snow.*

Spring Equinox

*"Spring is sprung
The grass is ris'
I wonder where
The flowers is?"*

Raft

*Floating alone on a raft - down big river
Water roars - dam's ahead - makes me shiver!*

Circus

Circus is a-coming - Clowns will do a prat
Circus is a-coming - Posters say where at
Circus is a-coming - Promises land of gold
Circus is a-coming - Tents will open & fold!



JR Chapter Synopsis



KIDNAPED: It's been awhile, but believe it was the summer of '39. I was staying at Grandfather's house, high on a hill above the Scioto River in Bellpoint, Ohio. Me and the preacher's boy, Will, fell asleep and drifted a borrowed rowboat over the top of O'shaughnessy dam. Scared and wet, we hitched a ride back up river with Ol' Ned Smith, on the back of his flat bed truck. That no-account kidnaped and locked us up in his shed. We waited until Ned and his gang drank themselves to sleep, loosened two boards and hightailed it out of there.

REVENGE: I was helping Grandfather thresh wheat and darn near fainted when I saw Ol' Ned running the boiler of that threshin' machine. Ned spotted me and the next day when I was stayin' alone, he came lookin' for me. When Ned came after me with a pitchfork, I scooted to the back haymow. Didn't want a pitchfork up my hind end, so I jumped out of the hay and pushed Ol' Ned out the hay door. Ned landed on his back, staring into the eyes of our bull. Scared, he levitated right out of there, like Harry Houdini. Our Border collie, Spot kept him from burnin' the farmhouse down. When he got back to the threshin' machine, the Captain fired him on the spot for smellin' so bad and lookin' worse.

OLD SWIMMIN' HOLE: I returned to my hometown, a place Tom Sawyer could call home. Me and Slick Willy were exploring alongside

Mad River, way back in the woods. Had a lot of fun fishin' until a black snake crawled up Slick's pant leg, but that's how we discovered the swimmin' hole. Slick came out of a dead sleep and jumped right in and we all followed. Later, we run across Ol' Ned and German Jerry. They were smokin' inside a houseboat up on a trailer in the lumber yard. I must've made Ol' Ned mad enough to spit nails. He came after us. Cornered me and Slick in a limestone quarry. Would have got us, too, if we hadn't found that dynamite cap. Doc fixed them up and the Sheriff took them to the county line and told them to get.

HARVEST MOON: Father and I returned to Grandfather's to help him harvest corn. Uncle Bus took me to my first Big Ten football game. Ohio State played Illinois. Now that was a real thrill. That evening, Will, Jake and me were skippin' rocks on the Scioto when Ned and his gang robbed Doc's house. We called the Sheriff and the next day Ned came lookin' for us. Uncle Mac saved the day. He emptied a shotgun load of rock salt into German and One Eye, but Ol' Ned got away.

SCHOOL DAYS: Teacher keeps me after school when my mouth gets in gear before my brain does. I learn a basketball game called, 'Horse' and get my clock cleaned on lay-ups. When me and Slick Willy were on a fall hike in the woods, we stumbled onto Ned's new still. He spotted us and the chase was on. We ran as fast as we could until we got to the road and then our bikes saved us.

TREASURE: The Preacher was so scared of Ned and his gang that he moved away. Sure was lonely with Will and Jake gone north to Lake Erie. Grandfather let me caddy for him when he played Marysville's golf course the day after Thanksgiving. I fell in love with that game on the spot. Got to love a game where you get to hit things, run after them and hit 'em again. I was exploring alongside Mill Creek when I discovered Ned's stash, sixteen hundred dollars in cash hidden under the Old Mill's floor. Grandfather turned it in to the Sheriff.

WITCH'S BREW: Slick talks me into sellin' newspapers on the street corner on Sundays. We quit when we discover our boss, Ol' Nel, is a cheat and worse yet, Nel is Ned's sister. She made us work out in the snow and cold and then didn't pay us. We got even. Buried our newspaper bags in the middle of the football field and gave them a Viking funeral, fire and all. Still, I felt guilty.

POOR OL' NED: Christmas at Bellpoint. Wish I had two stomachs. After reading Tom Sawyer, I decide to build a raft. I searched the Old Mill for wood. Ol' Ned shows up and discovers his stash is gone. He is some kinda' mad. He comes lookin' for me, but I hide pretty good.

WINTER SOLSTICE: I get my American Flyer sled down from the rafters and Slick gets his Bob. We flirt with the fence at the bottom of sleddin' hill. When Ol' Ned breaks his gang out

of prison, he shows up in his flat bed truck. Law doesn't seem to be able to catch that slippery thief. I'm lookin' over my shoulder almost every day, now. When I return to Bellpoint, I discover that Ned is about and is using the Old Mill as his hide-out. He has robbed the store for supplies. Darn near catches me when I spy on him. Father calls the Sheriff to report, but the law arrives a day late and a dollar short. Ned's on the run and gettin' dangerous.

SPRING EQUINOX: Slick Willy and me discover how to avoid the superintendents office. When teacher sends us there for punishment, we keep on going to the gym and no one knows better. Worked too, until my Father's quarterback catches us. Didn't turn us in, but he scared us straight. We explore the remains of Ned's Mad River still. I discover a basement of days gone by, when the Underground Railroad was do or die. While we're down inside, Ned sneaks up and locks us in. I find a tunnel and we crawl out of that funnel.

CIRCUS: Circus comes to town. Slick and me get a job diving in dishwater for circus pearls. Cook, the dirtiest lookin' man I'd ever seen, works us day and night. Mother takes one look at the grease and grounds me from the circus. Slick stays on, but the circus stiffes him as well as all the other boys who signed on to help. Ned hires on as a roustabout and robs the circus' strong box. I learn another one of life's lessons: sometimes a circus can be grim. Grandfather Mac takes me to

a real circus, Barnum's, in Columbus. Tell you what, Barnum knows how to put on a show, but his has just as much larceny as the Arkansas Circus that came to my hometown.

RAFT: My Father loses his job as the town football coach and makes plans to return to the family farm near Bellpoint. I'm sent on ahead. I work day after day building a raft. When I attempt to launch my raft, Ned sneaks up from aft. Knocks me over the head, wants me dead, but ties me up and sends me down Mill Creek instead. I wake in time to grab the wire barrier o'er O'shaughnessy dam and escape. Where's Ol' Ned? Some say Ned has gone out west and some say Ned is dead. But when night comes cloudy, windy, black with dread and ol' elm scrapes up against the bedroom eaves, worries about Ol' Ned mingle with the north wind's breeze.



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"Folks in these parts wish I was dead - or gone out west - or locked up in the Ohio State Penitentiary. Specially those dab-nabbed - no good - church going - goody-two-shoed folks livin' in Bellpoint, Ohio. I'm pretty famous around here. Everyone knows Old Ned Smith - meaner than the Kaiser and tougher than a two-dollar steak. I'm not too old - mind you. Got all wrinkled up workin' at stealin'. Takin' from other folks ain't as easy as you think. It's twice as hard stealin' as it is workin' for wages. Now about Bellpoint - isn't big enough for a city - or town - or village. Doesn't have a village green or 'nough boys in high school to have a baseball team. How do I know? Well - I robbed all fifteen houses - and the general store - and the poor box at the church. 'Scuse me. I need to take a pull from my whiskey jug. Keeps *The Big Ol' Hairy Red Things* away."

"As I was sayin' - Bellpoint is small - so small you can walk from one end to the other in less than a five minutes. Some places have all the luck - like Columbus - not more'n twenty miles south of here - it's the State Capital. A not too bright land spectator named Jim Kooker tried to sell lots - over a hundred in Bellpoint, but folks knew better. They wouldn't buy and the bottom fell out of village land around here - before the Civil War. First of all - the Scioto River had too much fall. Can't navigate a boat on rocks - rapids and bottom mud. I know - I helped clear brush on the river banks before they built the dam. Bellpoint never was more'n a one horse town. If it'd been bigger - my take would have been bigger too - and I would've gone south. 'Scuse me - need another pull from my whiskey jug."

"Don't anyone around here make good whiskey. Not like I used too. This stuff barely makes my eyes water. Wasn't always this way. I did what I pleased until that smart aleck - goody-two-shoed kid - Johnny Ropp came along. Him and his kind cost me a bunch of money. Shut down the best moonshine operation in the State of Ohio. But - I'm getting ahead of myself. Trouble started before World War II. Can't remember - was it 1938 or 1939? Me and German Jerry was leanin' up against a shade tree on the side yard of Bellpoint's general store - tryin' to sober up. Woke up and opened one eye when Johnny Ropp and that preacher's boy - think his name was Will - came walkin' by. Lucky for me I'm slicker than owl stuff or they woulda' had me down river at the Penitentiary. I'll let Johnny tell the rest of my story. Mind you - might not like bein called a low down - mean old scoundrel - but I love hearin' about it. Oh! *The Big Ol' Hairy Red Things?* They're out there - waitin'. Mine came callin' - has yours?"

Just melted into the last pew - next to Will and Jake. Hot - hotter than I could ever 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. Grandmother wasn't keen on me playing with Will and Jake. Thought they were too wild, but I hadn't met a preacher's boy yet that wasn't. Their arrows were almost straight - just a little bent. Now - 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 - and over - and over. Well you know what I'm gettin' at. If you don't understand a Bible story the first time around you deserve to be punished by repetition. Sitting with Will and Jake - I didn't have to listen. We'd shared comic books in Church. Snuck 'em into the middle of our Bibles - heads down reading. Made us look real religious. If we didn't have 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 for a couple of weeks each summer and another week at Grandmother Ropp's farm on the other side of the Scioto River. Wasn't sure if it was Mother's vacation or mine. Didn't matter - couldn't be a better place in the whole wide world to spend summer than my Grandmothers' places - in Bellpoint - or on the farm. Both were on the banks of the Scioto River. Better than going to camp, but I've never been to a camp. Need money for that.

How about me? I'm average - not tall - or short - just about right. All my parts work - feet reach the floor and hands reach my mouth. Grandmother Mac always said, "Johnny, you can't sit still for a minute. You're as fidgety as a waggly tailed puppy." She was right. I was always fidgetin' away in Jr. High 'cause I'm at that 'tween age. Too young to chase girls - not that I'm not interested - and too old for most children's games. My hair is average - too. Not yellow or brown - sort of dirt-sandy. If you saw me in a crowd - you wouldn't. I'd blend in. Now - I'm not a genius, but I do pride myself in havin' an average share of smarts. I know 'nough not to drink river water closer than two-hundred yards upstream from a dead horse and not to pee in a swimmin' hole. Its got-a' be hot. My mind is wanderin' all over and I'm stuck here in this back pew. Sunday School lasts an hour. Church? Will's Dad can carry on for two - sometimes three hours. And by the time he finishes grace at dinner it's time to cook supper. Oh - you might not be from Ohio. We call lunch - dinner and dinner - supper. Makes sense to us. Noon time is our main meal. Farmers like to stoke the furnace at noon when they have afternoon work.

Must have been sound asleep. Ol' Will brought me back to life - pokin' me in the ribs - whisperin', "Johnny, wake up. You're beginning to snore." Sitting in the back pew with sweat dripping down my shirt - between the heat and

Will's Dad - droning on - and on - hard to stay awake. Will punched me in the ribs with his elbow, "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 dinner." "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 after those folks down in Columbus built O'Shaughnessy Dam. Backed the river up clear past Bellpoint. Grandfather Mac said, "Before they built that dam I could walk across the Scioto - from rock to rock all winter long." His favorite fishin' hole is right below the dam's spillway - where water comes crashing down. He'd fish for largemouth bass there. Scared the dickens out of me. I'd dream about that dam breaking and water would come crashing down after me. I'd run and run, but that water kept on comin' - closer and closer. I'd always wake up before it got me. If it wasn't for Columbus Zoo and Grandfather's fishing hole - I'd never go near that dam. I wasn't allowed to swim or float on the Scioto. Grandmother would let me fish from the bank down the lane, but I wasn't allowed in it - or on it. Mill Creek was shallow enough - so I was allowed. Our swimmin' hole was up the creek - near what was left of the Old Mill. All that was left was some boards - concrete - mill wheel pit and a chimney - across a crumblin' cement bridge.

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 door when everyone stands up to sing." So we did. Running uphill toward Grandmother Mac's house. Will and Jake live right across the road - on the other side of the lane between Grandmother Mac's and Doc's house. I didn't dally. Grandmother Mac came home right after teaching Sunday School to cook Sunday dinner and get me outa' bed. Sunday noon meal had to be the best meal of the week. The aroma of fried chicken was enough to make anyone forget about staying

outdoors to play. Didn't have to ask a Bellpoint boy what running around like a chicken with its head cut off meant. Grandmother wrung a rooster's neck after she came back from Sunday School. It was plucked - split into parts - covered with salt - pepper and flour and in the skillet before Church was over. Grandmother Mac used drippings to make gravy for mashed potatoes. And she didn't make me eat anything green when she cooked chicken. Grandmother Mac's fried chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy had to be the heaven Will's Dad preached about.

I ate my dinner in the kitchen - before the grown-ups. Winter - Grandmother made Postum and milk. I'd think I was drinking coffee. Not today - too hot for anything, but milk. I waited until Grandmother began to cleaning her Cast-iron range before edging my way along the wall toward the back porch screen door. Grandmother must have seen me out of the corner of her eye, "Where do you think you're going - young man?" "Up Mill Creek with Will and Jake. Grandfathers bait bucket is empty. He needs crawdads." "Be careful around Will and Jake. I know they go to Church, but they're a might too wild for my liking. Don't go near the river and be back in time for supper." I had the screen door open, "Yes Ma'am, I'll be back in time for supper."

I ran across the road - downhill on the lane past Will and Jake's house. Peaked in through the screen door. Their Dad was still saying grace. I wondered if Will and Jake ever got to eat a hot meal. Will noticed me and nodded toward the river. I waved and pointed in the same direction. Tiptoed off their front porch. Didn't want to get caught. Their Dad would make me come in and listen to his prayers. If he ever got an audience - he'd go on - and on and on. Wasn't more'n a hundred yards from Will's to the Scioto River and I kicked up dust all the way downhill. Saw a large carp sunning near the river bank - in the shallows. So I sat down and took my

shoes off and waded in after it - moving real slow like. I'd never caught one with my hands - not ever - but today might be the day - it was sunnin' - motionless. Carps are slippery and fun to catch, but I didn't know anyone who would want to eat one - or catfish. Not with largemouth bass and crappie to fry. Trying to catch one was the fun of it. Couldn't tell if this one was sound asleep with his eyes open or awake - staring at me. I waded closer - knowing this carp was going to be mine. Had to be at least ten pounds. I bent over - hands out - ready to pounce. Will snuck up, "You're not supposed to be wadin' in the river." Darn carp woke up and turned tail - splashing water and mud all over my rolled up pants. Took off faster than a largemouth bass heading for deep water. I turned around, "Darn you Will - my carp got away. Had to be over ten pounds. Darn thing was over two feet long. Almost had him." "Carp ain't fit for dog food. Ready to 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 Mac'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 drying on the bottom of my feet and tied the laces. We ran up the lane to Bellpoint Road and stopped - for Grandfather's bait bucket. Got too hot to run - so we stopped runnin' - walked downhill toward the general store - kicking stones along the edge of the road. Hard not to stop at the general store - with the warm aroma of fresh baked bread - cookies and chocolate drifting out through the screen door. We couldn't though - we were both flat broke. Still - I checked my pockets hoping a nickel might be balled up inside pocket lint. Leaning up against a big elm next to the store - were two mean looking shade tree mechanics. Our lone Sunday garage mechanic was under the hood of a flatbed Ford truck. We didn't say a word

- but we sure did walk faster - just short of running. 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. I looked at Will and he looked at me - and we both took off running to Mill Creek bridge. Neither one of us wanted to be caught. Have our noses rubbed in the dirt, but we got lucky. German was too drunk to get up and the ugly one - too lazy to get up off his hind end and chase after us.

Turned the corner and slowed down to a crawl - kicking stones on Old Mill Road - walkin' upstream. Will whistled, "That was close. Don't trust those two. How far upstream do you want to go?" "To our swimmin' hole by the Old Mill's concrete bridge." "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 skipped a dozen or so times before we came upon the remains of the Old Mill. Will took a shortcut across green moss still slick from morning dew - towards the old concrete bridge. Wet moss is slippery. Ol' Will slipped and bounced - and bounced - and bounced along on his bottom. Tried to get up, but went head over butt into the creek. He came up sputterin' - shoutin', "Christ all Friday!" I bent over double laughing, "You look like a drowned rat. Bounced across that moss like a Keystone Cop!" "Damn you, Johnny. Quit your laughing and help me up." "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 and 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. 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 pulling the bait bucket trailin' behind."

Creek water was just right - not too hot or cold. We bobbed around - jumped off the bridge and had a gay old time until we both wrinkled up like a pair of prunes. Wasn't much of a swimming hole, but then neither one of us was much of a swimmer. At least the water was clear - though we couldn't see bottom. Made sure I didn't take any into my mouth 'cause Will didn't climb out to pee. Said, "Don't worry - it'll float downstream." "Just make sure you pee downstream of where I'm swimmin'." I pulled myself up on the bridge for the last time, "Sun's getting low and we haven't looked for one darn crawdad." 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 them over." "They'll dry on our walk home. Look on my back. Feels like I've got something crawling there. See anything?" "Hold still while I look. Nothing important." "Well, what is it? Feels like a worm of some kind." "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 real still - so you won't get burnt." I placed the flame near enough to the leech and almost far enough away from Will. 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 my blood out for sure. We better get a move on if you want to fill your bait bucket with crawdads."

We tied our sneakers by the laces around our necks and walked downstream. Stayed in the shallows - near the bank - turning rocks over - looking for crawdads. I asked Will, "Do

you really know those two shade tree mechanics sleepin' under the shade tree outside the general store?" "Couple of no-good moonshiners from Dublin way." "Where's that?" "Past the dam - downstream on the west side of the Scioto. My Dad says Dublin has a reputation for harboring layabouts and ne'er-do-wells. The ugly one - the one chewin' tobacco with only one front tooth is Old Ned Smith. He's the leader of a gang of thieves. The sleepy one is German Jerry and there's another one - One Eyed Jack. They're about as mean and lowdown as anyone can get. Even their Mother can't stand to be near 'em." "Don't worry - I don't plan on going anywhere near 'em."

We picked up twenty or so crawdads. Covered 'em with wet river moss. Will held up one to look. It was squirming between his fingers, "Won't catch me eating one of these things." I poured in enough creek water to wet the moss down, "My Uncle says folks south of the Ohio River consider them good eating." "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 might be all right." "Bass like 'em and we eat bass. Hope those two moonshiners are gone. I'm too tired to be chased after." "We can cut across the field behind the store." Didn't bother to flick off the mud caked on my pants. It would fall off as we walked. Our clothes were damp and our under shorts soaked, but that was one of those things we had to put up with if we wanted to go swimmin'. Wasn't proper to go skinny dippin' alongside a road. Never know when a nosy girl might come walking by. Dust hung in the hot humid air along Mill Creek Road - a hazy backdrop to the elms lining the creek banks. It was a gift from a Model A Ford Roadster that passed by an hour earlier on its way to Ostrander. Didn't bother us - 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 anyone can cool a house down in summer - unless you own the ice house. We can heat our homes in winter, but there's no way to cool one. Why Bellpoint has the Scioto River and Mill Creek. No place on earth better than here." Will laughed, "I liked it better when you were a zombie 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 wrong - has to be millions of folks living south of the Ohio. Isn't that the same Uncle who said you can cure pneumonia by riding a horse - fast as you can make him go - naked in the snow?" "Uncle Bus is the smartest man alive and he's right when he says riding a horse naked at night - at a full gallop forces air into your lungs - so it has to be the best cure for pneumonia. And he's right about the south - hardly anyone lives south of the Ohio River and those that do eat crawdads."

Will and me cut across the field behind the general store. We weren't about to take any chances running into those crooks from Dublin - not this late in the day. We cut back to Bellpoint Road when we were above the general store. Will wasn't about to let me get the last word. He gave me his two cents worth, "My Dad says the best place to live is up north on the banks of Lake Erie. Stays cool all summer and the waters clear enough to drink." I nodded, "Heard it gets mighty cold in the winter when the wind blows across the lake. I'd like to see it and the Ohio River." "I'd like to travel south and make you eat your words about nobody living there. And everyone knows that nobody alive would ever eat crawdads." The silence of this midsummer Sunday wrapped around us like dust wrapped around the trees.

Will and I had run out of things to talk about. My stay in Bellpoint was almost up. It was time to go across the Scioto River to Grandfather Ropp's farm. Grandmother Mac looked like she'd seen enough of me for awhile and she needed a rest. Maybe that's why my Mother was always so happy when she dropped me off in Bellpoint. She did - too. Grownups are a curious lot. Always kidding, but when I didn't take them serious - they'd get irritated. Not Grandmother Mac. And she didn't make me eat green things - most of the time - or beets. As we walked up hill toward Grandfather Mac's house - I asked Will, "Can you come outside after supper?" "Not on Sunday. Evening prayers run right into our bedtime prayers. I'll stop by after breakfast."

Supper was worth coming in early for. Left over fried chicken - mashed potatoes - gravy and angel food cake. Only prayers we said were grace before supper and Grandfather Mac kept his short and to the point. After supper - Grandfather adjourned to the parlor and smoked a cigar or sometimes his 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 was always making deep guttural sighs when things weren't right - which was most of the time. I counted each sigh. Ten was his record. Maybe tonight he would break it. I liked listening to radio. It was almost as good as going to a movie. With radio you saw people and action inside your head - as you wanted to see them. Sort of like reading a book, but someone else is reading it for you. The men in my family rested after eating. Didn't want to get athlete's heart. If you started work too soon after supper - your heart would get 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." "Do they eat crawdads?" "Love 'em down there. Call them crayfish. Your Uncle Bus has been pulling your leg again - hasn't he?" "Yes Sir."

Jack Benny's radio show was over. I stretched - stood up and looked around. Grandfather Mac was sound asleep. I was certain that he'd never get athlete's heart. I wandered through the dining room - toward the kitchen. Grandmother was finishing - cleaning up after supper - busy wiping off the kitchen table. No one ever mentioned it, but not working after supper must be for men only. She worked harder than any two people I knew. Not paying attention - I tripped over the sill on my way into the kitchen - stubbing my toe. The swear words flew out of my mouth on wings of their own, "Christ all Friday!" Grandmother had me by the back of my neck - at the sink and a bar of lye soap in my mouth before I could say, "Will taught me those words," through the lye soap bubbles. "Young man, I don't care who taught you. You know better than to take the Lord's name in vain. Now get outside and sit on the back step for a bit. Think before you talk. You better pray our Lord doesn't send a lightning bolt down to strike you dead." "Yes Ma'am."

Don't let anyone tell you that soap is tasty - and lye soap? It burned the coating on top my tongue. Grandmother knew how to nip a problem in the bud. After she finished swabbing my mouth out with lye soap - the strongest swear words I said were, "My Goodness!" Worse yet - my running off the 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 Church for as long as I stayed with her. Spent the better part of an hour trying to rinse the taste of lye soap out of my mouth at the backyard pump. Being told to sit with nothing to do - I decided to inspect that 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 deep below. Flowed out of the opening - cold and pure - on the hottest days. Back porch step was hard - so I leaned against the walnut tree and put my feet up on the low bench next to it.

The odor was faint, but it was there for all to see and smell. The pride of Bellpoint - Grandfather Mac's big brick outhouse. Everyone in Bellpoint had one, but nobody had an outhouse like Grandfather's. It was solid as any old brick outhouse. Had four holes - beginning at baby size - working up to one I could fall into. 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. We had a water closet at home in Osborn. But, Grandfather Mac's outhouse was outside - something special. Even had a grape arbor covering the walk to it - to provide privacy. Didn't make much sense to me. Everyone in Bellpoint had an outhouse. There wasn't any running water. Not even the school - or the general store. And I didn't mind walking through his arbor. Grandfather Mac's old brick outhouse and a cold nor'east gale made going to the bathroom an adventure.

Past the outhouse was a large lot where Grandfather grew vegetables - when he had a mind, too. Liked growing things that vine - like pumpkins - tomatoes - cucumbers and squash. Out past that lot I could see 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 a dusty old livery stable. Opened on the lane that went past Doc's house - down toward the river. Before automobiles became the rage - Grandfather Mac kept his spring wagon in there. He would hitch up his pair of horses - think they were Morgans and drive them to Ostrander - where he'd pick up goods for his general store at the train station. When trucks began to deliver goods - he sold his store and his horses, but kept his wagon and buggies. They were up in the livery stable now. On the ground floor was his Plymouth Roadster. That was my favorite car of all. Had a rumble seat - I'd get to ride in the open air. Uncle Bus had a Chrysler Roadster which was just 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 I'd take an open air rumble seat 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. Maybe she would forgive me. I opened the screen door and peeked in. All was forgiven. A glass of milk and a plate of cookies were waiting on the table. Grandmother looked in from the parlor, "Are you all right -young man?" "Yes, Ma'am." "I want you to stay away from Will and Jake until I talk to their father. Wash your hands before you go upstairs to bed." "Is it all right if I climb up the livery stable mow tomorrow morning." "Yes, but be careful. No ones been there for years." Grandmother wouldn't have to worry about me getting into trouble - not with Will and Jake anyway. After she talked to their father I'd either get beat up or they'd have nothing to do with me. Oatmeal cookies are not my favorite. Rather have peanut butter or chocolate chip, but after lye soap and with milk - 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 of the four upstairs bedrooms. I chose Uncle Bus's bedroom. On his dresser was a glass case with his high school track medals. State Championship medals in Pole Vault - Shot Put - Hammer Throw 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 morning or night. 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. Didn't use it - either. Rather wash up at the cistern pump sink in the kitchen and go inside

the outhouse - than carry a chamber pot to it. Pulled the covers up to my chin and began counting the mildew spots on the ceiling. Was all the way to sixty six when both of my eyelids closed.

Woke next morning to the coo of mourning doves. Don't ever remember hearing their coo anywhere else - except along a river. Morning along the Scioto would make anyone want to sing. Knew I was late - so I hopped out of bed and pulled on my clothes as fast as I could. Left everything untied - so I almost tripped over my laces coming down the back stairs. I had to hurry. Maybe I could convince Grandfather Mac to go fishin' when he came home from work. The lingering aroma of his pipe was all that remained. Grandmother Mac was in the back yard using the same lye soap that she stuck in my mouth last night. She had an old fashioned mechanical washing machine - didn't use electricity - crank turned the paddles. I was down to wearing shorts. Couldn't climb or slide in them without skinning 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. Went back inside for breakfast. Washed up at the cistern sink in the kitchen - making 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 for me, "Johnny? Oh, there you are. You sure slept in late 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 all ready 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. Can't be chewed or licked off. Just have to wait for it to wear off. I drank all of my milk except the last half inch. It was full of wash-back. My best Osborn

friend - Willy - warned me not to drink it, "Don't dare do that - Johnny. Stuff is full of spit and slimy food. 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 again. Willy - we call him Slick 'cause he is - warned me and Jonsey about using too much soap and water, "Skin will fall off if you wash your face too often. Wash with soap more than three times a day and your insides will spill out through the worn spots - ooze out all over the floor." Wasn't sure if Slick was right, but it didn't want to chance it. I could just see the mess I'd be in if my insides popped out.

Grandmother was busy pulling wet clothes through the wrangler on her washing machine. Now her wrangler isn't a cowboy who takes care of horses. Wrangler on a washing machine is the rollers that squeeze the water from clothes before they're hung out to dry. I made sure I didn't slam the screen door, "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." But I wasn't going to run down the lane to Will's house. Might get my block knocked off, "Yes Ma'am." "Remember, stay off the river. Not a safe place to play. Make sure you're back in time for dinner." "Yes Ma'am. Would it be all right if I pack a lunch - later. Saw a big carp yesterday." "If you're going fishing on the river - stay on the bank." "Yes Ma'am."

I ran to the livery stable before she changed her mind and climbed the wall ladder up to the mow. Wasn't at all like the haymows on Grandfather Ropp's farm across the Scioto. His haymows 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 set a pony cart. Filling up half the mow - Grandfather'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 - seven times before I returned that buggy whip to its peg. I climbed into the front seat of the surrey - pretending I was holding the reins of a pair of midnight-black pacers going down Bellpoint Road to the general store. Climbed down and jumped into the pony cart and closed my eyes. Pretended to hold the reins of a brown and white Mustang pony - just like Little Beaver - Red Rider's side kick.

I was halfway to Ostrander - when Will called up from down below, "Come on down - Johnny. I'm promise not to beat up on you, but Christ all Friday - what did you say to your Grandmother? My Dad was all over me this morning." "Those swear words you just said." "Christ all Friday?" "Stubbed my toe on the door sill to the kitchen and your 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 that go to Saint Mary's Catholic School - the one at the County Seat. We shoot baskets with 'em at Bellpoint Gym on winter weekends. Thought it was a pretty neat saying. Better than swearing - not damning anything. We can shoot baskets if you want too." "Is there a basketball?" "Sure is - leave a couple there all the time. Still hoping that 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 resting 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 it can 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 that said no one lives south of the Ohio River." "Okay - okay I was wrong - I'll give you that. But - Grandfather Mac says there are millions down there and everyone eats crawdads."

I climbed down out of the mow. Will and me walked down Bellpoint Road to the one lane bridge across the Scioto. A great rusting hulk - it replaced the covered bridge that was wiped out during the last flood - before O'shaughnessy dam was built. We were careful when we walked along the side of the bridge. Stayed close to 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 from the bridge. Same school my Mother and Father went too. It had not changed. All twelve grades were still in the same old building and there were still less than nine boys in high school. Grandfather Mac taught when the school was behind the Church - across the river. He came from Pennsylvania to teach - before the turn of the century. Grandfather would still be teaching if it hadn't been for the County Clerk. In those days teachers were paid once a year. Rode his horse ten miles to the County Courthouse, but the Clerk didn't have his pay. When he was finally paid in August - the Clerk told him not to spend it all in one place. Grandfather lost his temper and quit on the spot - opened a general store. Sold it when his customers drove to the County Seat in their Model T Fords. After what he'd been through - didn't care much for the County folks. And he couldn't compete with city stores. Sure wished he still owned Bellpoint's general store - and all the candy and cookies and soda pop!

Bellpoint School looked impressive - high up on the hill above the river. Placed there to keep it dry when spring floods came. The old school was made out of wood - not more than four or five classrooms. Bellpoint School was made of old brick - like Grandfather's outhouse. When we arrived at the end of the bridge - Will ran ahead, "Race you to the top of the hill." I took off runnin' - passed him and he didn't catch me until I was inside the large front door. Out of breath, - we stopped and looked at trophies inside the large glass case. Will said, "Those large ones are for the State Basketball Championship. Had to be 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 or two hands above the waist." "Must have been like indoor football." "It was rough. Jumped center after each basket. But, the rules allowed for two foul shots even if you made the basket. That kept the fowls down."

We picked two basketballs off the rack at the end of the gym and began shooting at the west basket. I hit the ceiling five straight times before I adjusted my arc. The backboards were right against the wall - so we couldn't shoot lay-ups straight on. It was fun running up and down the length of a short court. Made me feel like a varsity player. But, it wasn't long before I discovered why we were the only ones here. It was hot. My clothes were soaked clear through to the skin. We both stopped at the same time - panting. 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 Will led the way. He primed it before pumping enough water to fill two cups - to drink and splash the sweat from our faces. He

filled the primer can with water - so the next person could prime the pump. Get our hind ends tanned in these parts if we didn't fill it and someone found out. I dumped the rest of my cup over my head. Will jumped up, "Follow me. Got something to show you."

Will ran to Bellpoint Bridge - scrambled down a bramble filled bank to a rickety old row boat hidden deep in the brush - and turned around. "Found it last week floating 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 pulled and Will pushed, "How did you get it up on the bank?" "Came out of the water - easy. You push and I'll pull." 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 as I jumped over the bow. Will shouted, "Grab an oar and we'll row her to the other side." We sat next to each other and began rowing in circles - before we got the hang of it. We rowed straight across and then north along the other bank to the lane behind Will's house. Wasn't easy going upstream, but we made it. We got it halfway out of the river without much effort - hiding the rowboat behind Doc's house.

Will sat down inside the boat, "What do you want to do now?" "I'll meet you back here with my fishing pole in twenty minutes." "Your Grandmother won't let you float on the Scioto." "Not if you don't tell her. Besides - we just rowed across and lightning didn't strike. We'll be okay as long as we don't tip her over." "Current isn't bad. We can row upstream without any 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 will go with us? Plenty of room." "Can't, he's still in Dad's doghouse for smoking in the outhouse."

I snuck in the front door - so Grandmother wouldn't find out that I was returnin' for a fishin' pole and Grandfather's bait bucket. I saw her through the kitchen window - hanging clothes on the line. Washing clothes was an all day job with an old fashioned washing machine and hanging clothes out to dry. I made two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and took a handful of oatmeal cookies. Filled a mason jar with water and placed all of it into a brown paper sack. Opened the screen door to the porch and tiptoed out to get my pole and bait bucket. Grandmother had eyes in the back of her head. She turned and wagged 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 my crawdads had survived overnight. They were scooting around all over the bucket, trying to hide under the river moss. Felt sorry for them. Bad enough that they had to dodge raccoons, carp and catfish. Soon they'd have to dodge largemouth bass. Will was sitting in the rowboat - waiting, "Jake stepped all over himself. Dad caught him smoking again. Found a cigar butt next to where your Uncle Bus parks his roadster. Bad enough he got caught. This time he's sicker than a dog. You know Jake - he's got a wooden head." "Where is he?" "Painting 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 climbed over the transom, "Where's your fishing pole?" "Didn't bring it. I'll row - you fish. I've had enough of it for awhile. I live on this river. Fishing gets boring after awhile. 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 fishing for?" "Largemouth bass."

Will let the boat drift away from the bank, "Too hot to catch 'em. This time of day they go deep. You'd be better off fishing for crappie - or sun fish." "Just have to throw 'em back in. Bass is the only fish Grandmother Mac will cook. Sure you can handle this boat?" "River's low and current's slow. We're heading downstream - let her drift." "Old bridge sure looks different from underneath. Looks like a giant metal erector set." "I'll drift close to the bank. Shade from trees along the bank will give you a better chance at catching a largemouth. Fish ain't stupid. Except for carp - they like shade too. You bring along enough food for two? Didn't want to go inside and get caught. Not with fence painting going on." "Made you a sandwich and we have 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 - looking out on pastureland. Most of the farmland on this side of the river was owned by relatives. 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. 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 - or branch. Wasn't any rocks to speak of. Scioto River cut mostly through mud after Bellpoint. Will was busy trying to keep us close to the bank without getting stuck and I was catching sun fish. Caught more than a dozen. Threw 'em all back in. Will was right - too hot for largemouth bass. Will turned toward the west bank, "I'm hungry. Going 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 worked on oatmeal cookies. I spoke, "Can't get my mind off those two shade tree mechanics. The ones that teased us yesterday afternoon. When we ran away -

the ugly one." "Old Ned Smith." "He pointed at us - making 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' he'll sick *A Big Hairy Red Thing* after Jake and me." "You never mentioned that before." "Too scared." "What about Dublin?" "No one in Bellpoint ever talks about it. Has to be a devil's hideout. Make a lot of moonshine in those hills above the Scioto. Some say Old Ned is still making it." "Anything else?" "And he's made a pact with the devil. Wouldn't pay for us to make him mad at us." "Don't plan on doing that. Do you want to row back?" Not thinking about how far we'd have 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."

Drifted downstream - under the bridge north of the Girls Industrial Home. Fancy name for a prison. The sun's shadow was about one or two o'clock when the first largemouth bass struck my bait. Will edged his boat out so I could fish in deeper water. Neither one of us noticed the current picked up. Caught a second largemouth bass and hooked it onto my stringer with the first one. Both over two pounds and keepers. Wasn't long before 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 awake. With the Scioto at a midsummer low - our rowboat slipped under the guard wire stretched over the river above the damn. It was put there to keep fools like us from going over the top. I woke up to a scream and, "Christ all Friday! We're goners!"

Those were the last words I heard. The noise of falling water blocked out every other sound. Lucky for us the river was low. Our rowboat slowed down - as it scrapped its bottom on the spillway - all the way down toward the deep water pool

below the dam. We skipped across that pond like one of our rocks on Mill Creek. Pointed end didn't hardly go under water. Didn't have time to think about why we stayed upright and afloat. Later when this was all over - we figured it was the low amount of water spilling over the dam that saved us. Breathed a sigh of relief when I found my fishing pole and bait bucket floating in the bottom of our boat. But both oars were gone - floating ahead toward white water rapids. Still had two bass attached to the stringer hangin' over the side. I let 'em go. The fall on the spillway scrapped their scales a bit. After a ride like that - they deserved to be set free. I emptied out the bait bucket and began bailing. Will was hanging on to both sides, "Christ all Friday! Watch out - white water ahead!" I looked up, "My Goodness!"

Our wild ride came to an end below the rapids on the west bank of the Scioto. Rapids made our ride over the dam seem like a walk down a shady lane. I helped Will pull the rowboat up on the bank, "Had to be at least a fifty foot drop over the dam." "More like a hundred." "We look like two drowned rats. Better take our shoes off and drain the water out of 'em." "Can't go barefoot up the hill to the road - too many rocks." "What about your 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 with branches. Might find someone with a truck." "It slides pretty good on these rocks." We moved it fifteen feet up on the bank and covered it over.

I looked up at the back end of a general store. Sign on it was large enough to read from half-a-mile away. Big as life - *Dublin!* "Boy! are we in trouble." Neither one of us had ever been this far south on the river. Pointed up and Will moaned, "Holy Cow - are we in for it. Better climb up the hill and hightail it outa' here. The road goes right through to Bellpoint." Will had his shoes on and was halfway

up the bank before I could say, "You betchum', Red Rider."
"Maybe we can hitch a ride. 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 watching you catch fish. We're in luck. Here comes a truck." Will waved as it went by. It stopped - backed up and we climbed on back.

We should have paid attention, but we didn't and it was going too fast to tell anyway. We were riding 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. We were all ready flying up the road. Will and I hung on for dear life. I looked inside the truck's 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 doing over sixty." Before we knew it - Old Ned turned off the main road and we were bouncing uphill on a dirt lane - dust flying all over the place. I hollered, "Hang on. I think he's trying to kill us." Couldn't jump off - we were too busy ducking tree branches and Old Ned was bouncing along over thirty. He slid to a halt in front of a run-down shack. Will and me jumped off and tried to run, but two scraggly looking types grabbed us and wouldn't turn us loose.

Old Ned opened the door of his flatbed and climbed down, "Look 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 a silly smile and meet 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 and our *Big Hairy Red Thing* is gonna' wake up hungry. Where's my jug?" One Eyed pointed

toward the porch. "Well - go fetch it while I check on our still. Brought supplies and tobacco. In the front seat. Break out our pipes - we'll have a party." German Jerry opened the door to a shed that was more fallin' down than standing up. He and One Eyed shoved us in and slammed the door. Locked us in by bracing a board against the door. There was a smell in here - a cross between sulfur and manure that knocked us off our feet.

We sat there - neither of us saying a word until German and One Eyed began sharing pulls from their jug with Ned on the porch. Will shook his head, "It's my fault. I should have recognized it was Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. We'll be in a whole world of hurts if we can't get out of this fix." "They'll have to let us go - won't they?" "Don't bet your life on it. Ned said *The Big Hairy Red Thing* was hungry. Looks like they're saving us for supper." "You've convinced me - lets see if we can find a way outa' here. Has to be a path out back. I can smell a whiskey still cooking. Must be down by the creek. Need pure water. Wells around here have too much lime." Will lit up, "They're too lazy to haul water. Path down there has to be a way out." "If they're as drunk as they smell - should pass out soon. Front of this shed looks too solid. If you go west - I'll go east - we'll meet in back." "Better get a move on. Old Ned's not only missing most of his teeth - he's a might short on common sense." I held up my nose and pointed toward a locked metal door in the floor, "*The Big Hairy Red Thing!*"

We returned - no luck - and peeked out between the gaps of two warped boards. Our three jailers were sitting on the front porch - their legs hanging over the edge - smoking pipes - drinking whiskey from a jug. They looked dirty - mean and ugly. Old Ned was getting louder and meaner with each pull from the jug. I looked over at Will, "Doesn't look

like they're going to fall asleep. What's plan B?" "Time to do another look-a-round and see if we can find a way outa' here. Couple of loose boards to the front, but that won't do. I'm looking out back again." "I'm moving. Old Ned is beginning to squeal like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I skirted past a stack of copper pipes - looking for a way out. We met again in the back of the shed. I asked, "Any way out?" "No, how about you?" Nothing, but stolen pipe for their still and did you hear that rumble from behind the metal door?" "See this chicken skin?" "Hello - this board shows promise." "Damn shed looks like it's falling down. Ned's got it buttressed with two-by-fours." "Lets see if we can pry your board loose." Will tugged and I pulled until we pushed the 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 - tumbling to the ground. I followed after. When we were both free, we knelt down and pushed the boards back into place.

I stood up to brush off my shirt - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* let out a roar that rattled my teeth. Will was halfway down the path by Ned's still. I didn't bother brushing my pants - followed right after him. Ran bent over past Old Ned's still. Didn't stop until we both reached the creek. I held 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 like it. Must have them tied up - out back of his shack." "We better walk down the center of this creek. Might 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 bottommed and shallow - not more than a foot deep. We walked in the middle until it became too deep to wade. Got lucky again. Ten minutes downstream - the bramble thinned out to rocks and pasture. Scrambled up the bank - dried our

feet out only a little - put our sneakers back on and trotted along the bank toward the river road. Will stopped and tugged on my arm, "Hear those dogs?" "Yep - they're either being fed to *The Big Hairy Red Thing* or chasin' after us. See that path. Lets follow it." "And make tracks."

Didn't stop running until we reached the road. Will pointed north, "Lets get moving." "Don't hear the dogs and I need to catch my breath." "Can't stop now. Not if you want to live. We can continue walking up this side of the river or we can cross over at the dam." "I vote to cross over. If they come after us - we can stop at Grandfather Ropp's farm." "What are you going to tell your Grandparents?" "Nothing." "What about your fishing pole and bait bucket?" Oh boy! They're on the back of Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. Lets see. I 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 moonshiners - because we hitchhiked - which I'm not allowed to do. Almost fed to *A 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 - walked and ran until we were three miles north of Old Ned's place.

We both heard it at the same time. Without thinking - I jumped over the roadside ditch - climbed up the bank and tumbled over the hedgerow. Will scrambled over - after me. Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck was coming up the road. We both hunkered down - laying flat on our bellies. When the flatbed came alongside - we peeked out between the branches. Old Ned was driving - weaving all over the road. One Eyed Jack was

at his side and German Jerry was sleeping on the truck bed. Looked like he had passed out. I saw my pole and bait bucket up next to the cab and stood up - figuring I was home free. Ned's truck hit a chuck hole and German sat straight up. He pointed and shouted as the flatbed went over a hill, but didn't stop. I looked at Will, "What do you think? Are they coming back after us?" "Might be, but Ned's carrying boxes on the back. Might be delivering moonshine to the roadhouse on the other side of the dam." "Chance to get my fishing pole and bait bucket back. You game?" "Ned's flatbed makes so much noise - we'll have enough warning to hide anywhere except on the bridge over the dam." "We might come out of this clean as a whistle. Lets go." We hopped back over the hedgerow - climbed up out of the ditch and ran down the road toward the dam.

We ran until we got tired - walked and ran. When we arrived at O'shaughnessey Dam - looked both ways, but didn't see a flatbed. Tell you what - we sure walked gingerly across the bridge over the top of that dam. Stopped and looked down at the spillway. Will whistled, "Don't know how we survived the fall. Must be a hundred foot drop." We walked on - like we were walking on egg shells to the other side. Climbing uphill from the dam - we stopped. Old Ned's flatbed truck was parked in front of the roadhouse. Will held me back, "Lets take our time and do it up brown." "Don't have time. Need to get my gear before they come back outside." "Don't hurry. They're most likely inside trying to sober up on hamburgers and beer." "Can't sober up on beer." "You and I know that, but they don't." "Looks clear to me. Those boxes are gone, but my pole and bucket are still there."

I hunkered down - keeping the flatbed between me and the roadhouse and scooted across the road into the parking lot. We snuck up on Old Ned's truck from behind - keeping an eye on the roadhouse door. While I grabbed my gear - Will popped

the flatbed's hood. He 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." "Lets get outa' here." And we took off running. Didn't stop until we were a half mile north of the zoo. Walked and ran and walked and ran. We didn't even stop at Grandfather Ropp's farm. As we walked by - I told Will, "If we stop here we'll both have a whole lot of explaining to do. Way it is - if we get back before supper - we'll be home free. This is the best adventure I've ever had." "Only one thing that ruins it." "What's that?" "We can't tell anybody."

By the time we reached Bellpoint Bridge - it was getting on to six o'clock. Grandfather Mac drove up and stopped, "Open up the rumble seat - Johnny. Looks like you two fell in the river with your clothes on. Catch any bass?" My mind was racing. I never threw bass back in, but I couldn't lie. "A flock of sunfish, but I threw 'em back. Not much luck on this part of the river." This was true - I just didn't tell the whole of it. "Day after tomorrow we'll go fishing at my favorite bass pool below the dam. You and Will can go up Mill Creek and fill my bait bucket with crawdads." Will and I were laughing - out of relief as we climbed into his rumble seat. Grandfather shook his head as he slipped his Plymouth roadster into first gear, "Never will understand you modern youngsters." Will and me - our bodies like bottles of soda water that had been shook until all the fizz escaped - were asleep before Grandfather's Plymouth Roadster climbed up the hill into the quiet village of Bellpoint.

*"It was kind of solemn, drifting down the
big still river, laying on our backs looking
up at the stars ... nothing ever happened
to us at all, that night, nor the next ..."*

2

Went to bed right after supper and didn't wake up until ten o'clock the next morning. That afternoon - Will and me went up Mill Creek with Grandfather's bait bucket and a bar of soap. Took an old fashioned bath in our swimming hole. Had to get the smell of *The Big Hairy Red Thing* in Old Ned's shed off our skins. No one else seemed to notice, but Will and me had the skin crawls. Filled Grandfather's Mac's bait bucket with a bunch of crawdads and river moss and ran - and ran sraight home with one eye open for Old Ned and his gang. Will was truly sad that he'd lost his rowboat, but he knew it was our fault. Took all my willpower not to say anything about our adventure to Grandfather Mac when we went fishin'. Funny thing happened when we were fishin' in the deep water pool below the dam. Grandfather caught two largemouth bass with their scales scraped on one side. Now - all bass look alike. But - this was peculiar. And they looked like any white fish filet when Grandmother covered them with flour - salt - pepper and fried them for supper. Tender - best I've ever had. The rest of my stay in Bellpoint - absolutely nothing happened - or so it seemed. After Will and me had our run in with Old Ned - his gang and *A Big Hairy Red Thing* - everything else we did seemed tame. I was ready to go across the river to Grandfather Ropp's farm. And he phoned right after supper last night. Said I'd be in time to help with threshing. I was going to bring in the sheaves. Harvesting - one of the best of times ever to be on a farm.

Saturday morning came and here I was - up early - packed and ready to travel across the Scioto River to Grandfather's

house. Grandfather Mac wanted me to sit up front with him, but he understood what a rumble seat ride meant to me. He shifted into high gear and we were on Bellpoint Bridge quick as a wink. Felt like a fool, but couldn't help it. I began to sing, *"Over the river and through the wood, To Grandfather's house we go."* Didn't know if these were the right lyrics and didn't care. Seemed like it was the right thing to do and no one could hear me and know that I couldn't carry a tune worth a lick. It was warm out and the sun was going to bake today, but when I closed my eyes - I saw snow flying - and horses pulling a sleigh over a frozen river - woods covered with frost and the whole world - winter white. Almost made me shiver. Grandfather Mac brought me back into the baking heat of a summer's day when he turned up the lane leading up to the farmhouse. He pulled in front of the wheat bin - empty - waiting for harvest and picked me up out of the rumble seat. Gave me a Dutch rub before placing me down on the ground, "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. Rubbing his whiskers against my cheek wasn't my idea of a good time. It was beginning to hurt. "Johnny - mind your manners - now. Don't use any of those words you picked up from the Preacher's boy - Will isn't it?" After Grandmother's lye soap - wasn't a chance I'd swear. Not for awhile. "Yes Sir, I'll mind my manners."

While my Grandfathers were busy visiting - I lifted my suitcase out of the rumble seat well. Grandmother Mac had cleaned and pressed everything. Didn't want my Grandmother Ropp to think she didn't take right good care of me. I ran to the kitchen door and into Grandmother Ropp's arms. She took my suitcase, "Scoot on upstairs and change into your farm clothes. You'll find a pair of bib overalls up on the bed. If the pant legs are too long - roll them up so they don't drag in the dirt." She opened my suitcase and smiled,

"Why everything is clean and pressed. Mrs. Mac certainly is 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 changed into bib overalls. Coming up the stairs reminded me of being on a pirate ship's ladder - with all of 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 that made visiting the farm fun. That attic and the barn - with its three haymows. Grandmother's attic was stacked high with my Father's childhood books and toys. And his books were really neat. Full of stories about Yankee boys beating up on Germany's Kaiser. Kaiser always had his silver spiked helmet knocked sideways. And there were books with all kinds of adventure and sports. Last time I stayed - I only looked at pictures. This time I'd read a few, but for now they'd have to wait. I had shoes to put back on - couldn't wear sneakers on the farm - and candy was waiting.

Grandfather always had a white sack of dime store candy in the cupboard - over the refrigerator. Had to stand on a chair to get to it. I bounded down the staircase - two steps at a time. Grandmother knew where I was heading. She held open the white paper sack, "You can have two, but that's all. Don't want you to spoil your appetite before supper." I reached in and took out two large orange slices - gum drops - soft jelly candy coated with sugar. Always stuck to the top of my back teeth like gum to a chair bottom. I sat down at the kitchen table. 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. Center piece was her eight burner - two oven Cast-iron range. In the winter it stayed fired all day and night. Helped keep

the house warm. Windows would frost over so you couldn't see out, but the 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 the Cast-iron range and the reservoir on the side would have hot water - and everyone had to take a bath. Grandmother was busy churning 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 to the back porch. I cringed as the door slammed shut behind me, "Sorry Grandmother. I'll be more careful next time." She looked up smiling - knowing that I wouldn't, "Mind that you do just that."

Grandfather's Border collie - Spot sat waiting at the bottom of the steps. He jumped up - placing both paws on my stomach - his tail wagging in circles. I scratched behind both of ears, "Come on Spot - lets explore." He ran beside me - prancing like a prince - happy to have someone besides a cow to play with. Spot got his name from the black hair covering 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 back on tracks along the front wall. I opened both - just a crack - so we could squeeze inside. Hay wagon was parked on the barn floor. Grandfather had installed sideboards - so burlap sacks of wheat wouldn't fall off when harvest began Monday morning. I hoisted Spot up and we both sat there - my feet and his front paws dangling over the side. Spot seemed to like daydreaming as much as I did.

I could hardly wait for the threshing machine to arrive. Crew would fire up the boiler to make steam - with clouds of black smoke belching upwards into a hazy morning. Neighbors arriving with pitchforks and wagons. Farm work could be fun when everyone pitched in. Wagons would haul cut wheat stalks to the thresher. The thresher's giant wheel turned metal

grinders - its teeth separating 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 winter fodder. You might not know about fodder. We spread wheat stalks around our barnyard so cows will have something dry to sleep and walk on. Webster says farmers feed it to domestic animals, but he never was much of a farmer. As the stalks decompose - we mix them in with the manure. Gives it substance - so it's easier to spread on the fields. Grandfather also spread fodder on the floor of his stalls so horses will have clean straw to walk and sleep on. Makes horse manure easier to shovel - too.

Spot barked. His daydream must have been over or maybe he was thinking about Monday's thresher dinner. Long wooden tables were set up under the giant walnut trees in the front yard. Farmer's wives stacked them high with pies - cookies cakes and other stuff - stuff we have to eat before desert. Like baked ham - fried chicken - biscuits - gravy and fresh baked bread. The front yard would be full of farm workers - milling around - talking about the wheat harvest - knee high corn by the Fourth of July - horses and farm equipment. Sort of like a midsummer county fair without harness races and amusement rides. Spot nudged me with his nose. 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 front paws. He jumped away - soon enough.

We checked the stalls. Horses were out in the pasture and wouldn't be in until evening. Grandfather didn't like to keep them inside when it was hot. He had six stalls. First two were for harness horses. Took care of them long after he sold the carriage and surrey. Used one or the other to pull his one horse sleigh when there was enough snow. They passed on several years back - natural like. None of his horses would ever see a glue factory. The sleigh still hung in the

back of his equipment shed - harness and sleigh bells on the wall. Grandfather had a haymow above the horse stalls - another went from ceiling to floor - directly across. The third one - we called the back haymow - was over the cattle pens for his Short Horn Durham bull and his Jersey milk cow. Hay was packed in loose - so it would dry and not catch fire through spontaneous combustion. I wasn't supposed to go near the cattle pens - not since Willy visited from Osborn last summer. He teased the bull with a long piece of straw and our bull got mad - came after him. Jumped right through the wall mounted feed rack. Willy and me cleared a five foot wooden gate without touching the top. 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 everyone thought was tame.

Told Spot, "Sit while I climb the ladder to the haymow." The one across from the horse stalls. There isn't anything more fun than jumping into loose hay. I climbed the six-by-six cross beam and jumped - climbed back up and jumped again. Quit after the sixth jump. Haymow was getting hot with a midsummer sun shining down on metal roof. Climbed down the ladder real careful. Used to slide down, but not anymore. Not since one of the neighbors got his innards punctured with a pitchfork doing the same thing. Spot was waiting for me - still in the same spot - sitting with his tail thumping on the dirt floor. He knew we were going back outside. Barn had two sheds. One with the sleigh had corn planters - wheat drills - plows and discs stored out of the weather. The one between the stalls and water trough had a huge all purpose wagon with wooden spokes and metal covered wheels. Past the water trough was a drive through tractor shed. On both sides were corn cribs. In the middle was a monster of an iron cleated tractor - a Farmall with huge metal rear wheels and small knife like front ones. I gave this tractor a wide berth - same as the bull. A great Uncle was run over by a

tractor like this one. 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 - until we ran toward the shed with the sleigh in it. It was still there - hanging on the wall by its runners - only a bit more rusty. The drill was toward the back - in front of the corn planter. Forgot - you may not know what a drill is - an elongated box like contraption. Has a front lid for wheat or oat seed and a back lid for lime - set between two giant wheels. A series of tubes on springs runs the length of it. When the wheels turn - the tubes move up and down drilling wheat seed and lime into the soil. It's fun to ride standing up on the back rail and smooth out the lime so it doesn't cake up. Grandfather Ropp had all ready moved the hay rake and cutter bar to the front. First thing he'd do for harvest is cut wheat - then rake it into wind rows. Then he'd use the hay loader to bring wheat up on top the wagon so it could be carried to the threshing machine. Once a threshing machine boiler got fired up - it set in one spot. Wheels on it were only used to drive it from field to field. Spot barked at me. He'd seen enough of this shed. He was thirsty.

I walked after him as he made a beeline for the moss covered concrete water tank. While he drank his fill - I kept right on walking to the tractor shed - with its drive through corn cribs. Inside the furthest crib was a corn sheller. Had 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 shelling corn. I cranked the wheel and shelled six ears. Put the corn in my pockets - so they bulged out. When Grandfather brought his horses in for water - I'd help lead them to their stalls and try again to make friends with Sandy and Clyde - giant Scot Clydesdale - just like ones that pulled beer wagons. Sandy

was a frisky one. When Grandfather gave me his lead - I was never sure who was in charge. Spot barked and pulled on my pants leg. He knew my routine - our next stop would be the smokehouse - between the wheat bin and well.

Grandfather Ropp's smoke house was almost as rickety as Old Ned's shed. He decided to let it go - when it fell down he'd stop smoking meat. Figured it 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 hung 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 - knowing he'd get his hind end swatted if he got anywhere near Grandmother Ropp's chickens. She let her chickens roam free, 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. Hunting for eggs was like a pirate looking for gold. First place I looked 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 in the back haymow - under the corn planter and on the Farmall tractor seat. Grandmother could use all the eggs I could find when she baked tomorrow. I'd explored all of my favorite places by supper time. I ran outside to help Grandfather clean out the stalls before we brought the horses in from the field.

Didn't have to walk them far. They were on their way in as the sun dropped over the barn. Sandy nudged my pocket. He could smell shelled corn. After he drank his fill at the concrete water tank - he followed me into his stall. I gave him his fair share of corn and Clyde - too. After dining on grass all day - they couldn't be too hungry. 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 the box - first. After all the grass - didn't need much hay. When we finished chores it was time for us to wash up for supper. Chores always 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 - nothing green. Grandfather was going to town after supper. All the farmers parked on main street and gossip about work - crops - weather - and trouble. He'd smoke his weekly cigar on the way in to town and come home with the odor of smoke on his clothes. And if I was stayin' - a white candy sack to put up on the shelf. Grandmother went along if she had shopping to do, but not tonight. She was going to fire up the range when the evening turned cool and bake pie crusts. Getting 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."

I shuffled up the stairs. Attic door was only four foot high and its steps led down to a carpenter's mystery. Built over the winter pantry - its 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 other stuff lined 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 beating up on the Spaniards in Cuba. I looked all of them over - selected one about a Yale football player. Picture on the cover showed him wearin' a turtle neck sweater with a big Y on the front. He carried a football - so round it looked more like a soccer ball than a football. I read the first page 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 Harvard boys always 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 good and Harvards are always mean low down skunks."

Turned around to sit down on the steps and noticed Grandmother's dulcimer on the top shelf. Laid the Yale book down and took it off the shelf. 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 all about a poor boy from town who entered Yale and was soon set upon by bullies from Harvard. Wasn't a fair fight. Four against one, but he put up a good show and they ran away - cursing him. I could identify with my Yale hero. I had Ned and his gang after me, but I didn't win out. Unless escaping out back was winning. No - winning 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 finding out how he was going to do it. Maybe I would discover a way to punish Old Ned. Mother always said, "If you want to find the right answers - read a book."

Grandmother tapped me on my shoulder, "Wake up young man. Time to brush your teeth and go to bed." "Yes Ma'am. Is Grandfather home from town?" "Came home an hour ago. Do you want 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 the ham bone?" "You'll spoil that Border collie so he'll be of no use to us on the farm. Hurry down to the kitchen before the rolls get cold." I'd fallen asleep reading on the top step. Didn't get halfway through the first chapter. Stretched my arms over my head - turned out the light and closed the attic door. Careful - going down a steep staircase when I'm half asleep. Grandfather purchased his favorite breakfast rolls - caramel - without nuts. I remembered Grandfather's rule - chores first. So I took part of a ham bone to Spot - curled up asleep on the back porch. Laid it in front of his nose, but all he did was twitch and curl tighter. Spot knew the bone would still be there when he woke in the morning. Milk and hot caramel roll finished off a perfect day. I washed up and peeked in the cupboard. Another white sack of candy was next to the orange slices. I opened the sack and took a long whiff. I smelled chocolate coating with cherries inside. Didn't take one - wasn't allowed to - not after brushing my teeth.

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 full for the beef cattle he had pastured there. After breakfast he brought out fishing poles and we walked downhill and across the River Road to the Scioto. Fished along the bank until it was time for our noon meal. Caught a mess of sunfish and two large carp, but we threw 'em all back in. Grandfather and Grandmother Ropp had a falling out with the Church 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 that he

could speak to the Lord well enough on his own without a preacher's interference. Afternoon - he rested in his high backed cane rocking chair - listening to music on the radio. Grandmother busied herself making filling for her cherry and blueberry pies. She fired up the Cast-iron range early and we had roast pork and potatoes for supper. Now - roast pork gravy would make a candy lover want to miss desert.

After supper - I hightailed it upstairs to the attic and picked up my book. The Yale hero was trying out for the football team. He ran through everyone - without getting tackled - so they were going to make him one of two halfbacks in Yale's single wing offense. This was running football. Quarterback called signals and blocked. Center hiked the ball directly to the runner. Fullback ran up the middle - right halfback ran to the left - left halfback ran to the right and everyone else blocked. When this book was written at the turn of the century - football was closer to rugby. Halfbacks were the heroes and all eleven men played both ways - not a game for sissies. Any boy worth his salt wanted to be a halfback. Grandfather called up the stairs, "Come on down - Johnny. *I Love a Mystery* will be on in a minute." I laid my book down and bounded down the stairs. Jack - Doc and Reggie were climbing a set of golden stairs in a land far - far away. Their climb was fraught with danger - one trap - one pitfall after another. *Valse Triest* - echoing from the speaker of Grandfather's RCA Victor radio console - announced the beginning - sending shivers up my spine.

Jack - Doc and Reggie were still climbing up the golden staircase - high into the mountains of Asia. Stairs had to be fifty miles high. This was the ninth week of climbing and they were only halfway up. They had spears thrown at them - and arrows and rocks. Tonight they were jumped by men all covered with hair - like Old Ned's *Big Hairy Red Things*, but

got away. *Valse Triest* and the announcer's voice - asking us to tune in next week for another exciting episode - announced the end. I ran back upstairs and resumed reading. The Yale hero and his football teammates were going to get even with the Harvard bullies when they returned to New Haven. Got to the part where the whole team was singing about poor little lambs that went astray when Grandmother tapped my shoulder. She pointed downstairs, "If you're going to help thresh wheat tomorrow - you need your rest." I set my book down - marking the page, "What time is it?" "Time for a young man whose been listening to too much radio to go to bed." "Why do they play classical music to introduce radio programs?" "Ask your Grandfather. He's the one who wastes his time listening to radio - day and night."

Grandfather Ropp was in the kitchen working on his farm books. He motioned for me to sit down, "Understand your Grandmother says I spend too much time listening to radio. When you have to spend all day out working on the farm - horses don't provide much entertainment. Radio gives me an opportunity to find out what's going on in the world. Also 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 what program is going to be on the air. Know what's coming without them having to tell us." "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* fits the Lone Ranger better than a boy getting an apple shot off his head with an arrow. When the orchestra plays the music - I hear horses gallop." "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 for tonight. You didn't wash behind your ears."

Grandmother led me to the sink and pumped fresh water up from the cistern, onto a wash cloth. "Your Grandfather didn't tell you the most important thing about radio." I flinched as she scrubbed real hard behind both ears, "Ouch!" She stayed after me, "Listening to too much radio will make your mind go slow and if you're not careful - your mind will stop and you won't be able to think at all. Now get on up to bed." I wasn't sure if radio was really bad for my mind. Grandfather Ropp said she worried about my Father reading too many dime novels. Said he'd lose his eyesight. With hours of radio to listen too - adventure books to read - I knew I was living in the best of times. Wasn't any war - least not here. 'Course those Germans were always fighting someone. I opened the window. Farm crickets were busy calling to one another. Didn't keep me awake. In the morning I'd hear the mourning doves. Grandfather's farm stretched down to River Road - across from the Scioto. Government took land on the other side of the road when they built O'shaughnessey dam. We were right 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 shouting to each other. I tossed and turned and tossed some more, but 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 the hbedroom 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 going to get even. The book was just getting exciting 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 the. What book are you reading - that you can't put down." "One about a 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 have to tell you the same thing I told him. Off to bed or I'll tan your hide - good." "Yes Ma'am."

Grandmother's voice was sweeter than coo of mourning doves, "Johnny - wake up." I opened my eyes. "Better hurry if you want to help your Grandfather with chores. Threshing machine will be here within the hour." I was out of bed and dressed in in a minute. Almost tripped over my shoelaces bounding down stairs. Grandmother had eggs - bacon and pancakes on the kitchen table. Last spring her maple syrup was so pure it hurt the back of my mouth. This poured better and tasted better. She looked up, "I added molasses. Has to last until next year when maple sap runs again." "I don't mind. Like it better this way. Doesn't soak into pancakes and it's milder. Pure maple syrup slides off the top one and soaks into the bottom pancake. Makes the top one dry and hard to swallow." "Slow down. Your Grandfather has to milk the Jersey first. He won't water the horses without you. Thinks your old enough to help bring in the wheat. I'm not so sure. Mind you - when you're on top of 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 closed. I could hear Grandmother say, "Just like his Father. Won't have a farmer with this one. Doesn't have patience - none at all."

I ran to the barn and pushed open the doors. Spot sat next to Grandfather - watching as he milked - licking his lips. Once in a while - a stream of milk came his way. Spot was a frustrated sheep dog without sheep to herd. So he practiced herding Grandfather's cows, but they 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 - jumping away from flying hooves. He barked at me and wagged his tail as Grandfather stood up and hung his three legged milking stool on the wall, "Carry the pail back to the kitchen. I'll wait for you - then we'll lead the horses to water. You can help me harness them to the cutter bar." The milk pail was a little over half full. The 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 at the double door to the horse stalls with Sandy and Clyde all ready to go, "Take their leads and water them while I get their harness ready."

I led - or rather they led me to the water trough - and stood by while they drank their fill. Clyde was as docile as could be. Sandy still thought he was a colt - as frisky as a newborn. Boosted me in the rear end twice with his nose - as I led them to the shed where Grandfather was waiting. He took their leads, "Better watch. They'll 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 gee-hawers in these parts. Now there I go again - most folks don't know what gee-haw means. Gee is the command to tell a horse to go right and haw - to the left. Giddy-up with clicking sounds is the command to go and whoa means to 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 farming as farmers. I was too small to command a team of horses - or drive a tractor. The only things I was allowed to do was lift - haul and pump. I'd have to be content with tossing sheaves of wheat from my wagon into the maw of the threshing machine. Grandfather tested the harness and made sure Sandy and Clyde were comfortable. He sat on the cutter bar seat, "Think

you're old enough to go up to the east pasture and fill up the water tank?" "Can I take Spot along?" "Couldn't hold him back. Wheat's drying pretty good. Better get to cutting or we'll have a lot of folks standing around waiting."

Spot ran by my side with one eye out - tryin' to follow Grandfather. He wasn't keen about trotting behind a cutter bar. Teeth and blades were almost razor sharp. If they weren't - it'd knock more wheat down than cut. I took off runnin'. Spot flew by me like I was standing still. He was waiting by the tank when I pulled up outa' breath. Cows had drunk the tank nearly 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 tried to egg me on. He'd found a loser and didn't want to let go, but I would have none of it. Didn't worry about taking my time. Grass was still wet with dew. Have to dry before threshing would commence.

As we topped the hill on our way back to the barn - Spot let out a bark and took off runnin' toward the barnyard. A giant threshing machine was coming up the lane - steam comin' out its boiler - black smoke billowin' from its stack and its whistle blowing. Neighbors were arriving from every which way with tractors - cutter bars - rakes and wagons. The 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 the back to bring up wheat from the windrows. My job was to move the wheat to the front - make sure it was distributed evenly and didn't fall off.

Wasn't hard work - moving the wheat around a wagon with a pitchfork. Ben - the neighbors boy was an expert. Drove slow so we wouldn't leave any wheat laying on the ground. We drove to the threshing machine with a full load. Had to wait

to unload - fifth in line. When we pulled into the second slot - couldn't believe my eyes. One Eyed Jack and German Jerry were shoveling coal into the boiler and Old Ned Smith was adjusting the control valves. I jumped down and placed the tractor and wagon between me and Old Ned. Ben asked, "Why'd you jump down? We'll be unloading in a few minutes." "Hiding from those three moonshiners. Why are they tending the boiler?" "Captain that runs the thresher hires 'em when he brings his machine north. No one better except a railroad engineer - knows how to fire a boiler." 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 every once in a while. Threshing machine is a modern marvel - wheat comes out one end and straw the other. Steam hissin' - black smoke risin' - gears clankin' - men cussing - whistle blowin' - it was like the Fourth of July on Grandfather'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. We finished unloading our third wagon of wheat when the dinner bell rang. Ben didn't waste any time drivin' to the tables 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 more farm hands to arrive. I ducked inside the house and waited for One Eyed Jack - German Jerry and Old Ned. They were the last to arrive. Had to bank the boiler fires before they could leave. Ladies were busy setting food out on the tables. Everyone sat down and took what they wanted. Passed it around - country style. When it looked like the moonshiners were more interested in food than me - I sat down - as far away as I could get. We had fried chicken - ham - corn - hot biscuits - cornbread - mashed potatoes and gravy. Washed it all down with hot coffee - or 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 a graniteware mug half full of coffee and half full of milk. 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 something - like a touch of sulfur and a whole lot of manure. Looked up into Old Ned's grinning face. He was uglier than a devil - beyond description - what with only one front tooth and tobacco juice dripping out of the corner of his mouth. His face was so close to mine - I knew he'd turn my pie crust black. He grabbed my arm and spoke to me in half growl - half mean, "I know where you live. You say one word about me to anyone about locking you and Will up in my shed and I'll slice you into little pieces and feed you to my *Big Hairy Red Thing*." He was gone before I could run - or talk back - or do anything. Which was probably just as well. All I would be able to do was stutter - anyway. Old Ned didn't have to worry about me saying anything. I'd be in trouble at home if I did. I looked around to see if anyone noticed. Ben was stoking food away and Grandmother Ropp was busy socializing with the other ladies. 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 staying with Grandfather Ropp. And if he had any smarts - he'd leave well enough alone. Anyway - come next Sunday - Father was driving me back to Osborn.

Made six more trips carrying wheat to the machine before we finished. Old Ned knew where I was - so I stopped trying to hide. Seemed like he was working himself up into a real lather each time we unloaded. Face kept gettin' redder and eyes - well squinty mean - real evil like. Old Ned looked so full of hatred - he 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 sleeping it off on the back 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 removing the distributor cap from their flatbed Ford truck. Ben smiled, "Serves 'em right for trying to mess with you and Will." He thought a minute or two - chewing on wheat straw, "'Course that sorry lot now have you and Will between the rock and the hard place." "Old Ned is the first person I've ever met who seems to get his enjoyment from tormenting other folks." "He's known for that. Fat's in the fire for you and Will. He'll keep coming after you unless someone else gets in his way. Best you can hope for is he'll get tired of tormenting you. If I were you - I'd stay out of his way." "Won't be hard. I'm going 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 set of unwanted worries.

Threshing machine pulled up stakes and was on its way to the next farm before sunset. It would be our turn to help the neighbors in the morning. I helped bed down two tired horses. Ground six more ears of corn for a treat. Sandy's favorite trick was to pin me to the side of the stall when I came inside to feed him, but he was a real gentleman this evening. Even nuzzled me with his nose and didn't try to step on my foot. Spot was worn out from barking at all the strangers and the monster threshing machine. He'd done his best to protect us and now that they were gone. He curled up and slept. Grandmother served leftovers from the noon meal for supper. After dinner - Grandfather Ropp turned the radio on to his favorite comedian - Joe Penner. He was an old vaudevillian who carried a duck under his arm. His favorite punch line was, "Wanna' buy a duck?" Grandfather doubled over in laughter, but I didn't understand.

While Grandfather listened and laughed at Joe Penner's stories - I wandered upstairs to the attic and opened my book. I read two pages - then rested my eyes - leaning back against the door sill. Grandmother's voice jolted me back to life, "Wake up - young man. Let me have a look at those hands. My-oh-my - just look at those blisters. You've seen the last of threshing for awhile. Grandfather should have given you a pair of gloves." "They'll be okay by tomorrow." "And better the next day - if you rest them. Come along with me to the kitchen. I have some salve that might help." I followed her downstairs into the kitchen. The salve cooled the blisters all right, but 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 the 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 - for me - 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 - with one culinary masterpiece after another. Tried to hide it - but she noticed my breakfast was two pieces of warm cherry pie and a glass of fresh cold milk. Grandmother didn't say a word - just smiled at my breakfast selection, but not at my hands. She rubbed my hands with salve and gave me a piece of advice I could not refuse, "You'll have to stay home today, but I don't want you frittering away your time listening to radio. Read a book or take Spot for a walk. You can ride to the neighbors with me when I deliver pies and help prepare the tables for thresher dinner." "If it's all right - I'll hang around here." I wasn't interested in listening to radio in daytime. Couldn't stand the slow pace of the soap operas. Give me a *Jack Armstrong* or *Captain Midnight* adventure anytime,

but not soap operas. They hurt my brain. Almost made it out the door, but Grandmother wasn't finished with her lecture. "I'll have to talk to your Mother about your listening to too much radio. Isn't right for a body to fritter away his time like that. Can you imagine how much damage that nonsense does to your mind? Now - get to the sink and brush your teeth before you run outdoors to play."

Almost didn't make it to the barn in time to carry the milk pail back to the kitchen. Spot ran alongside - barking and jumping. The time he spent curled up on the back porch for a long night's rest made him frisky. We got back to the horse stall door 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 evening. They could use a treat when they returned home from the neighbors farm. After they drank their fill - I helped Grandfather hitch them to the wagon. They were going to pull burlap sacks full of threshed wheat to the granary. Grandfather finally had to give in. Horses couldn't pull a cutter bar fast enough to keep up with a threshing machine. He released the hand brake on his wagon, "I'll have two spoiled horses on my hands when you return home to Osborn. Take Spot with you to the east pasture and fill the water tank. He'll keep you company - the walk will keep him from following me. Fool dog thinks he can herd cars when we're out on the highway. You'll find a pair of gloves in the equipment shed to protect your hands. Next time - remind yourself to wear them before you help. City hands aren't used to farm work." "I'd sure like to go with you. Will you change your mind?" "Your Grandmother 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 - we've got cows to herd in the east pasture." I took off runnin', "Race

you to the water tank." He flew by with ears back and tail flying - up the lane. As I topped the crest of the hill - Spot sat waiting for me - tail wagging - scratching behind one ear with his hind leg - 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 - matching my pace stride for stride. Pumped the tank was almost full. Gloves helped a bit, but my hands were still sore. Spot edged out in the pasture. "Stay away from those cows. We're not bringing them home. Come along with me - we're done here." We both stopped at the top of the hill. I looked out and Spot sniffed. On the horizon - black smoke drifted upward to the morning sky. We heard the steam whistle and broke into a trot, but wasn't any use. We were too late. Grandfather's wagon left without us. I stopped at the equipment shed and hung up his work gloves. Spot kept right on going to the two stone pillars guarding the farmyard entrance. He laid down - stretched out on his stomach - nose flat to the ground - waiting for Grandfather Ropp and his horses - to return.

I wandered over to the swing hanging 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 the water and wooden seat worn into a comfortable shape - from when Father was a boy. At the top of my forward swing - I could see the Scioto River. I wasn't going anywhere near it - not after my run-in with Old Ned Smith and his gang. Swinging was fun - even if it was kind-of sissy like. Grandmother opened the kitchen screen door carrying her egg basket in her hands, "Johnny - see if there are any eggs about." I waited until the swing's arc decreased and jumped off, "Yes Ma'am." "With all the baking I've been doing - we're down to less than a dozen." I made a beeline straight to the hen house. With threshing and all its associated commotion - chickens stayed away from the sheds and barn. Found almost two dozen eggs in their nests.

Noise of the threshing machine whistle must have scared the eggs right out of our hens. Grandmother was pleased, "That's 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 more than a dozen times - wasn't long before I lost interest. Climbed halfway up the windmill tower to find out how far I could see. I could see the river, but not far enough to locate the threshing machine - though I could see black smoke billowing on the horizon. Metal rungs hurt the bottom of my feet - so I climbed down and dipped my hands in the water tank. It was deep enough to bob in, but way too cold for my liking. Took the steps up to the back porch two at a time. Grandmother was placing pies in baskets - so I climbed the stairs to the attic and opened my Yale book. At first it was a fast read, but it began to drag a bit. It was improving. Football season was now in full swing in New Haven. The Yale hero was scoring touchdown after touchdown - saving game after game. I heard, "Johnny" and set the book down. "Yes Ma'am?" "I'll be leaving for the neighbors in a minute or two. Will you carry my baskets to the car?" "Yes Ma'am. If you don't mind - I'd like to stay here with Spot. The other boys will give me all kinds of teasing for getting blisters on my hands." "All right - stay around the house. And don't go anywhere near the river."

I carried three baskets to the trunk of her Studebaker coupe. Grandfather's Studebaker coupe 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 for her pies. Grandfather wouldn't have anything, but a Studebaker. Even his wagons and sleigh were made by Studebaker - long before the company began building automobiles. Grandfather Ropp's tractor would have been a Studebaker, but they didn't make

them. Grandmother waved as she drove through the stone pillars. She made it through without scraping either side. Grandfather would be proud of her. Spot looked up as she drove by and placed his nose back to the ground - waiting. Called to him, but he wouldn't budge. So I went back inside the farmhouse - climbed the stairs and picked up my book. It didn't feel right reading inside the house during daytime - so I took it outside and leaned up against the Walnut tree. Finished two chapters and was working on another when I heard a rumbling engine noise I'd heard somewhere else - before. As it got louder - sent chills right up my spine. Had to be Old Ned Smith's flatbed Ford truck coming up River Road. The Engine noise grew louder and louder as Old Ned's flatbed truck turned into our lane. I ran for the barn - hid behind the barn doors.

Peeked out through a knothole. Ned's flatbed Ford truck roared to a stop - sliding in the gravel - and out pops Old Ned Smith - lookin' toward our farmhouse. He looked uglier than a mud fence and twice as mean. Figured he must have sneaked away while everyone else was sitting down to thresher dinner. Spot was up on his toes - standing guard between Old Ned and the farmhouse. Spot was scary - growling a growl lower than the rumbling noise of Old Ned's flatbed. Made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Spot looked like he'd just as soon die before he'd let Old Ned Smith get past him. Old Ned musta' known it, too. He turned around and looked at the barn. When he began to walk toward me. I hightailed it up the ladder into the front haymow. I heard him shout, "I know you're around here somewhere - Johnny Ropp. You left your book by the tree. You can run, but there's no way you can hide from me!" I hopped across the hay toward the hole in the barn wall leading to the back haymow. I could hear Old Ned huffing and puffing as he climbed the haymow ladder, "I'm going to stick a pitchfork in you and see if you're done - Johnny Ropp. No way you can escape from me."

I ducked through the opening into the back haymow and didn't look back. The only way out was the door over the bull's pen. Ned blocked the front entrance and the doors that opened at the top of the barn for the hay fork were too high for me to reach. My mind raced over a dozen ways to get away - and it kept comin' with nothing, but blanks for answers. Then I thought, "What would my hero - Tom Mix - the world's greatest cowboy do? Why - he'd stand up and fight for what's right." Couldn't do that - so I hopped over the hay and jumped down to the haymow floor where the door opened over the bull's pen. I dug a hiding place into the hay and covered the entrance over. Ned was jumping all over the front two haymows - making more noise than a herd of African elephants. I could hear him grunt as he pushed a pitchfork down into the hay - trying to impale me. Only folks that used a pitchfork were farmers and devils and Old Ned wasn't a farmer. I was in for it now.

Ned came through the opening into the back haymow - landing 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 as he pulled himself up and looked out the hay door. Old Ned Smith had his back to me and a pitchfork in his hand. If I didn't come up with something quick - I was a goner' for sure. Couldn't take a chance - not with him wieldin' that pitchfork like a devil's weapon and me with so little hay as a cover. 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 football hero blocked in chapter three of the Yale book.

Pitchfork and a scream were all that was left on the haymow floor 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. Saw him laying face down on his belly - on top of the gate of the Durham bull's pen. He wasn't moving, "Fall must have killed Old Ned or knocked him out." I peered down - puffed up - feeling mighty proud of myself. Old Ned's bones looked intact. Least none of 'em were sticking out. Just then - Old Ned moaned and rolled off the gate - fallin' all the way down into our bull's pen. Old Ned Smith wasn't dead - just knocked silly by the fall. Our Durham bull wandered over to have a look. Probably wondered if Old Ned was going to give him something to eat - clean out his pen - or a dirty small cow. Old Ned smelled like sulfur and manure on a normal day.

My brain finally got back into gear, but it wasn't coming up with any answers. What should I do now? If I helped - Ned would as soon kill me as look at me. Besides - I was the one that pushed him out the door. Fate or luck or an act of god took over. Old Ned moaned - his head turned - lookin' upward - directly into a pair of bull's eyes. Old Ned floated up outa' there like he was Harry Houdini. He cleared the gate without touching anything, but the manure piled up on the other side. And then he landed splat in the middle of it on his face. Old Ned's feet didn't touch the ground more than six or seven times making tracks out of our barnyard toward the gate next to the water tank. By that time I was standing up full of myself - showin' no brains at all - looking out at Old Ned's plight - laughin'. Old Ned floated over the top of our water tank gate like it wasn't there. I hopped across the hay to get to the front of the barn - so I could get a better view.

Peeked out through a knothole in the front haymow. Ned was limping toward his flatbed - trying to brush off dust - cow pies and wet manure. He got some of it off - but the cow pies on his back and the wet manure on his front stuck on him

like goo. Ned didn't even notice Spot had clamped his teeth onto his right ankle. Not until he tried to lift his foot up to the running board of his flatbed. Old Ned should've known who he was messing with. Spot's the smartest Border collie alive. When he tried to kick Spot with his other foot - Spot let loose and dodged. Ned foot missed - went up in the air - and he fell ass over teakettle into the gravel and dust of our lane. Spot bit him right there and then - on the rear end and backed off - growling. Spot knew when it was time to quit. Ned uncoiled off the gravel like a copperhead snake striking to kill. He made a feint like he was coming back to the barn, but Spot's growl turned into a deep low rumble - making a fearsome sound his wolf ancestors would have been proud of. Old Ned kicked some gravel at Spot and made a jump for his truck's running board. Spot came closer, but not too close - still growling. Old Ned Smith gave up - he'd met his match - started his flatbed and turned it around. Leaned out his window and raised his fist at the barn - shouting, "You haven't heard the last of me - Johnny Ropp! I got the devil on my side and he'll send his *Big Hairy Red Thing* after you and when he does - you'll get yours." Old Ned gunned his engine - spinning gravel all the way down the lane. Spot followed after him, but stopped at the pillars - laid down - nose flat to the ground - nonchalant - like he had this type of tussle every day.

I waited until I could no longer hear the sound of Old Ned's flatbed before climbing down out of 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 really watch out from now on. If he was mad at me before - after today Old Ned would be beside himself. When I washed my face off at the water tank - I noticed I was shaking. Might not have bothered Spot, but this episode scared the dickens outa' me.

Picked up my book from 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 Old Ned was going to do if he ever caught me.

Stuck my nose in the book. The Harvard bullies were coming to New Haven again - looking for my Yale hero - just like Old Ned was chasing after me. Still couldn't figure out why Yale men were heroes and Harvards were the 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 the Harvard Press wouldn't publish anything that didn't look up a Cambridge navel. Not sure what she meant by that, but 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. Place that produced nothing but lawyers and accountants had to be the devil's playground. I'd have to ask my Father. He'd know - it was his book.

Yale beat Harvard - my football hero got the girl - I finished the last chapter and Grandmother came home. I carried in her 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 Old Ned Smith, "Nothing special. Spot's waiting for Grandfather. Wouldn'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 listening to radio." "Yes Ma'am." I had my eye on another book - the one about the German Kaiser. The cover painting showed two boys my age tweaking his nose. Brought it downstairs to read in the kitchen. Grandmother had a slice of cherry pie waiting. She poured a glass of milk, "You missed quite a show. Should have come along. Horrible looking man who runs the boiler on the threshing machine returned after the noon meal with his

clothes torn - all covered with manure. Why - he smelled just like our barnyard. Looked like he had been in a fight with the devil and lost. Captain sent him and his friends off. Neighbors pitched in to help him run the boiler. Sure wouldn't want to sit next to that awful looking one toothed man. He smelled terrible. You can read at the table - if you want too. We're having leftovers for supper."

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 wagging in circles - jumping for joy. Grandmother walked out on the back porch - wiping her hands on the apron. I followed - careful not to slam the door. Grandfather gave us a wave as he drove his wagon and team 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?" "While we were cleaning up the 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 them 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. 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 dirt and manure. Looked like someone hit him in the stomach with a two-by-four. Had to walk bent over. His clothes were all torn - even his pants cuffs. Passed out when he was trying to adjust the boiler. Captain fired him on the spot. And his friends - too. Didn't miss either one of them, but it did take some 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 down near Dublin?" "Believe he does. Have a hard time selling it - the way Ned smelled."

After all the excitement - next four days were pretty tame. I shoveled wheat around the granary to help it dry. If we didn't - it might get moldy. Grandfather hauled manure from the barnyard and spread it over the wheat fields. He'd grow hay there next year. But, did it ever smell. I wasn't close enough to smell Old Ned, but if he smelled like our wheat field - vultures would pass him by. Father - Mother and my two sisters arrived before noon - Sunday. The odor of that manure must have gotten to them - too. We left for home at noon - right after Sunday dinner.

*"At last the stranger got out a smothered 'Nuff!"
and Tom let him up and said: 'Now that'll learn
you. Better look out who you're fooling with
next time.'"*

3

Returning from Grandfather Ropp's Concord Township farm to the village of Osborn was much more than just a fifty mile journey through the flat farmlands of central Ohio. It was a trip forward in time from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. My view was marred only by my location - squeezed between two older sisters in the back seat of my Father's Chrysler Airflow sedan. Therefore - my view was limited to my imagination. I knew we were traveling from Bellpoint - an echo of Hannibal, Missouri to a replica of Andy Hardy's movie set - Osborn, Ohio, but my worldly view was mostly of tree tops. When I was younger - I'd lay up on the back ledge. My view from there was of a world passed by. Now - all I could see was a scene - much like looking up out of the bottom of a milk pail - all handle and sky.

First town of any size - we passed through - was Plain City. Drove by their old time fairgrounds as we entered its outskirts. Next came houses with turrets - all kinds of gingerbread. Plain City was clean as a whistle. It's the type of town farmers retired too when their sons took over the farm. Maybe it was called plain because it was right in the middle of Amish country. And they were out in force today - dressed all in black - going to afternoon Church in horse drawn carriages. On the south side of town is the Plain City Dairy - selling Amish cured meat and cheese. And oh - is it ever good. We stopped and purchased a two pound wheel of Swiss cheese - cut right off a larger wheel. It was so sharp - if you chewed too much too soon - it cut the roof of your mouth - like paper cuts a finger. Father said the cheese was sharp because Amish farmers aged their great

wheels under their barnyard manure piles. Mother added, "And the Amish seal their cheese in paraffin before they bury it." So I asked, "Why do they bury cheese under a manure pile?" "Acts like a compost. Manure generates heat. That helps the cheese ferment and cure. The longer the process takes - the sharper the cheese. Don't worry - manure doesn't seep in and contaminate the cheese." After that lecture - I was afraid to ask about the long loops of summer sausage hanging above the meat case.

I was glad we stopped. Sitting still for thirty minutes can be wearing. Back on the road - my sisters kept busy looking 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 going to stop again. Always did - at an old general store north of Springfield that sold the greatest - greasiest potato chips in the State. And were they ever delicious. Thick - salty and freshly cooked. Two of 'em were enough to give me a fat fix for a week. Only problem was - I'd have two greasy hands and no place to wipe them. I'd wait until my sisters were looking outside and wipe them on my pants. Drove into the outskirts of Springfield - past the Masonic Home and past the hospital. Had to go right through downtown - no way around it, but Osborn wasn't far away - less than twenty miles.

As we came over the crest of the hill past the Wabash Cement plant - I could see out the front windshield. On the horizon was Patterson Army Airfield - sprawled 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 in north and south streets like a checkerboard. Main feature in town - besides the air field were its two cement plants. The other one was close to where we lived was called Southwestern. And another town - Fairfield - was between Osborn and the Army Airfield. It was here first. All the houses that made up

Osborn were moved out of the Huffman Prairie when a flood control dam was over built there. Seemed a shame to move it away from all that history. Orville and Wilbur Wright had an airfield there to test their flying contraptions when they returned from Kitty Hawk. River that cut through there was named Mad River - which is why they had to dam it.

If Bellpoint was too small to be called a village - Osborn wasn't large enough to be called a town. Trapped between the village of Fairfield and The New York Central Railroad - could of filmed an Andy Hardy movie there. Willy called Osborn a number one town - it had 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. Would have been perfect if it had only one lawyer. Bandstand was a huge gazebo located right in the middle of the traffic circle. School was run by Bath Township - so Fairfield didn't have to build one. High school had enough boys to field a football team, but not enough money to buy uniforms. Merchants bought them and placed advertisements on the backs of the jerseys - right above the numbers. We pulled into our driveway - I almost escaped, but Mother sent me upstairs, "Need to get the farm smell off you. After you bathe - change your clothes and come down for supper. Grandfather Ropp sent one of his sugar cured hams home with us."

Mother prepared grilled ham and cheese sandwiches on her four legged gas range. I knew it was modern and convenient, but I missed the Cast-iron range both Grandmother's used. We had Father's favorite - home fried potatoes and my nemesis - green beans. Knew I was home for sure when I had to eat green things again. Father wasn't allowed to smoke his pipe in the house - so he sat out on the front porch swing after supper. I sat down on the front steps, "Remember your dime novels?" "Your Grandmother still has them up in the attic?"

"Yes - I read two of them. One was about Kaiser Bill and the other was about a Yale football player." "The Yale book was always my favorite. How did you like it?" "Couldn't put it down. Could you tell me why the Yale boys are heroes and the Harvards always bullies?" "I asked the same question when I was your age. 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. He relit his pipe. Figured now was as good as time as any to mention Old Ned Smith.

I waited until his pipe made smoke, "Grandfather Mac and me fished the deep hole below the dam. He said Dublin - down the road - is not a place to go. Everyone 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 county line and as far away from the Sheriff as anyplace in the County can get. And the land there isn't worth a plug nickel. Too hilly to plow and too rocky to plant. Folks hanging out 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 Dublin folks a wide berth." "One of them is Old Ned Smith." "Is Ned still around? Thought he'd be in the State Pen or dead by now. Where did you meet him?" "Captain fired him from the threshing machine at the neighbor's farm. His friends quit - too. German Jerry and One Eyed Jack." "They're a mean bunch. Don't ever tangle with them." Almost mentioned *The Big Hairy Red Thing*, but decided that was as far as I could go without causing trouble for myself. I excused myself and turned in early.

After breakfast - I rode my bicycle to Willy's house to see if he wanted to go fishing. 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 sitting on his side porch steps - pounding a softball into his new glove - trying to make a pocket. I stopped my bicycle in front, "Hey Slick." "Hey Johnny - what do you want to do?" "Ride out to Mad River and go fishing?" 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 something to do with Robinson Crusoe, but you know Slick - he thinks he knows everything. Right or wrong - Willy had an answer. We put our poles over the handlebars and rode toward Jonsey's. Willy asked, "What are we using for bait?" "Brought along some mustard powder to pour down night crawler holes." "We gonna' eat 'em or fish?" "You'll see - brings 'em up in a hurry." "Catch any big ones on the Scioto?" "Few bass, but it was too hot for 'em. Mostly sun fish and crappie." "Your Grandfather Ropp still mad at me for teasing his bull?" "Never was. That old Durham bull saved my hide. Scared off a mean one that was chasing after me." Willy didn't look at all interested - so I changed the subject, "What did you do while I was away?" "Played softball at the school - sunup to sunset. Reminds me - we need a new ball. Old one wore out." "Think Jonsey wants to go fishing?" "Can't. Got caught stealing peaches from a neighbor's tree. He's grounded for a week." "No one would get grounded for a week - for eating a peach." "Well - he did. You'll see."

We rode into the driveway and found Jonsey working on his bicycle inside the garage, "Hey, Jonsey. Want to ride out to Mad River and go fishing?" "Wait till I tighten my chain. When did you get back?" "Last night. Slick says you're grounded for a week." "Nah, just the weekend. Damn 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 here to buy food. Had

to walk our bicycles along a winding - bramble filled - path to get to Mad River. Hid our bikes in the trees when we got close to the bank. River was low, but it was moving along at a pretty good clip. Full of twists and turns - I could see why 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. Twenty seconds later a night crawler will come squirming out. I repeated this ten more times and we had enough bait for today. Willy shook his head, "I'll have to remember that. Bass love night crawlers more than crawdads." "I had good luck on the Scioto with crawdads." "Fish must be stupid up there."

We took off our sneakers - rolled up our pants legs and waded west along the bank - looking 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 crashing along the bank - loud enough to scare fish a mile away. He looked back at Jonsey, "No one can swim here. Why I've heard stories about folks falling into Mad River and never bein' seen again. One man fell in north of here and washed up thirty miles down stream. This river ain't safe to swim in." Jonsey wasn't buying Willy's foolishness, "Can't be that dangerous or we would have read about it in the newspaper." Willy laughed, "Since when did you start reading a newspaper." We waded around three more bends before we found a pool deep enough for our liking. Across the pool stood a large buckeye tree with roots crawling down the bank. I tested the water, "Too deep to wade here. Plenty of shade - just right for a largemouth bass to hide on a hot summer day. Bass must have gone to bottom or were across on the other side of Mad River. Wet our lines, but not one of us got a nibble.

Wasn't long before we all leaned back and fell asleep on the bank. By eleven o'clock we were all sawing wood. Willy woke us up with his hollering, "I'm dead - Lord almighty - I'm dead! Snake crwaled up my pants. And I can still feel it crawlin'! Lord almighty - somebody save me!" Willy was jumping and down on one foot trying to shake it loose. About that time - a black snake came flying out and made tracks toward the water. Swam across the river - right on top - and didn't stop until it was up the buckeye tree on the other side. Snake was just as scared as Willy. But - Willy didn't know that snake was out of his pants. He was still hollering and jumping about like a Mexican jumping bean in a jar. Then it happened. Before I could tell Willy to quit jumping - he slipped and tumbled head over heels into Mad River. Went right under. I jumped in and helped pulled him up. He came up sputtering, "Where's the snake?" "Up the buckeye tree on the other side of the river. Quit thrashing around. I'll help you out." We climbed up the bank and Willy emptied the water out of his pockets, "Don't think I've ever been so scared in my life." Jonsey was laughing and pointing, "How deep is it?" Willy answered, "Up to my chest" and we all shouted at the same time, "Lets go swimming!"

Peeled off our wet clothes and hung them on the nearest tree limb. Left our underwear on. Never could tell when a girl might come sneaking by. Jonsey jumped in with a whoop and a holler and Willy and me followed after. We bobbed and jumped and bobbed some more. Stayed away from the middle. Bottom began to slope about twenty yards from the bank. We'd found a swimming hole - almost as good as the one up Mill Creek. After we'd done a pretty good job of splashing - had to negotiate a slippery - muddy bank. Didn't have towels - so we had to air dry our bodies. Willy and me - our 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 pants on, but it wasn't easy.

Damp clothes stick to your legs. Our shoes were squishing as we walked to our bikes. Jonsey had it right. By the time we were halfway back to town - our clothes were dry. We stopped at Jonsey's house. I offered, "Let's meet at the ball field after lunch. Jonsey nodded, "You bring your ball."

Mother worked at the library and Father had summer construction work. Teachers didn't get much pay and we had to make ends meet. My sisters were cleaning house and doing girl things - so I fixed a Midwestern lunch. Made a peanut butter sandwich with mayonnaise on whole wheat. White bread would have made a perfect sandwich, but Mother was on one of her health food kicks. On top the range - a kettle of whole bran - ground at Yellow Spring's Mill - cooking over the pilot light. Took twenty hours of before it was fit to eat and then we needed sugar and milk to get it down. Now - milk didn't come in boxes. Milkman delivered it to the door each morning in bottles. Mother skimmed the cream off the top for baking 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 had replaced our ice chest, but neither could 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 softball game.

Our softball games were pickup affairs. Didn't have organized teams until we became sixteen. Then there was American Legion ball, but it was a hardball game to hands and head. Not the same as softball and much faster than I cared for. We were at that wonderful age when we could play our own ball games without adult interference. We made up our own rules. And we all 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 I had a ball. Wore our softballs out. We played

with four outfielders - so more 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 rolling in the street - so I played way back. We didn't mess around. If you could reach a pitched ball with your bat it was a strike. Games moved right along. Worst part about playing outfield is judging the flight of a ball. Especially if it was coming at you - straight on. Wasn't too bad if it was right or left. We missed a bunch - so I was kept busy running balls down. Fourth game was over an hour before supper time. I was dragging. Rode home as fast as I could. Didn't want to miss my favorite radio programs.

Made it inside as the theme song began. Something about Hudson High School sung by a robust male trio. Had to be written by an Annapolis graduate. Father said Hudson High is a derogatory term Midshipmen use for West Point. Cadets got even. Called the Naval Academy - Canoe U. *Jack Armstrong* - couldn't be a better program - except *Captain Midnight*. Had my decoder ready. At the end of each show announcer always read a series of letters. I'd spin the decoder and they'd reveal a secret message. I always hoped for something special - like a map to lost gold, but that never happened. Always decoded into a promotion for the next episode. Mother would buy cereal and I sent in box tops, but all I'd ever get was a tin toy that either broke when I tried to put it together or fell apart when played with. I was a sucker for airplanes. Ate the worst tasting stuff - so I could save three box tops to get a model plane. Instead of the sleek pursuit plane on the cover - they'd send a block of balsa wood with directions on how to carve it. Like giving a Bible to a chimpanzee and expecting him to read Genesis out loud. Carved three spears before I gave up and quit sending in box tops.

Soon as I turned off the radio - I checked the kitchen for a mason jar - it was firefly season. Father opened the back door, "We're going to cook a picnic supper over an open fire at Bryan Farm this evening. Wash up and get your hiking gear on." I liked going to the State Park outside Yellow Springs, but this was the time of year to catch fireflies at dusk. We'd catch 'em one by one and store 'em in a mason jar. Punch holes in the top of the lid so they'd have air. Didn't work - though. Next morning I'd have a jar full of dead fireflies. Catching fireflies is one of those things that has no purpose at all. Still - most warm late summer evenings we'd chase after them, but not tonight. Bryan Farm. 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. Enough room for Paul Bunyan to keep Babe - his great blue ox and room for another dozen wagons. Along the Little Miami was a place called Clifton Gorge. Our cliffs weren't more than twenty or so feet high - this is Ohio not Grand Canyon. I'd heard tales of Daniel Boone swinging across that 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 - if we could find a vine. Wasn't one anywhere near that was uncut. Park Rangers must have known what we would do. 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 cut branches and carved a point on each stick. My sisters only put one hot dog on theirs but I'd put two on mine. My stick would bend and bend - so far the hot dogs touched the coals. Lost a few, but tonight all I did was burn 'em around the edges. Tasted all right to me. 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'd use the same 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 near it. Said it was too much of a fire hazard, with all the wood and straw in it. When we got back - everything was packed up. Didn't want to go, but it was time to leave. Ranger locked the park gates after nine. Something about burnt hot dogs and my stomach. They didn't seem to like each other. I could still taste 'em when I went to bed. Next morning they were still talking. Milk - sugar and Mother's bran helped to brake the logjam. Maybe her bran wasn't so bad after all.

When I opened the front door - Willy and Jonsey were waiting on my front steps with a canteen and a sack lunch. I asked "Where we going?" Willy smiled, "Don't ask and you won't have to tell your Mom." So I didn't. Went back inside - filled my canteen with water and soaked the canvass cloth on the outside of the metal. Evaporation would keep it cool for a few hours. Made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich - wasn't safe to get mayonnaise warm. Mother said the germs breeding in hot weather 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 - so no ones gonna' get hurt." "And your the one that tumbled into Mad River." "Found our new swimming hole - didn't I?" "Long as Jonsey doesn't mess around with dynamite caps - guess it'll be all right. Father says they're laying around all over up there. Only takes one of 'em can blow a finger off." Jonsey didn't say anything. He just smiled. Then he opined, "Not much chance of that - with me around. I know how to handle 'em. I've been trained. If we find one," and he smiled again, "I know how to throw 'em so they'll explode away from

us." Jonsey's smile worried me a bit. Had a suspicion he was carrying one or two of 'em in his pocket. Be grounded for a year if I carried even one.

We walked down the street past the village Blacksmith's shop. The clanging sound of hammer to metal made us stop and look in. He had his fire white hot and was placing 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 left. Next stop was the houseboat - up on a trailer at the back of the lumber yard. Didn't wonder why it was there. Always been there for long as I could remember. Wasn't a lake of any size within forty miles - 'cept Indian Lake and I didn't know anybody who would want to put a houseboat on it. Jonsey put his hand out to stop us, "Look at the back window. Is that smoke coming out?" Willy - nosy as ever - climbed up the trailer wheel. We ran after him, but he was coming down as we were about to climb up. Willy took off running. He was halfway down the block before we caught up with him. And he kept right on running. Willy talked as we ran, "When I looked inside and saw three bums smoking corncob pipes and drinking from a whiskey jug. Ugly one - with one tooth in the front of his mouth - pointed at me and said, 'Got a young un' lookin' in. He'll lead us to Johnny Ropp.' They jumped up and I jumped down." We kept on running. I looked back over my shoulder. Big as life - Old Ned Smith - One Eyed Jack - German Jerry and *The Big Hairy Red Thing* -all covered up by a rain coat - trailing behind. "Damn! Thought I was rid of Old Ned Smith for good. Keep on runnin'. They're worse than a handful of snakes." Willy asked, "What'll they do if they catch us? Rub our faces in the dirt?" "Worse than that - wouldn't put it past them to cut our throats and feed us to their red friend." We ran around the corner - right past the Green Frog - the only bar in town and across the New York Central Railroad tracks toward the cement plant.

Stopped and looked back. Couldn't see them following - so I pointed to the cement plant sign. We made a beeline for it. 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. Going into the Green Frog. Fess up - Johnny. Who are those guys and why are they after you?" "Long story. Tried to tell Slick, 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, "Lets start walking toward the quarry. They can't follow us there. As I was saying. 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 hitching 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 rolling on the ground laughing. Willy got up, "You sure can tell a wild tale." Jonsey added, "Your whoppers are as good as Slick's." "That *Big Hairy Red Thing* - covered with a raincoat - you smelled the sulfur?" They both nodded, "Yes" and we ran uphill to the quarry.

Got to take time out to explain why whiskey was so bad back then. You had to live in Ohio. Green Frog was the only place in town that sold whiskey over the bar. 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 Old Ned Smith and his gang. That was normal for anyone who lived in a small town in central Ohio. Westerville wasn't more than forty miles away and it's the home of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. If you drank hard liquor in a saloon - well that was

frowned upon. Mind you - wine was drunk in homes around here for medicinal purposes. And a lot of folks were in need of heavy medication to stay well. And most everyone had a jug of whiskey to ward off a winter chill. Most folks would give temperance lip service on Sunday and get sauced on medicine come Monday. 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.

Weren't on the path to the abandoned quarry more than thirty minutes. This quarry was dug out of the hillside - open on one side - didn't have a drop of water in it. Face of it was all rock and fun to climb. It was the only way up that was close. Only other way up 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. A lot like life, the fun of it is in the climb. Wasn't enough water in it to drown a frog. We came up here because we weren't supposed to and mostly because it was something to do. As soon as I said, "Think we got away," Willy said, "We got company coming." Turned around. Old Ned and his gang weren't more than a football field away from us. They weren't running and they weren't walking - sort of jogging along - mean looking. *The Great Big Hairy Thing* was agitated - looked like he had the hungries. They were all breathing hard - so we 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 standing at the bottom - catching their breath. Willy and I picked up several good sized rocks. Jonsey peeked over the edge and looked back at us with that silly smile of his. Made him look half crazy. He took a cylinder out of his pocket and turned something on it with his fingers. Threw it over the edge. Didn't fly straight down like a rock or one of the

spears we made. Kind of tumbled and fluttered all the way down. They must have wondered what it was - too. All four of 'em were staring up - looking at it fall - their mouths open. Jonsey made a good toss. His cylinder landed at Old Ned's feet - 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 - lost sight of 'em. When the dust cleared - all four of 'em were writhing on the ground - moaning - cussing.

We stood there like three fools - staring 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 running on one of the paths leading through the woods to the highway above the quarry. Half mile away - we could still hear *The Big Hairy Red Thing's* roar. Willy said, "Follow me. We can cross the road - walk the railroad tracks gondola cars use for hauling rock to the cement plant. We'll be outa' sight of Johnny's friends. That red thing sure has an odor about him." "Not my friends. Sorry I drug you into this fight. Old Ned isn't the kind who'll forget. Jonsey, that was a pretty good sized explosion. Couldn't have been a dynamite cap." Jonsey got that silly grin, "Used to be before I fixed it up. Sure was a pretty sight watching those four fall. Like a couple of oak trees." Willy asked, "What if it 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. Ran across the highway and down a quarry road to the narrow gauge railroad track. Had to wait for a donkey engine pulling gondola cars full of rock to go by. Willy had all the answers - so I asked, "Can't follow us here, but they may find my house. What do you think we should do next?" Willy asked Jonsey, "Any ideas?" "Need to put more powder in the caps. Man was that fun." Willy shook his head, "We got a picnic to do yet. Lets have it in my backyard. Johnny can stay at my place until his parents come home from work. Do you know how those four 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 have busted up Ned's moonshine still. Will and I were the last ones to see it. Bet they're blaming me." When we reached the entrance to the cement plant we had a choice - walk back on the road or cut across the railroad tracks to the Waterworks Park. Looked 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 smiling, "They'll need help from Doc if they want to 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. We knew how a caveman felt when he brought down a giant mastodon. Willy's Mom brought out hot cookies and cold milk. Shot baskets at the hoop on Willy's garage most of the afternoon. The lumber yard wasn't more than a block and a half from my house - so it 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 jumped up, "I can take care of that." I grabbed his arm, "Sit down. Didn't you hear *The 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 looking for one." Willy weighed in, "This fight has come lookin' for you." "Souldn't get all worked up. Won't be coming after me until they heal. Those rock fragments have got 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 and we shook. Not as good as pricking 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?" "Sell newspapers for her - she's the distributor for the Dayton Herald." "Whats' she look like?" "Like a witch with a face ugly enough to stop a clock."

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. Stranger that didn't have a job or income wouldn't stay around 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 willing 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 several orphanages. No one in their right mind would pay people for sitting around and not working. 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 living 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 them for hidin' *A Big Hairy Red Thing* under a raincoat.

I arrived before Mother and before my afternoon radio serials were about to begin. Willy lost interest in 'em and Jonsey had to sell newspapers - so I listened alone. Turned the power on, but it still took ten seconds for the tubes to warm up. Radio didn't come right on - not like it would after transistors and 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 evening. 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 never see treats like ice cream and potato chips. Tonight was special. He brought home a nickel bag for each of us and exciting news for Mother.

"Mom - Doc stopped by the pool hall. Had quite a story to tell. That's why I'm late. He treated three vagrants this afternoon. Had rock fragments in their legs and hind ends. After they left - he phoned our police and they were picked up over at the lumberyard - trying to make a home out of that old houseboat. Chief took them to the station. No wanted posters outstanding on them - 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 lot as he has ever seen. Wouldn't give their names, but from his description they sound a lot like Ned Smith and his gang." Mother asked, are they the ones who spend Sunday afternoons under the tree next to the Bellpoint general store." "Yes - thought they might be rustlers - some farm animals are missing."

No one said anything at dinner - so I thought I was home free, but I wasn't. Father waited until Mother was in the kitchen with my sisters - washing dishes, "Come on outside where we can talk, Johnny." I followed him to the front porch. He filled up 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 this pack of wild ones. Do you know anything about this?" As a general rule - I avoid all confrontation with my father. For one thing - he's bigger than me and for another he's smarter. The easiest path for me was to mind my manners - keep my mouth shut and speak only when asked too. My mind was always working - though - and now it was racing 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 got me dead to rights. We were at the quarry, but I'm not the one in charge - a ringleader. It's a long story. I thought I could handle Ned, but it looks like he has gone way out of control." "So that's why you asked me about Dublin. Tell me what happened."

"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 coming out of the house boat - so he climbed up the trailer wheel and peeked in. Old Ned and his gang saw Willy and chased us all the way to the quarry. We climbed up the face. When they arrived at the bottom - Jonsey threw a dynamite cap down at their feet. All we were doing was trying to scare them off. Willy and me had rocks ready, but we didn't need them. We were surprised as they were when it exploded. Knocked them all off their feet. Jonsey modified a dynamite cap he'd found. We 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 railing and knocked ashes out of the top of his pipe and relit it.

He smiled at me, "You know how your Mother feels about you playing at the quarry. And you proved to yourself how dangerous dynamite is. I don't want you to ever go near a dynamite cap again, but I'm glad Jonsey had one when you needed it. It probably saved your lives. Ned and his gang play for keeps. But - I know that Ned wouldn't be after you for sport. He must have a reason. Tell me what happened when you were at the farm." "All began when I was staying at Grandfather Mac's in Bellpoint. Will and I 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. 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 looking for us. Got away again by hiding 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 fishing gear back. We walked and ran all the way back to Bellpoint." "Has to be more to it than that. Didn't you mention that Ned and his gang worked the boiler on the threshing machine?"

I waited until Father refilled his pipe, "Old Ned saw me when he was running 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 doing anymore harm. Smelled like our barnyard and looked awful. Captain fired him and his gang on the spot." Father turned away so I wouldn't see him smile, but I did.

He turned back, "Ned holds a grudge longer than anyone I know. Still - he wouldn't come all the way here after you to get even. He'd wait for you to come back to Bellpoint."

"Might be his still. Bet the sheriff busted it and now 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've caused Old Ned a whole bunch of trouble. Know one thing for sure - I don't want to always be looking over my shoulder to see if he's coming 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 worrying until I noticed Father staring out over the porch rail - through the evening haze at our apple tree. Last spanking I had was from one of its branches and did it ever smart. Father placed his hand on my shoulder, "Ned Smith and his gang - can't be a meaner bunch in central Ohio. They've been able to stay one step ahead of the law because folks are scared of them and they live on the county line. Delaware's Sheriff doesn't get down there very often and the Franklin County Sheriff? He doesn't seem to care. If there ever was a hell hole for stick carrying - rock hitting - worthless no-goods - has to be Dublin. 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 know that 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, "Yes, Sir." "T 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 so." "No Sir - I don't know. He had another one, but we made him throw it away." "If he ever brings another 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 escaping a spanking I even sat down with my sisters - listening to their radio programs. I had done all right - so far. If Old Ned came after me again I was going to make his life miserable. He played a game I knew I could win - long as he didn't sneak up on me. Wished I could tell Father everything, but forgiving as he was - our rowboat ride over the dam would be the last straw. And I couldn't tell him about Ned's devil, *The Big Hairy Red Thing*. He would think I was tetches in the head. And playing with my sisters was out of the question. They were busy doing things they liked to do and I wasn't interested in doing girl stuff. And if it wasn't raining - I was outside playing 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. Staying 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 waiting. I ran outside to the garage. I'd made it through another scrape without getting my hide tanned or losing any teeth. I had to have an angel on my shoulder.

Mother woke me before seven. Hot bran was waiting 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 that quarry." "Have to check my fireflies before we go." Putting the jar in the garage instead of leaving it 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. Mother left me off at Willy's front door. Willy's place wasn't more than 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 one side. I walked around to Willy's side door. Front one was used only 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 shopping 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 beginning 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 caddying 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. Kept our caddie badges. Neat - a bright polished silver emblem - our tickets to get inside Patterson Army Air Field.

Put my swimming suit on under my pants. Couldn't sneak on if they saw our suits. Guards would know we weren't going 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 warehouses. Wasn't big enough to get our bicycles through and guards kept filling 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 arm when they saw us coming. 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 doing and didn't mind - long as we played the game. We undressed in the men's locker room - hid our caddie badges in our shoes.

Weren't many people at the pool - not in the morning. 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 going to be Father's quarterback this fall. He knew we didn't belong here, but as long as we were civil - left us alone. After a couple of hours we began to look like a couple of eighty pound prunes. Willy asked, "You had enough?" "I'm starved. Mother gave me a quarter. Want to go to the PX snack bar? Make the best milkshakes 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 howl, "Caddie badge stuck my toe."

We each had a quarter to spend - more than 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 a drugstore - so it must be better and Mounds 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 like the radio jingle, 'Twice as much for a nickel - too. Pepsi Cola is the drink for you.'" "Well, it's true. 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 eating an orange." "Too much fizz - just like Coke. What you gonna' get?" "Milk shake makes a whole meal and I'll still have fifteen cents."

Had to have a chocolate milk shake. PX made 'em big and thick from scratch. Not like ones made after the war - with whipped air and additives. Real chocolate syrup and vanilla ice cream. Always left a big lump at the bottom - wouldn't mix up. Cold - so cold it'd give you an ice cream headache. So thick - had to eat it with a spoon. Served it with a long stainless steel spoon. No carry out. Had to eat it at the snack bar. And nothing to throw out - except soda fountain straws. Willy had his Pepsi and Mounds bar devoured while I was only halfway through. By the time I got to the hunk of vanilla ice cream on the bottom - he was pacing. After a morning of swimming and riding bicycles - we needed rest.

Wasn't a better place in the whole wide world to do nothing than an Army Post. Parked our bicycles next to a tree on top the hill and watched airplanes take off and land. We could see two and a half runways. Leaned back and watched the new four engine bomber - XB-1 running taxi tests. Had four huge propellers - looked bigger than a barn - though it wasn't too exciting watching it taxi around. Willy was

impressed, "Sure makes a lot of noise. Is that all they're going 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 taking it back to the hanger where they keep the experimental planes." Willy poked me, "What's that landing on the east-west runway?" "Looks like a flight of four Boeing P-26 Peashooters. Neat looking - aren't they? I was hoping we'd see a new Curtis P-40 Warhawk." We waited for over an hour, but none showed up, "Looks like I'll be drawing Peashooters in my notebook come fall." Willy had enough, "Lets ride on home. Looks like they're done for today." "Want to ride over to the school and see if anyone is playing softball?" "Let's get our gloves. Might be an opening."

We played ball that afternoon - and the next - and the next - and the next. Didn't go out to Mad River. Still worried about being away from town with Old Ned Smith and his gang on the loose. Last week of August - playing softball stopped and football began. We played touch football in the morning. Afternoons I had to help my Father. 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 training his team to use the new T formation. Xenia's Soldiers and Sailors Orphan's Home was in for a surprise. Everyone else used the single wing. I was on pins and needles - anxious for school to begin and varsity football games - on late Friday afternoons.

"Within two minutes, or even less, he had forgotten all his troubles. Not because his troubles were one whit less heavy and bitter to him than a man's are to a man, but because a new and powerful interest ..."

4

Just the thought of going back to school got Willy down in the dumps, but not me. I couldn't wait for school to begin. And hauling helmets out to the practice field during hot - late August afternoons paid off. I was still doing 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. Willy and Jonsey needled unmercifully, "'Bout all you're good for is to go fetch and carry - Johnny" Willy said. Jonsey added, "Ain't nothin' but a water boy." "Not true - I get to take care of helmets - too." I figured they were needling because they were jealous of my exalted position. In the back of my mind I could hear my own voice whispering, "Father is keeping me close in case Old Ned shows up." Didn't matter. 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 bring the helmets back in and give 'em a good cleaning. Leather can get mighty sweaty and dirty. Insides needed scrubbing so no one would get sick. Friday - that was game day. Players would draw their helmets. After the game they cleaned their own uniforms, but I had to clean their helmets.

After school let out on Friday - if we had a home game - band would form up in the front school yard. Everyone that could walk followed the music and drums to Waterworks Park. Right past the bandstand gazebo in the center of the village. Everyone in Osborn and most of the folks in Fairfield knew old Bath High School was playing a football game on their home field that afternoon. Willy said, "Football team should be called the Bath High Bathers." We didn't have a mascot or

a nickname - unless it was Merchants - with advertising on the back of wool jerseys. I rode to the game with the football team. Couldn't have them walking on cement wearing cleats - so we took the school bus. Father rode on the front seat and I sat on the steps with water bottles.

Jonsey was right about 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 hauling empties one way and water the other. And was it ever heavy. Spilled about 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 about the game to make me want to play in the band. Pickup games of touch football were fun - like shooting a BB gun. We kept all our teeth. Tackle football? The way they play it in high school? That was like firing a rifle with real bullets. Scrapes - and blood - and bandages - and players limping off the field didn't look like much fun to me. And being a coach didn't look like much fun - either. Even though Father's team won almost all their games using his new T formation - problem was the school board. They didn't care for any of 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 he did.

Father's troubles began with the first home game. It was raining - real hard. Couldn't pass because the ball was too wet and was the wind ever blowing. When our quarterback handed off - his halfbacks kept dropping it. Didn't lose a fumble, but our team wasn't getting past the fifty yard line. Game was being played in the center of the field. After three quarters of slogging it out there - it turned into a kicking game. Father's new quarterback was as tough as

nails. He'd been a blocking back when they played single wing the year before - and the same lifeguard that didn't kick Willy and me outa' the Officer's Club pool last August. 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 attended this home opener. 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 with folks that had one track minds - stuck in the past. If he had players to run single wing - might have even used a double wing - like Michigan and Ohio State. But - Father didn't care for single wing football. Said it was too much like Rugby scrum - no science - 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. Those orphans at the Ohio Soldiers and Sailors Home in Xenia. Were they ever tough. Well coached and motivated - they were ready to play on every down. As usual - we were losing 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 receiving the kickoff and returning it to the forty yard line - he had his quarterback pretend to be confused. Took the snap from center and the whole team stood bolt upright. Then they all walked sixty yards to the end zone for a touchdown. Soldiers and Sailors Home team stood up - too and watched. Referee didn't know what to do - so he called half the distance to the goal penalty for using a flying wedge formation. Wasn't though - none of the players linked arms. So we lost our first game. That penalty made the difference.

Willy and Jonsey were right about me being nothing more than a water boy and helmet carrier, but I didn't mind. I

had become a member of the team and that was enough for me. Football team stopped by our house Saturday nights for milk and cookies. Mother didn't mind, but it was a lot of work for her - baking six dozen cookies every Saturday afternoon. Learned a lot from those Saturday 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 evil friend - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* back into my life.

It was right after our last game - a victory over Dayton Oakwood. Now that was quite a rivalry. Most of the Officer's kids from the brick quarters on the Air Field went to school at Dayton Oakwood. Townies and military brats living together, but going to different high schools was bound to make a rivalry and it did. Each team played like their lives depended on it and we knew ours did. Loser got ragged by his friends until next year's big 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 - the team bus returned to Osborn. Mother had our car packed and ready to go to the farm and Bellpoint. Father said we were going to help cut corn at Grandfather Ropp's farm, but I had a feeling it was more than that. My sisters were staying behind with friends - talking like they'd soon be leaving Osborn for good. I liked visiting Bellpoint, but I wasn't certain I'd like to live there. Course with me there - we'd have enough boys for a baseball team.

The night was clear - moonlit and cold. The time of year appetites got cranked up - to prepare a body for the long winter ahead. Mother packed sandwiches for us to eat on the way and a thermos of hot chocolate for me. I polished up my share before we reached Springfield. Without competition

for sitting 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 were talking about advantages and disadvantages of moving 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 talk had turned to the harvest.

When Grandfather harvested wheat - all the neighbors joined in to help. Threshing time was a together time of the year. But, when it came time to cut corn - he was on his own. Wielding a corn knife to cut corn stalks wasn't a farmer's idea of having a good time. Ohio farmers had three ways to harvest their corn - use a cutter bar - cut the corn green and store stocks and ears inside tall round silos - or pick it by hand - leaving corn stalks standing in the field and plow them under in the spring. Grandfather Ropp chose the 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 shocks to dry. After the ground froze - he'd collect it by horse and wagon. Then he'd shovel it over his head into the corn cribs. The remaining corn stocks were used for fodder. Lay 'em on top of manure in the barn yard. His third way was 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 odor.

Mother reached around her seat and tapped 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. Maybe later. Your Uncle Bus has a surprise for you. He's taking you and Grandfather Mac to an Ohio State football game tomorrow." I smiled - rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, "Yes Ma'am. Who's playing?" "Illinois." Mother

didn't know about Willy and me sticking jackknives in the dirt - playing mumblety-peg. I'd handled knives as sharp, but maybe 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 than a few times. Handles were six inches longer than a fully open jackknife. Swung 'em around a bit - pretending I was a knife thrower in the circus. Had good balance. Almost threw one - to see if it stuck in the shed wall, but thought better of it. Grandfather's three corn knives were 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. Three tickets to a college football game and 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. Coming from a village and going to see a college football game with over eighty thousand fans. Well - that was like visiting Barnum's show in New York City and seeing his giant elephant - Jumbo. Only one thing spoiled it. Had to wear my Sunday clothes to the game. College football games were serious business. Everyone wore sincere clothes - the kind we wear to weddings 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 wearing coats and ties. I bundled up - covering my legs with a car blanket in the rumble seat. Chrysler roadsters look like something that won a race in Indianapolis. Long and sleek and black - it had a spare tire mounted under cover on the drivers side. Wooden running boards made it easy to get in or out. Seats were all leather. Even had isinglass side curtains to mount on the side windows if it rained. Front windshield rolled down if you wanted to streamline it for racing. Six tapered in-line cylinders made it fly like the wind and wooden spoke wheels

kept it on the ground. Chrysler roadster was more than a decade ahead of its competition. Father said it was because no one built '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 drifting by in a dark blue sky. It was going to be a perfect day for a football game. Crisp and clear with a scent of smoke floating in the air from burning leaves. Added spice to a cool autumn afternoon. I was on pins and needles. Couldn't wait to get to Ohio Stadium. As we crossed over the Olentangy River - I could hear music from the Ohio State Marching Band blowing toward us on the wind. We parked on the sports field close to the open end of the stadium. Contributors - 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 friends. He spent Saturdays refereeing small college football games. Father said he'd had his fill of big time football. He played tackle on defense and fullback on offense for three autumns at Ohio State. Winter - he played center on the basketball team and in spring track - his favorite sport. When the coach pressured him to play baseball or lose his scholarship - Uncle Bus walked away from 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 he 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 at the car - sitting on the running board - eating the 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 cleaned up 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 darn 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 was full of electricity. Drums marched in first with the lead drummer tapping 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 wearing a hat that had to be two feet high. He did a bow out front 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. 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 turned toward the field and listened. Music made hair stand up on my arms - sent chills up and down my spine. I made my mind up right then and there that I was going to play in our high school band. Band members had most of their teeth - football players lost most of theirs.

At the start of the game - the Illinois team 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 spinning like tops - Ohio State scored two touchdowns. Couldn't tell who had the ball

or which direction it was going. Each one of the backs threw a forward pass. Both teams looked winded by the time the half ended. Playing both ways wasn't a game for sissies. Half time was the best of all. Band made block formations honoring both schools - played 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. Ohio State scored two more times and we could tell it was all, but over by the end of the third quarter. Leading 21 to 9 - 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 getting back out. I wanted to follow the band, but Uncle Bus kept me on track - steering me toward his roadster. Took our time walking 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 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 something. All brass and what a sound. Has to be the best darn band in the land." Uncle Bus nodded, "I liked watching them more than playing here. They should be good. They practice longer and smarter than the football team."

Grandfather opened up the picnic basket, "Might as well have a snack while the traffic clears out." Didn't eat, but a few bites of chicken. Stadium hot dog was still churning in my stomach. 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 your car blanket - Johnny. Sun's on its way down. Ride back here in the open air will be cooler going than coming." Even though we waited an hour after the game was over, cars were still crawling along over the Olentangy 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 that I heard through the wind noise. Roadster's convertible top had a small window in the back. Hard to see ahead from where I sat. My view was mostly out both sides. By the time we crossed over the river below Dublin we were on an empty road in the countryside. Usually the rumble seat was great fun, but not today. I was traveling in Old Ned Smith's land and the wind was changing to evening cold.

Too late - by the time I saw Dublin on the road sign and hunkered down in the rumble seat - we were out of town. Made myself as small as I could get. As we passed by Dublin's general store - I looked out the right side. Saw Old Ned Smith - One Eyed Jack - German Jerry - *A Big Hairy Red Thing* sittin' on the store's front porch - six legs and two cloven hoofs hanging over the edge of the porch. I ducked, but Old Ned saw me before I could get down. Guess I was too nosy for my own good. Peaked over the back of the seat. He was pointing at me with his finger and *The Big Hairy Red Thing* was dancin' so hard its raincoat fell off. As we drove over the hill outside of Dublin, thought I heard, "I'm gonna' get you, Johnny Ropp!" This wasn't the ending I would pick for what had otherwise been a great day. But, I tried not to worry. I'd be going home tomorrow night and Old Ned would still be

here. He couldn't cause me any trouble tonight - or tomorrow and after that I'd be on my 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. Didn't look up until we crossed over Mill Creek.

Climbed out of the rumble seat - my nose turned blue from the wind. Drive from Columbus to Bellpoint was a night too long to be riding in a cold rumble seat. Grandmother Mac looked me over, "Lot of stadium grime on this boy. Wash up at the cistern sink before supper." She checked behind my ears and gave them both a good scrubbing. Grandmothers seem to know more about ears than anyone. After an afternoon of hot dogs and fried chicken - my appetite wasn't. However, Grandmother had roast pork - mashed potatoes and gravy. Now that combination would make a dead man wake up with the hungries. And she didn't make me eat anything green. Got away with it 'cause Mother and Father were eating supper at Grandfather Ropp's farm. Had to go to the parlor after supper. Uncle Bus was still insisted n everyone, but women resting after the evening meal. Both he and Grandfather Mac replayed most every down of the Ohio State football game. Cigar smoke rose to the ceiling - filling the top of the room. Smoke inched down from the ceiling like fall morning fog rising off the Scioto. When it got too close to my nose - I excused myself and went outside to sit on the front porch. Harvest Moon was big and orange - shining through a cool night sky. Shame to waste a night like this sitting around. Wandered across the street to see if Will and Jake were outside.

Jake was hitting fungoes with his baseball bat to Will. Would have been all right if he was using a baseball - which he wasn't. I walked up, "Jake you're going to ruin that bat hitting 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 and Jake flipped his bat into the front yard. Walked to the river - picking up flat rocks on the way. Made sure we picked ones that were thin - ones shaped like pancakes and discs. Jake went first. Got down real low to the ground - slinging his rock sidearm - making it spin real fast with a flick of his wrist as he released it. Made his first rock skip sixteen times before it went under. Will was next, but his didn't skip more than nine hops and a splash - before it sunk. Mine went eleven before it went down. Jake stood there grinnin' - knowin' we couldn't beat him - which we didn't. Will and I kept spinning rocks and getting fewer skips as time went on. After twenty minutes or so - we gave up. I looked over at Jake - grinning at us. He was a good three years older than Will and me and a foot taller. He knew when 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 around it. Jake tried to move it by grabbing the south end, but he couldn't drag it more'n a yard. I used a branch as a lever and broke it free. We rolled it down to the 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 rolling in the shallows - making ripples like swimmers do - coasting between strokes. Moonlight shining orange - reflecting off a muddy river is an unusual sight. 'Course an orange colored sky is - too.

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 shouting and pointing. 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 laying 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 causing me a whole lot of pain. And I'm getting tired of looking over my shoulder - wondering when Old Ned and his gang are coming after me. Don't even feel safe going out by myself anymore. We got to take the offense - make 'em worry more about when the law than chasing after us. Got any ideas how we can make 'em play defense for a change?" I thought on it a bit, "Maybe, but I have to go home tomorrow evening. 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." "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 breathing down his neck. Couldn't tie the still too Ned. He had it on county land. Got away Scot free. Some say the Sheriff warned 'em." Jake added, "Now there's rumors that they've taken up thievin' and rustlin'. When you comin' back?" "Not until Thanksgiving. Did you hear that? Sounds like oars in the water - splashing on the river."

Jake put his finger to his lips and whispered, "Look out on the Scioto." Hair stood up on my neck. Three men in a

rowboat were rowing in our direction. I whispered, "Holy cow - looks like Old Ned is a-comin' our way." Didn't have to say a word. We hightailed it to Doc's yard and hid behind his bench. Stuck our noses up and confirmed the worst. It was Old Ned and his gang all right and they were carrying 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 using - the one we sailed over the dam." Couldn't stand not knowing - so we peeked over the top. One Eyed Jack jumped off the bow as soon as the 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 doin'. Hold her close - so I don't get my feet wet." Ned hopped out. German followed - slipping on the bank. Wound up standing 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. German sat on the edge of the boat pouring water out of his work boots. Ned looked around like he knew we were hiding - somewhere.

Soon as German had his boots back on - Ned ran toward Doc's house and his gang followed - broke into a trot - running. Passed by - not more than ten feet from our hiding place, but we were flat on the ground. Our breathing sounded like a winter wind, but Ned couldn't have heard us. The three of 'em were making more noise than a flock of geese running from a hatchet at Christmas. Old Ned had enough. He yelled at German Jerry, "Don't make so much noise. Follow One Eyed up the path. Remember - don't turn on any lights. We'll work by the light of the moon." Couldn't hold my breath any longer. Had to let it out, "Wonder what they're after this time?" The sound of breaking glass answered that question - so I asked another one. "What do we do now?" Jake whispered back, "Nothin'. Got no law around here. By the time we get out a warning - they'd be gone and we'd all

get blamed for breaking Doc's window." I stood up and moved toward the house. Will grabbed my arm, "What are you doing? None of those Tom Mix heroics while we're around." "Gonna' look in through Doc's office window to see what Old Ned's up too. Where's Doc?" Jake followed, "He's at the hospital. Mrs. went along. Told Mom she had shopping to do."

We must have looked like three chipmunks - peering into Doc's side window - noses barely over the top of the sill. One Eyed Jack was holding a sack while Ned emptied drugs into it out of Doc's office medicine cabinet. German Jerry's head popped into the window and we three dropped like stones into the bushes. Jake ran for the bench and we followed - hunched over like ostriches - thinking no one would be able to see us. '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 at Old Ned, "I know I saw those little rats peerin' in the window. Lets go get 'em." Ned ran right on by us, "Don't have time for any of your foolishness. We have to get back across the river and down the road. Need an alibi and if we don't get back to the roadhouse we won't have one." One Eyed Jack placed his sack in the rowboat, "Ain't no one around - 'cept us and your friend across the river - *The Big Ol' Hairy Red Thing.*" Moon's full - we'd see them." Just then, 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." He reached down and pulled German out of the water - pushin' the rowboat away from the bank at the same time. He helped German into the boat sayin', "Row damnit! Lets get outa' here."

We all let the air out of our lungs at once - got up and sat down on Doc's bench. Will asked Jake, "Got any idea where they're goin'?" "Most likely parked their flatbed over

on the other side. You heard Old Ned say they were going to the roadhouse for an alibi. That's where they're heading. After that - who knows? Sheriff burnt down their hideout in the woods. No ones ever robbed Doc's office before. That's like burning a barn or robbin' Dad's Church. Don't get any lower than that. Don't have a choice. Johnny better tell his Uncle. He'll know what to do. Besides - he ain't one bit scared of Old Ned - and those no-goods need to be put away." I wasn't certain it would work, "What if they think we busted the window?" Jake nodded, "Could be trouble, but none of us would steal from Doc. Doesn't matter if they do or don't. It's the right thing to do." I agreed, "If we don't - we ain't no better than they are."

Running across the road to Grandfather's house - I felt like a settler in a Tom Mix movie - on my way to tell Tom about the robbery. Got about half the story outa' my mouth before Uncle Bus was up outa' his chair. He walked right over to the wall phone and called the Sheriff. While he was on the phone - Grandmother and Grandfather walked across the road to Doc's to check on the damage. Uncle Bus motioned for me to follow him over, "You did the right thing - Johnny. No telling what they'd 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 locked in Bellpoint - Doc's medicine cabinet and the door to the general store." Pretty soon most of the town was gatherin'. Most excitement around here since Bellpoint won the State Basketball Championship - or when Grandfather Mac's general store burnt to the ground. Grandmother returned with her broom and a dustpan to clean up the glass. Uncle Bus cut a pane of glass from a sheet Grandfather had leaning up against the back wall of the livery stable. The damage was repaired in a jiffy. All the excitement was over by the time the Sheriff's Deputy drove up. Didn't do much and he didn't listen - either.

Deputy spent less than two minutes asking Will - Jake and me questions. Wasn't interested in where Old Ned said he was going - 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 looking." "Must not want to tangle with Old Ned. Your Mom and Dad just drove up." I wandered back to the other side of the street. Grownups would know what was going on. Back inside - all I learned was it was time for me to get undressed and go to bed. Didn't want too. House was buzzing with sightings of Old Ned and what he'd done. I sat down at the top of the steps so I could listen. Grandfather loaded his double barrel shotgun with rock salt - in case Old Ned found his way back. Grandmother looked up the stairs and saw me listrning. Shooed me to bed. I was asleep by the time my head hit the pillow.

I felt a tug on my arm and a shake 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 going to cut corn. Then I realized - Father was taking me outa' harms way and cutting corn was as good excuse as any. I rubbed my eyes and looked for warm clothes. It was going to be cold riding on the wagon this morning. Ran down the back stairs. Grandmother had a bowl of hot oatmeal cooking on the range and hot chocolate in my cup. Cutting corn had to be serious business if it meant missing 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 across the river - I had an old question that was still burning in my brain - so I decided to ask

Father, "History books mention that central Ohio was covered with forests. Whatever happened to them?" "Your book was right. Most of it was cut 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 laid side by side. This used to all be forest and swamp land before it was drained." "Did the Delaware's hunt here?" "That's why I find arrowheads." "Must have been fun before they cut it all down. Wouldn't you like to go back?" "Don't think I would. Rattlesnakes were as thick as branches along the Scioto and mosquitoes filled the air all summer long. Wasn't a healthy place to live." "Where'd the Delaware's go?" "West and some are still around. Married in with the first settlers." "Did Great Grandfather use wood from the old forests to build his barn and house?" "That's why it's still standing. Most of the woods you see today are second growth. Every farm has one or two. Good for wild life, though we haven't had any bear or deer since before the Civil war." "Is that why we have only pheasants - squirrels and rabbits?" "You missed mentioning groundhogs - bobwhite and black snakes."

Father turned into the farm lane, "We're almost there. Mind your manners and watch how you swing that corn knife. When you think you're an expert and get cocky - that's when you'll cut yourself - so be careful." We passed through two pillars that looked like cement obelisks from Egypt or small Washington monuments. I could still see black paint 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 it begins - he'll be gone. Morning it's over - he'll be back." As soon as I stepped out Spot was at my side and I had two paws in my hands. Grandfather led Sandy and Clyde from their stalls and handed me their leads, "Water them good - Johnny."

After both horses drank their fill - Grandfather took over their leads and hitched two eager Clydesdales to his wagon. Under his wagon seat were three sharp corn knives - a gallon jug of water and several rolls of binding twine. Twine was used to tie around the corn stalks to make shocks. Cock pheasant looked us up and down from his perch on the water tank and then strutted to the far corner. Didn't budge until Spot jumped up - barking. Then he fluttered to the ground - still in control - on the opposite side of the tank. Spot barked a bit more, but it wasn't any use. He couldn't squeeze through to get him. Cock pheasant spread out his wing feathers and flew right back up to his perch - still cock of the water trough. Father came out of the equipment shed and handed me a set of gloves, "A might large, but usable." Grandfather knew what I was thinking, "Go ahead. You'll need energy. We'll be out in the corn field until noon. Be a long time until dinner."

I was up the back porch steps - standing on a chair and reaching for the white candy sack quicker than you could say 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 them stored away for the winter. Soon as I climbed up to the wagon seat we were on our way. Father walked alongside - opening and closing gates, but mostly looking for arrowheads. A few still popped up out of the soil when the ground cycled through freezing and thawing. Sandy and Clyde pulled an empty wagon along 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 - leaving 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 higher on the horizon.

We each took a row and the competition began. I was always behind - still catching up as Father and Grandfather were bundling up 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 this experience was wearing thin after the third hour. When the newness faded away it was replaced by peer pressure. Pride became my motivation, but try as I may - I was always behind. But, I didn't quit. Sun was still low 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 both would have done a pretty fair imitation of old Dan Patch - the world famous trotting horse. Morning ride out to the field jolted my bones - not having much padding on my seat. Noontime ride almost jolted me off the wagon. Father had to jog alongside to keep up. I climbed down - rubbing my hind end and ground corn for the horses as Grandfather unhitched them and led them to the water tank. I had corn waiting for them when 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 scolding 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 will have to be a might tougher if you want to do a full day's work." I was left standing in the doorway - watching with mixed emotions as the wagon left without me. Pride said go, but sore hands said stay. Just as well - tempers grow short when cutting corn. Doesn't pay to be around an angry farmer with a corn knife in his hands. Had company though. Spot stayed behind. Wasn't keen on following Grandfather's wagon on its slow journey through the corn field. And there weren't any rabbits to chase. Most had gone to winter cover under the deep tangled grass of the fence rows.

Grandmother handed me her egg basket, "Check those haymows for me. I'm getting 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 in the back haymow out to the hogs. Halfway back - I heard an engine that sent a shock 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 barking, but more of a greeting than a warning. Wasn't Old Ned Smith. It was one of the neighbors. Grandmother came out on the back porch - wiping 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 our east field. Johnny can walk you out there if you want to talk to him." "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." "He - German Jerry and One Eyed Jack came back to Bellpoint this morning 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 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 - anyway. Tell Griff to give me a call this evening." Cousin Thomas drove out spinning gravel - scattering chickens - dust flying - like he was going 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 before dark." Grandmother took the lever action twenty-two long rifle down from the wall and began to load it. She took it to the kitchen and leaned it up against the wall - in the corner - near the door. I wandered upstairs and found a cowboy book. The hero looked a lot like Tom Mix, but I knew he wasn't. I was almost 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 hero and were taking him to an old gold mine in the hills of South Dakota.

Kitchen clock was at three, "Why are we leaving early?" "Dad and I finished early - 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 morning?" "Bits and pieces. Mac will fill in the gaps. Sounds like Ned Smith is out of control. We're leaving for Osborn right after supper." We turned west and drove over Bellpoint Bridge. Town looked deserted. No one was outside playing - not even Will and Jake. Bellpoint wasn't the same safe crossroads I'd left before daybreak. Doors that were never locked were now. Strangers that were once welcome wouldn't go unscrutinized. Behind each closed door - shotguns were loaded and at the ready.

Uncle Bus came outside to greet us as we drove up, "I imagine you heard about all 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 when 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 I'm know I'm supposed to give notice, but this place is too dangerous for my boys." Grandfather was in-between happy and mad, "Not proper - not to give us time to interview for a new preacher." "Don't care - 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 and told Grandmother, "I'll phone the United Brethren District office in the morning and let them know we need a replacement."

When he came back to the table, Grandmother was all smiles, "I heard you - Dad. I want to know a little more about this new preacher - before you hire him. I'm not too happy with the one that's leaving." With all the commotion going on - I was able to excuse myself from the table and was gone before anyone missed me. With Will and Jake going away

and if we moved to the farm, I wouldn't make a difference. There still wouldn't be enough boys to field a baseball team when I reached high school. Knew that grownups wouldn't tell me everything - so I slipped out the kitchen door. Didn't have much time. We were heading back to Osborn in less than an hour - so I ran across the street and stopped at Will and Jake's house. They were getting 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, but Will looked out the screen door. I pointed to my Grandfather's back yard - sat on a bench by the front door to the livery stable - and waited. Sun was on the horizon when Will came running up the hill.

He was outa' breath, but talkin' a mile a minute, "Jake said you'd gone back." "Leaving in a few minutes." "Hear about the excitement we had this morning?" "It's all over Concord Township. Cousin Thomas was at the farm - forming a posse - just like a Tom Mix movie." "You and that damn Tom Mix." "Is it true? You have to move to Lake Erie tomorrow morning?" "Soon as we pack up. Mom's been at it all day." "Sorry to see you go. We may be moving to the farm after school's out next summer. Do you know where you're moving too?" "To my Grandfather's place in Loraine County. Dad's givin' up preaching. Gonna' sell Bibles to farmers. Still be near water and Erie ain't as muddy as the Scioto." We sat there swinging our feet under the bench for awhile. Had to know, "What happened?" "We were walkin' to Sunday School in front of your Grandfather's place when Old Ned came over the hill in his flatbed truck - like a bat outa' hell. Came roarin' to a stop. One Eyed Jack and German Jerry jumped out and chased Jake and me back to our yard. Jake grabbed our baseball bat and whacked German in the shins. You should have seen the look on his face. 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 one barrel of

rock salt into One Eyed's hind end and he fell like the other tree. German came after your Uncle and Bus gave him the other barrel." "What happened to Old Ned?" "Don't know. What with German and One Eyed rolling and moaning - he took off. Didn't even hear his flatbed leave. Must've coasted down hill in idle while we were occupied. Talk about stupid. No one in the County messes with your Uncle Bus." "Except Old Ned and his gang." "Their brains must be fried from all that whiskey they drink." Mother called, "Johnny. Finish up. We're leaving in ten minutes."

Will wasn't done, "Bible must be right about an eye for an eye. German and One Eyed had to get repaired by Doc. He didn't have anything 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 screaming more'n a block away. German passed out when Doc set his broken leg. Jake snapped it like a dry twig. Afterwards - butter would've melted in their mouths. 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 forever." "Where are they now?" "Locked up in the County Jail at the Courthouse. Posse is out looking for Old Ned - just like in one of your Tom Mix movies." "Bet he's long gone by now. You're going to miss the excitement up on Lake Eire." "Won't miss running 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 get 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 as Will turned and walked back down the lane. Breaking a promise is one thing that boys can do as well as grownups. He didn't write and neither did I. Never heard from Will 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 were still talking about moving back to the farm. Mother asked, "What do you plan to do with all of 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. And I'm not moving here until you put indoor plumbing in. Won't live in a house without a bathroom. We'll need two and a half. And a new kitchen." "Can you live with what you'll 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 my children here."

Should have kept my mouth shut, but I didn't, "Are we moving 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 your Grandfather's farm?" "If we have - too. I'll miss my friends." "Don't mention it too anyone. We're not certain if we'll move and if the School Board finds out - well you know how they are. If they find out your Father is even thinking of leaving - they won't renew his contract and we might change our minds." "I won't say a word." "Don't even tell your friends"

Now I couldn't get to sleep. Maybe living on the farm wouldn't be bad after all. And sheep! Spot would be in Border collie heaven, "Will Spot stay with us." Father laughed, "Town 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 should make the basketball team!" My mind was going a mile a minute. A new school and I all ready knew most of the boys. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. We passed through Plain City as twilight turned from purple to night. An orange Harvest Moon came up over the eastern horizon like an big ol' orange pumpkin on Halloween. Around the corner of the Amish dairy - outside of Plain city - a flatbed Ford truck was parked in the shadows. I turned around and looked out the back window, "Nah, it couldn't be Old Ned Smith.

"... as soon as his back was turned the new boy snatched up a stone, threw it and hit him between the shoulders and then turned tail and ran like an antelope. Tom chased the traitor home and thus found out where he lived."

5

Fall - wonderful fall - crisp - cold golden fall. And Halloween - when ghosts and goblins come out. Only time of the year I can be a little bad and not get spanked for it. Fall means football and cider, but football season was over and too much cider gives me the runs. And there's nothing as invigorating as breathin' in the aroma of burning autumn leaves on a crisp fall afternoon. Maybe it's because Ohio skies finally turn from milky summer haze to a deep blue and the gray days of winter are waiting. But - darn it all - I wished we had fall all year round. Returned from Bellpoint - temperature dropped below freezing and stayed that way for several days. Any leaf that hadn't turned - did. Wasn't any snow. Too soon for that. Basketball season had begun and our school's wheel had spun a seasonal turn.

Weather was dry and cold. Just right for making dirt firm on outdoor basketball courts. Basketball could bounce without splashin' mud or raisin' summer dust. Basketballs made of leather with a rubber bladder inside didn't hold air very well. When they had a little age on them - like old folks - their spring was gone. Nothing worse than an under inflated ball - except maybe one that is over inflated. If you didn't have enough air in it - wouldn't bounce off the dirt - just go thunk. Over inflate and it'd hit you under the chin and 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 mornings - before sunup - Bath High School coach let us use the indoor court. 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 - right across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Rumor had it he was firing a boiler on a big river sternwheeler. Couldn't figure out why he didn't make a career out of it. Steady work and all legal. Stealin' was like looking 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 in 1939. Didn't have an overabundant supply of lawyers. Only had two in Osborn 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 they were sent to the Prison Farm outside of London? Old Ned could break 'em outa' there. Couldn't worry about what-ifs. Had to wake up early for Saturday Basketball practice.

It was dark as midnight - no moon at all when I rolled outa' bed. My skin felt like a goose bump factory and my ears were so cold - couldn't feel them at all. Now that's dangerous. Willy said when they got like that - you could bump into something and they'd fall off without you knowing. Turned on the ceiling light and went blind for a few seconds. Soon as my eyes adjusted - pulled on my clothes and tied my shoe laces into knots - doing 'em too fast. Pulled a sweater over my head and grabbed my gym bag. Didn't stop to brush my teeth. Didn't have time. I was happy now that Mother had wheat bran simmering 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. Coach used three courts - two cross courts on the regular - one in the old gym - on the stage of the theater. Wolfed down the

last of my bran and ran out into a dark early morning 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 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 beginning to freeze - so I took off walkin'. Jonsey caught up with me at the village bandstand. He was carrying his gym bag - same as me - with tee shirt and shorts inside. We were wearing our sneakers - joggin' along together. I asked, "Where's Slick?" "Don't know. Lights were out and I couldn't wake him up." "Damn it's cold. Can't feel my feet." "Should have worn thicker socks." "Don't own any." Right after I said it - knew I shouldn't. With his Dad gone - Jonsey's times were tough. Runnin' might get his feet warm, "Race you to the gym." Made it to the back door breathin' hard. We walked down the stairs into the basement. Boy's locker room was so cold - felt like we were inside of a meat locker.

We were allowed to dress in the locker room. Couldn't use the lockers. They were for high school. I wadded my shirt and pants up in a ball - stuffed 'em into my gym bag and pulled on my gym clothes. Didn't like wearing 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 was like being a bank robber. Underwear was for sissies. Except in a gym - wouldn't catch a real boy wearin' a tee shirt.

Not one that showed. Pitched my gym bag on top the lockers. 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 up there - too. We were bouncing around like jumping jacks to keep warm. About the only organization was time and place. Sometimes we'd do lay-up drills. Didn't like 'em at all. I'd go too far under the basket and hit the bottom of the rim or have to shoot a reverse lay-up. Neither one pleased the coach. We called our own fouls and no one tried to maim anyone. If you did - you'd get yours. Other than not liking reverses lay-ups - coach had a lot of patience with us. Had too - since he was the only adult there with three games going at once. I shot the ball ten times and made only 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 trying to impress the coach. We all tried way too hard - so everyone shot their fair share of air balls. Or - could have been our outside 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 rest and stay home - you might not get to upchucking all day and night. Jonsey looked none too happy. Worse thing that can happen to a boy is to 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 getting 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 weekly Saturday serial was goin' to be over.

I looked forward to this weekend for two months. Every Saturday - before the main feature they'd show a short black and white serial. Ours had villain wearing a black mask and this was the Saturday he was going to take it off. Movies aren't the same today - after television. Everyone went to the Saturday matinee in 1939. Only cost ten cents and an ice cream cone afterwards - at the soda fountain - was only 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 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 than a dollar selling 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 meeting in Dayton and my sisters were over at their friends' houses. Made myself another Ohio lunch - peanut butter and mayonnaise on white 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 hanging around. Had to run all the way to the library. If I was late for the movie and I'd have to stand up in the back. All the seats would be taken. Mother was expecting 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 as 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 bouncing 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 could 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." Thinking and not running put me at the end of the ticket line and the window was open. 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 trying 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 - sitting next to a lit stick of dynamite. Tom Mix didn't panic. He wiggled himself into a sitting position and took his time. Thought himself right out of this fix. Scooted next to a broken shovel and rubbed the ropes around 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 - singing on his horse or playin' a guitar. Not Tom Mix - he was a real working 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 a real cowboy!

Walking out into bright sunlight from inside a dark theater and almost makes you go blind. Stood there for awhile - until my eyes adjusted. And I still had fifteen cents burning a hole in my pocket. Don't know what came over me, but I walked right past the soda fountain. 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 saving dimes and end up owning my own company. I'd have to open a bank account so I could make it grow by earning interest. If I learned one thing from watching grownups - you needed money to make money and John D. Rockefeller showed me the way. Any boy could do it if he saved dimes.

Going home was outa' the question. My sisters would be listening the wailing saxophones of popular swing bands on radio. Some of it sounded like a roomful of cats in an old folk's home - dodging rocking chairs. Glen Miller or Kay Kayser's were the only ones 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 rocking 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 doing nothin'. Mr. Andrew Carnegie donated more'n ten thousand libraries - all across America. But, he missed Osborn. Mother's library was a one room building - matched 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 began to read the classics. I leafed through it and saw enough captioned illustrations to get my interest. Sat down at the reading table and started at the beginning. I was on page ninety-five when Mother began to turn the library's lights out.

Walked home with her - Tom's book tucked under my arm. Mother asked, "How do you like Mr. Twain?" "Language seems 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. We've 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 - stopping only for supper. Couldn't get over Tom riding 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 River Road from Grandfather Ropp's farm. With Will and Jake gone north - I wouldn't have anyone. Tom Sawyer convinced me. Floating down river on a raft had to be the greatest adventure. And there were boards and nails up in the loft of the livery stable. My mind was racing so fast - I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until after Thanksgiving. The last thing I remember before my eyes closed - Tom was layin' on his back - looking up at the stars - floating down big river.

Wakin' up early Sunday morning - 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 blowing 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 mad me wear a tie. 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 Lutheran Church. Something about being a member of the Missouri Synod. Didn't know what that meant, but Willy thought it might be part of the Jewish religion. Convenient - wasn't more than a block from both our houses. Jonsey talked us into attending Sunday School with him - so we did until we both quit - right after the cookie episode.

Talk about mad - Willy is still mad every time I bring it up - about him not getting a cookie, "Why we almost starved to death." Willy was furious that Sunday, "Shoulda' thought twice about goin' to Sunday School in a Synod." Now goin' to Sunday School in a Lutheran Synod isn't much different than attending Sunday School at a regular Church. Fact is - I really enjoyed attending. It was close to home and Lutherans used pretty much the same Bible as us United Brethren folks and Methodists - too. But - our split with those Synod folks was predestined.

Me and Willy got up late that Sunday. Barely made it to the Synod in time for Sunday School and neither of us had any breakfast. Jonsey said, "You're in luck - Pastor is serving grape juice and cookies today. Gotta' go." We were starved, but Willy wasn't sure, "How many speeches before we get to eat?" "Not more'n thirty minutes. Sunday School teacher said there wasn't gonna' be time for a long sermon." Willy knew most everything - he didn't look convinced. I asked, "You game, Slick?" "Maybe. What kind of cookies?" Jonsey led us out the door, "Big sack of 'em. Looked like sugar." We ran upstairs to the big room with benches. Willy still wasn't convinced, but he came along, "Well, okay. But - if they don't serve us in an hour - I'm walking 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 the free food. Wish we had a watch - seemed like forever before it was our turn to go up to the rail - the one that keeps a congregation from getting a free run at lynching 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 and manhandled us to the rear. Willy was so mad he kept right on goin' out the door. I followed after. Willy was spittin' nails, "Damn that Jonsey. He promised food. Sat there for over an hour and didn't get fed." Jonsey came out behind us, "You shouldn't of made a commotion. A Missouri Synod Pastor won't feed you unless your confirmed." Willy grabbed Jonsey by the arm, "That's not what you said when we went upstairs. What is confirmed?" "You have to go through religious instruction." "Now you tell us. Well I'm finished going to Synods. Next week were gonna' be Presbyterians. Bet they let us eat the cookies."

Presbyterian Church was a block farther, but still a mile closer than the Methodists. 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 Presbyterian 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 going to hell." "Why would they want us to attend if we're going to hell?" "Must need sinners."

Catholic Church was halfway between 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 and 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 would have none of it, "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 Synod. Methodists give grape juice and cookies to anyone that can reach over 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. The one we saw in late August was just like a circus - tent and all. Even had an acrobat for a preacher - he climbed up the tent pole sayin' he was going to heaven - and slid 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 preaching inside tents." I was beginning to believe Willy was full of it. But -going to Church after watching a tent full of Holy Rollers was pretty tame.

Made it inside the Methodist Church and down the stairs 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 turning the other cheek with Job's friends. Workin' on Grandfather's farm - 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, "Who is Ned Smith, Johnny?" "Ugly old moonshiner from Dublin, Ohio and my own personal devil. Has *A Big Hairy Red Thing* for a friend" Teacher gave me one of those looks that told me my talkin' was over. He cut class short and excused himself. Thought I could see a few red spots breaking out on his forehead.

Didn't stick around and go to Church. Didn't feel like I needed it and they weren't servin' food. And was I ever starved. Walking against the wind had worked up my appetite. Going home was much easier than coming. Wind was at my back and I ran most of the way. Kept me warm. Neither Father or Grandfather Ropp were much on going to Church. Grandfather Mac never missed. But the Ropp side of the family decided to cut out the middle man and go direct. Mother went to the United Brethren Church 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. Grandfather and Grandmother Mac asked that I 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 living 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 getting 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 his steps - pulling his sweater on over his head. Willy was a whole world full of grumbles when he woke in the morning. He stopped at the bandstand and placed his feet up on the bottom step and tied his shoe laces, "Hate going to school almost as much as I hate Mondays." I waited two for the right time to give this 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 boring. 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 getting well." "Any good?" "Got some

swell ideas about building a raft." "Mad River's too far away and runs too fast." "Scioto River would be perfect." "You won't have enough time." Almost blurted out that I'd be leaving, but caught myself in time, "You ought to read more books." "Rather play tenor sax. Books are for worms."

Didn't talk the rest of the way. Too busy tryin' not to step on the crack in the sidewalk. Willy kept sayin', "Step on a crack and you'll break your back." Taking 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 my back. Didn't pay to tempt fate. Couldn't step on the grass - heavy dew had turned white with frost. If we did we'd kill it. Make large brown tracks when it dried. Beautiful day - wasn't a cloud in the sky. Sun was rising 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 building - in High School. Willy and me were exiled to the middle - Jr. High side. Math was a struggle for me. My mind was all 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 outa' 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 running. 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 it 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 could call blowing 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 training - not the real thing. Having me take Song Flute lessons was like trying 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 Song Flute class - like a weed in a flower bed.

Willy loved Song Flute as much as 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. With his tenor sax - had trouble with the reed. Push the keys on it and Willy made a sound - like a flock of 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 the flute." Bandmaster terminated my music lessons at noon after it was my turn to play solo. Couldn't hide in a crowd. Must have been painful. He covered up his ears, "Stop! I can't it. 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 that you need drum sticks." I sat in the back of the class with a grin from ear to ear - listening to everyone else pass their solo test. It was embarrassing, but necessary. On our way back to the classroom - Willy looked over 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 morning - 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 standing 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 down the blackboards." Willy turned away with one of his Cheshire-Cat grins. Made a motion like he was shooting baskets - so I'd know to stop by his house for a game of horse. If truth be known - I didn't mind

cleaning erasers and blackboards. That's another thing I couldn't understand. 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 pounding erasers with gusto. Wasn't long before I had three fifth graders pounding 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 make a difference.

Found Willy shootin' at the basket on his garage, "Had fun cleanin' up after school." "The dickens you did. Just us for now. Wanna' play horse?" "Do I get to go first?" "You know the rules. First one here goes first. Willy bounced the ball with both hands and drove to the basket, shooting a lay-up. "When you going to learn it doesn't pay to make the teacher mad?" I dribbled toward the basket with one hand and missed my lay-up. Knew I was in trouble. Willy would keep on shooting lay-ups until he missed. He missed his third attempt, but I had two letters. I shot three straight two hand set shots from above where a foul line should be and made 'em all. Willy didn't. He had three letters. Then I got fancy and tried a hook shot from the right hand side of his driveway. Missed everything and the ball wound up in the neighbor's yard. My goose was cooked.

Willy made five straight lay-ups and I missed three out of five. Never could shoot close in to the basket. Willy rubbed it in, "Got a horse on you! Lets play one on one." "Only until one of us gets to thirty points. I want to get home before *Jack Armstrong* starts." "The All American Boy. Waste of time if you ask me. I get to take it out first." When I played one on one with Willy - had to play with his rules. He was allowed to dribble the ball with two hands and take three steps before shooting. It was his ball and his court - so I couldn't argue. By the time the sun disappeared over the garage, we both had twenty-eight points. Decided to call it a draw.

Ran all the way home. Made it just in time to hear the announcer finish saying, "All American Boy." You're probably wonderin' why we were walking instead of riding our bikes. Against the rules to ride bikes or drive to school - if you were old enough - too. Either walked or road the school bus. Only way you could use the bus was to live outside the city limits and that meant Fairfield's - too. Knew it was comin' - just didn't know when. Father waited until I was leaving the Supper table, "Understand 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 laughing or giggling, but they did have wide smiles. "Pay attention to what you're doing next time." Had a feeling I was the only one relieved when his belt didn't come off. My 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. Except I didn't slam a lid or stay after school. And 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. Have to walk." Willy asked, "How come?" "Army won't let you park it near the gate." We were on our way home and Willy was still fussing, "Jonsey has flipped his lid. How can we sell papers and still have time to play?" "I know you don't care, but I'd miss my radio programs - so why is he trying to talk us into it? He still 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 doing."

"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 morning - right after basketball practice at the High Schoo - Willy and me walked by the theater to see what matinee movie was playin'. Stopped right in our tracks - movie was another vaudeville song and dance show. 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 to us. Willy kicked at 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 over - Mother had cookies left over to pack in with my peanut butter sandwich.

Rode over to Willy's with my lunch in the basket. We hadn't started and all ready I was hungry, "Kinda' glad the movie wasn't a cowboy film. This is gonna' be a great day. Like a bottle of ginger ale after the cap comes off - it's all sparkle and fizz." Willy only grunted, "Gonna be an easy

ride. Only a few swales - roads mostly flat." Crisp clear fall day gave us a shot of extra energy we didn't need, but would come in handy later. Willy stopped outside of town at sleddin' hill, "Look at that fence." "Where?" "At the bottom." I missed it because weeds were coverin' it up. Wasn't more than a couple of wires - not more than 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 short of it." "Drag your feet on the run-out. That'll make it stop short of the wire. At least the farmer didn't plow up the grass. Hill's still as 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 - making great wide sweeping S curves - side to side on the black top. Not a car on the road. We had this part of the countryside pretty much to ourselves. Most folks were listening to college football games on the radio or rakin' leaves. Saw only three cars on our ride out to Mad River. Hid our bicycles a little farther off the road into the brush with the leaves fallin'. Made sure they were hidden. Had too - be a long walk home if they were stolen. Sun was at midday warm. Didn't need our jackets - so we hung 'em over our handlebars. Shirt and sweater were warm enough. Willy waited for me to catch up. Had to tie my shoes again. "You know," he said, "Hiking makes no sense at all." "Nothin' better than a tramp through the woods. If we lived on an ocean - we'd swim in it. Live near woods - we hike." His Dad hiked the woods 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 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 the leaves turned from green to autumn red and

yellow. We could see better in the woods and didn't have to worry about brushin' up against poison ivy - or poison oak. And the 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. Ate our sack lunch and shared water from Willy's canteen. Buried the sacks like we're supposed too and then crunched along the leaves piled deep above Mad River's banks. Walked about a mile - or maybe two downstream when my nose picked up a scent that made me quiver. It was a familiar pungent odor. I grabbed Willy's arm and whispered, "Don't make any noise. Think 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." "Not many moonshiners in these parts. Let's find out." "Okay, but lets move away from the river and follow the trail." We walked a hundred yards or so away from the river - followin' a frontier road that had been used by Indians - settlers - animals and us. Wide enough that fishermen around here drove their trucks on it to get closer to the river. Willy wondered, "Two of those drifters that chased us are in jail - aren't they?" I whispered back, "Everyone, but Old Ned and *The Big Hairy Red Thing*." "Why are you whisperin'?" "Calm day. Voices can 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 the sour mash." "If Old Ned has smarts to make whiskey - he should be makin' an honest living." "Could if he didn't have a mean streak. Works a threshin' machine and a steamboat boiler now and then, but nothin' steady"

If the wind had been up - we'd of never smelled the mash cooking. But this was fall. Wind only blew when a Canadian cold front came through - like Sunday. Bramble got thick and odor of sour mash got stronger when we got closer to the still. I pointed toward a path leading 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 - see their scattered 'round. We've found the right trail. Old Ned was covering his tracks - so the law won't think there's still's this way." Willy whispered back, "Stinks so bad - all they'd have to do is follow their nose. Maybe we better turn around." "And miss out on an adventure?" I turned back and stopped just short of a log blocking the trail. Willy didn't pay attention and fell right over it. 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. Logs been moved more than once." We each grabbed a thick branch and tried to pry it up, but couldn't budge it. "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 down 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 good look-see - moved upstream - off the trail. Snuck up as close as we felt it was safe and hid behind a big old Buckeye tree. I peeked around one side and Willy the other - lookin' like two curious raccoons. We could see three men and Ned's *Big Ol' Hairy Red Thing* sittin' around a boilin' kettel. 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, but the other two are strangers. You know 'em?" "Never seen 'em

before. Must be from Vandallia. His 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 breathing and leaves crunching. Sprinted right past Willy to the old frontier road. By now we were making more noise than a herd of cows on a western stampede. Got lucky. Old Ned missed when he tried to jump over the tree blocking 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." Didn't need encouragement. Willy and me were flyin' down that road. Neither one of us had ever run a mile before, but we ran farther than that today. We were riding our bikes a good hundred yards down the road when Old Ned came out of the woods - screamin'. "Damn you - Johnny Ropp. I'll get you - yet! You can't hide from me!" Willy and me leaned over our handlebars and pumped as fast as our legs would go.

When we were satisfied that we'd outrun Old Ned - Willy slowed down, "He 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, "Must be. Saw a rowboat pulled up on the bank. What do you think of my troubles 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. Don't think I've 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. Want to shoot a few baskets?" "I've had enough excitement for today. Can you stop by on your way to Church tomorrow morning." "Walk - or ride?" "Walk."

Left Willy at his house and made a beeline for home. Father was in his office. Soon as I told him about Old Ned - he was on the phone to the Sheriff. Won't drag this out - as you probably all ready 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 being - knowing Ned was on the loose with his friend and madder than ever. I was beginning to have doubts. Might never get the better of him. 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 you live on a farm and Willy and me were growing outa' the costume age. Mother said, "By the time anyone reaches eighth grade - it's time to put costumes aside." We had bested Old Ned and helped the Sheriff shut down his still - so growin' up was comin' whether we were ready for it 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 grocery sack and we'll pull a paper bag 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 our annual prank. High School boys hauled the houseboat outa' the lumber yard and strung it up on the flagpole in front of the school. Law tried to stop them from doin' it, but they never were able too. Day before Halloween it'd be hoisted to the top as usual and this year was no different.

It didn't rain - so Willy's paper bag idea worked out. Maybe I was getting 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. Trick or treating just wasn't the same. Forgot - you may not celebrate Halloween the same way we do. Night before is Beggar's Night. You probably call it trick or treating. 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 plumbing, but more than 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 his trouble began. Rotten old boards gave way and Calvin tumbled into the pit head first. Came outa' there smellin' like Ned did when he left 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 our way to school. He was sittin' on his top side porch 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 one for me." "Hear about Calvin?" "What happened to him?" "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 Thanksgiving." "How come?" "Mother is worried that Old Ned'll come after me. Doesn't need too. Grounding 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 Thanksgiving. Going up to Bellpoint."

"Whoopee ti yi yo, get along, little dogies

It's your misfortune and none of my own -"

6

Bein' grounded meant I had to stay close to home the next week - and the next - and the next. Spent most of my time inside anyway - so bein' grounded didn't matter. And weather turned for the worse. Northwest wind blew away any leaf that wasn't burnt in the gutters. Rained 'most every day and was it ever comin' down cold. And hidin' from Old Ned Smith turned out to be a waste of time. Old Ned had gone to ground. Law couldn't find hide nor hair of that rascal. Wasn't even a good rumor about his whereabouts. And Jonsey kept buggin' me and Willy about sellin' newspapers. 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 getting interested though - what with Christmas comin' on and no money for presents. We finally got Jonsey off our backs by tellin' him we'd help out when I returned from Bellpoint - after Thanksgiving.

Didn't have many school holidays. School started after farm work was done and quit before planting began. No way we would get the Wednesday before turkey day off. Couldn't drive up to Bellpoint until after school was out. Father almost made it up there before dark. This late in November sun went down early - around five o'clock. Wedged between my two sisters - I was anxious to get out of the back seat as soon as possible. Grandmother Mac shooed us all into the kitchen. She had supper waiting on the stove. It was late - almost seven-thirty when I wandered outside lookin' for somethin' to do. Looked around. 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 propping up. Grandfather's livery stable needed a good coat of paint - too. Boards looked like they'd never had any. Maybe I was gettin' too picky about Bellpoint. With Will and Jake gone up north - didn't have another boy my age 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 leading to the outhouse. Couldn't hide where we were goin' from the neighbors in wintertime. 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 leaving for the farm right after breakfast and you'll need a goodnight's rest." I was careful not to slam the back porch door, "Are we going to have goose?" "Yes, and don't make a scene about it. Eat at least a few bites. Grandmother Ropp will have ham and sweet potatoes. Now 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. Thanksgiving and Christmas I'd have 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 seein' a goose hung high above a large black pot full of dressing on a Cast-iron range. Not a very appetizin' sight.

Can't ever understand holiday food. I was goin' to be fed more than anyone can eat at dinner and supper. And you'd think breakfast would be light, but it wasn't. Grandmother

Mac had pancakes - sausage - eggs - oatmeal - hot chocolate and fresh pecan roll waiting for breakfast - and a thirty-three pound turkey roasting in the oven for dinner. Made up my mind to eat lightly, but I was on my third pecan roll when Father called, "Wash up and get ready. We're going to leave for the farm in ten minutes." I washed down the remains of my roll with the last of my chocolate. Pushed my chair back from the kitchen table and was heading 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 scrubbing 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 the fire and stay warm. Grandmother and Grandfather Ropp were waitin' for our arrival - outside on their 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 our favorite - chocolate covered cherries. In the parlor fireplace was a log - large enough to be a Yule log - burning yellow and red. Couldn't smell turkey cookin' - so I knew it had to be goose roasting in Grandmother Ropp's oven. I'd just finished my second chocolate covered cherry when Grandfather entered the parlor

wearing his hat and Saturday night goin' to town clothes. I knew we were going somewhere important. 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 in it - odor from his Saturday night cigars had found a permanent home in the car's upholstery. This morning was the first time I'd ever seen him blush, but his cigar stayed out.

Now the home place is something special. My Great Great Grandfather came north from Alabama with forty freed slaves when Ohio was still a wild place - after Perry won a 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 brought them north to freedom. 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. Anyway - the slaves earned their freedom and land of their own by clearing Great Great Grandfather's farm and helping build the home place. These were very talented folks - blacksmiths - masons - carpenters and such. Made their own brick from scratch and built every building out of it - including the barn. No one had central heating back then - so every room had a fireplace. With six bedrooms and two kitchens - the home place wasn't easy to maintain. Great Uncle Fred - Grandfather's brother still lived there, but wanted to move out to his own farm like his brothers. He'd had enough of freezin' in winter. Told Grandfather, "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.

Didn't care for the geese that guarded the home place brick bridge. With necks arced high and feathered backs up - they protected the house from intruders better than a pack of 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 that guarded 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 leaving the ground. None of the geese bothered Grandfather. They seemed to like him. I could tell this wasn't going to be a happy visit. Grandfather had to sign papers to complete his part of the sale the sale of the home place to a commercial quarry. And his six brothers and two sisters were reluctant - too. He was the last to sign.

Great Grandfather left the farm in 1861 - too young to tote a gun - so as I said before - 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 and sent home from the Shenandoa Valley - set free by a Reb lieutenant neighbor - from Alabama. He'd seen enough killing. Put away his drum and never played it again. Turned to farming. All seven of his sons left the farm to work on the railroad that passed through the property. My favorite - Great Uncle Will stayed on as an engineer on the Baltimore and Ohio. The other six boys became farmers - tired of working on 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 within two weeks of each other. She was

left with a younger brother - sister and a large farm to care for. Barely sixteen when she drove her team and buggy to the home place to see if one of Great Grandfather's boys could manage her farm. Grandfather was the only boy at home - so 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 running a farm for a young single lady. They drove her buggy to the county seat and were married that very same day. That's how my Grandfather became a husband and farmer 'cause he was the only son at the home place that day.

Don't know what he was thinkin' about now, but we didn't stay at the home place long. He whispered a few words to Great Uncle Fred - signed the papers - lit his cigar and we walked back 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 the Studebaker. And that gander took off runnin' - flyin' after me. Nailed me - too on the back of my ankle with his beak and right in the middle of my hind end. Grandfather stood between me and the gander - rescued me from further embarrassment. He shooed it back over the bridge as I hopped in the car. Gander strutted off the brick bridge like he was 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 would take it over when you grew up. Fred didn't want to stay and it would cost too much to modernize." "Why don't you add it to your farms?" "Have over two sections to farm now - more than I can handle. 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 yard just in time for Thanksgiving dinner. Grandmother came out of the kitchen onto the back porch, "Did you sign the papers?" "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 after you?" "Both ways - coming and going." "In a couple of weeks he won't bother anyone. Wash up. Dinner is ready." Gave it a lick and a promise and walked to my place at the table in the dining room. Goose was cooked and on a platter at the head of the table. Grandfather carved as 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. I filled the rest of my plate with candied sweet potatoes - mashed potatoes and 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 would eat - though was that gander from the home place. But as mean as he was - he'd be tougher and chewier than 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 Victoria record player. Picked out my favorite record - a march by Sousa's band. One side was *Marching Through Georgia* and the other side - *King Cotton* - to keep things equal. Victrola records had to be at least a quarter inch thick and the only amplification was a horn on top. Didn't use

electricity. Had to wind up a spring that made the turntable go - with a crank on the side. My other favorite record 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 took over the Victrola. They put on a waltz record - *Blue Danube* or some river like that. I wandered out to the kitchen.

Grandmother must have noticed that 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. 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 at 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. Spot 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." I was still stuffed to my eyeballs from a double helping of breakfast and Grandmother Ropp's dinner. Sky was turning from slate gray to black when we climbed into the car and drove along the River Road - to Bellpoint and another feast.

Climbed outa' the car and regained my appetite. The aroma of a thirty-three pound tom turkey made my stomach expand. Uncles and cousins had arrived 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 dining room. The good news was no one could watch over me and 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 who were 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. Between our age differences and me bein' a boy - couldn't add a thing to their conversation. They talked on and on about school - and clothes - and horses - and boyfriends. I was terminally bored.

I snuck out the front door - so full of turkey dinner - I felt woozy - you know - tilted thirteen degrees off center. Strolled down the lane past Doc's house. Found three flat skippin' rocks along the way. Sat down on the log Will - and Jake - and me rolled down to the bank. Just sat there - thinkin' about how the home place was built. Bricks made and buildings built by free men - workin' for land of their own. But - I could see why no one in the family talked about it. No one would take time to listen to the whole story - anyway. Get to that part about bringing forty slaves north to freedom and everyone would have their own interpretation. Freedom had to be part of the Underground Railroad. 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 when I remembered Mark 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 - on before it quit swingin'. Turned around and looked toward the back wall. My mind wasn't played 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 - 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. I'd have to take a walk up Mill Creek and look for logs. Had to be some along the bank and I might find a few boards - too. When Mother called for me to come in - didn't take much urging. I was still two pints of turkey over the top. 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 floating up the back stairs as I tied my shoes. I dressed in a hurry this morning - 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 drinking coffee. "Morning - Johnny. You're up early today." "Going 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 Thanksgiving meals. Ate what was on my plate - though - eggs and bacon - drank two cups of hot chocolate and 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 opening.

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. 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 going to be easy sawing four logs of equal length and notch them so boards would fit on top.

Gave the general store a wide berth this morning. Never know when Old Ned Smith might be about, but he wasn't - not today. Wasn't anyone up and about to speak of. 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 that the first settlers cut timber from the surrounding forests in winter and floated logs downstream with the spring rains. Built rafts to go along and protect what was their own. They'd return by Military Road - which went from Columbus to Fort Meigs - way up on Lake Erie. Wondered if that was where Will and Jake wound up. Would be fun crawlin' about an old 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 going?" "To the farm. Grandfather Ropp needs our help." "Are we going 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?" "Hiking. 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 dancing along the lane as we drove between the two stone boundary pillars. Sandy and Clyde were hooked to the wagon - ready to go. Grandfather Ropp gave a few clicks with his tongue and we were away. Father walked along side with Spot and opened the gate while I hopped 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 beginning to feel like a pair of icicles. Father trailed behind - looking for arrowheads. The great wooden wagon wheels bounced my bones as we jarred along over the frozen 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. Too rocky to plow and too poor to graze. Won't even grow good trees. 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 that 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 trailed further behind - crisscrossing the fields along the way. He was looking for a black stone glint that would reveal an arrowhead's hiding place. Delaware Indians used to hunt in the forest that was here. Land was thicket

and forest then - so they lost quite a few. Father began collecting 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 as we approached the gate to the cornfield. Grandfather had over a thousand acres of land - but not all of it was bein' farmed. Half of it was in pasture - some was bein' rested and there were a few patches of woods. Boggled my mind to think of the work we'd have to do if all of the land was in crops. We'd need three more tractors and horses wouldn't do. 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 - 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 it 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."

Pitching corn up on the wagon was a lot easier than husking it. Wasn't long before we had a full wagon and were bouncing back to the corn cribs. New crib had three openings along the side. Grandfather stopped the wagon at the middle opening. I watched as he pitched corn back over his shoulder into the opening. 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 away and shoveling 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 - making 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

soon would turn the cornfield 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. Helping 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.

My face turned cherry-red from the cold northwest wind. Didn't notice the cold until we stopped shoveling. I helped Grandfather unhitch Sandy and Clyde and helped 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 helping today. After I fed the horses shelled corn 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 days afterwards - better. You would - too if you liked leftovers as much as I do. 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 all down with whole fresh 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 eating more than I should have - I stuck my nose out the back porch door and thought better of

goin' outside. It was below freezing and pitch black. Talk about Old Ned today made me a bit uneasy. 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'd be visitin' Bellpoint over Thanksgiving. Radio had one too many dance bands playin' Friday night - so I decided to do 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. At nine o'clock my eyes were closin'. Shovelin' corn and 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 morning. 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 else 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. Still walked gingerly by the general store - even

though it wasn't open. Looked all around, but Old Ned Smith wasn't about. 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'd have to come back and check out the Old 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 off as would come and commenced sawin' what was left. Had them trimmed well enough - so I could roll 'em around. Next step would be to hide 'em so no one else would find 'em. I pulled the logs up on the bank so high water wouldn't take them downstream and covered them 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', but should be more than 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 to where my logs were hidden - in a straight line.

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 that were left would be just right for a raft. Even found some two-by-fours that had been used as braces. All I needed to bring was nails and a saw.

Kicked some dirt off the floor boards to get a better look. Sun was at 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 some more 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. Pryed 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 person that dug the pit had taken time to make it deeper - it would've stayed put. I tugged on it. It was heavier than it looked. Put both hands under it and lifted it out. Couldn't open it. Had a brass laminated Yale key lock securin' it. And - written on top - *Open this box and you will 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.

Picked it up and moved it from side to side - couldn't give it a shake - it was too heavy. Sounded like metal coins were rattlin' around inside. I had a choice - return it to the pit - or take it back to Bellpoint. If I did - 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 this 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 here. Only person I'd have to worry about was the one who hid it. Took another look at my cover-up, "He'd have to lift the door up to find out his 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 with the saw - might cut myself - runnin' with it. Had to stop and rest five times before I reached Bellpoint Road. Bellpoint was still quiet Saturday morning. Wasn't a soul - outside of me - on the road. Not even a shade tree mechanic outside the general store. Still - I felt like at least fifty pairs of eyes 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. I could 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 saw 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 on it. Pony cart seat was as good a place as any. Went back down for the hacksaw. Found a likely blade and attached it. 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 caddie for me." "Be right down. Are we 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 wanted to give caddyin' another try and Grandfather Mac's clubs were an easy 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 Grandfather's golf bag and hand him the clubs he called for. Grandfather drove the Plymouth Roadster and Father rode up front. I road 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 - to meet us at the course. With a cold wind whipping around my ears - I decided to bum a ride back with him.

The Marysville Golf Course wasn't far - not more than thirty minutes from Bellpoint. Marysville was 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 stacking up on the edge of the fairways. Lose quite a few golf balls in 'em. We arrived before noon on a warm late fall day. Countin' the Pro's car and ours - there were only four cars in the parking lot. When we checked in at the Pro Shop - he warned us, "Only one foursome ahead of you. They should be turning the front nine in about fifteen minutes. I'm going to close up my shop early today. If you want a snack - better stop in after the front nine. Grandfather replied, "We'll take you up on the offer. Save three cups of coffee for us and an Orange Crush for our caddie. And 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 - too so it was easy goin' for the first nine holes. He could see I was wearin' down - so I carried only Grandfather's bag on the back nine. We stopped at the Pro Shop after nine holes. 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 and had to wait for coffee to cool. Finished eighteen holes in a little over three hours - well before dark.

Walkin' a golf course is almost good as hikin'. I'd 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 learned real quick that golf was more of an art than science - after watching 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 - golf was in competition with all my favorite sports. And it took a long time to play - and how was I going to carry a golf bag on my bicycle? But - that didn't stop me from tryin'. Before supper - I sneaked 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 would." Kept right on swingin' - and kept right on missin'. Reached down - teed the ball up on a tuft of grass tryin' to

remember what Uncle Bus told me, "Swing easy to hit it far." Took a couple of practice swings. Concentrated on shortening my backswing and cutting my take away down. Clipped the grass with each one. 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 going to be fun." Chased after the balls and brought 'em back. Wasn't long before I had to quit. Mother was callin' for 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 morning.

Stuffed myself at the dinner table - last night at supper. 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 gnawing on it - it would fast become a memory. Her roast turkey seemed to taste better with every 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 - standing clear. And it was a good thing I did. A dart flew outa' the box and imbedded itself overhead in the ceiling boards. Went right by my head with a whoosh. Used the screwdriver to turn the box over and dump out the contents - not wanting to spring another booby trap. Six leather drawstring bags fell out and another dart fired by my head into the pony cart seat. If it was Old Ned who set these traps, he was makin' sure his box lived up to its motto, *Open this box and you will die!* Pounded on the back of it - to make sure there wasn't another trap. Lifted it with the metal end of my screwdriver. Made sure the open part was pointin' 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 Yale lock made out to Old Ned Smith.

Looked inside the box. Made sure it was still pointing away from me. There were only two springs and two triggers for darts. One worked on opening - 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, "This was more than I expected. There was no way I can keep this gold. It has to be stolen or 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 in gold in Ned's metal box. I placed the gold coins back inside the pouch and all six back into the box with the bill of sale. Cleaned up the area around the pony cart seat and took the tools downstairs to the workbench. Climbed back in the loft and pulled the dart out of the ceilin' and the other one from the pony cart seat. Didn't know what to do with 'em and I was concerned. Old Ned might have coated the tips with poison. Just in case - I took both to the back lot

and buried 'em in the ground. Now all I had to do was figure out what to do with a box of gold coins that weren't mine. Father was hikin' the woods above Mill Creek lookin' for mushrooms and arrowheads. Maybe 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 working 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 - up Mill Creek. Bill of sale says it was purchased by Ned Smith." "So - you think Ned is the owner? Let me take 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 pouch after pouch, "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 - enough to buy two Plymouth Roadsters." Grandfather didn't hesitate - he telephoned the Sheriff's office and notified the Deputy on duty of my find. He turned to me after hanging up, "They want me to drop it off on my way to work in the morning. You did the right thing. Deputy agreed that Ned couldn't have come by his 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 that I found it?" "Don't think so, but I'll make sure. I'll let the Sheriff know that 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 placing '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. Wasn't anyone in the State of Ohio who could hit a golf ball as far as Uncle Bus. Father and Mother were drinking coffee - sitting around the kitchen table. I sat in a chair near the Cast-iron range and listened in to a family conversation - all about Old Ned Smith. My finding 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 tipping Ned off about raids. I was left with the impression that a lot of unsavory thugs lived in Dublin. Grandfather Mac said it was a populated by a group of men who were members of a club for gambling - golf - drinking and such. When they got to talking about lazy no-goods - I remembered that 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 losing his gold. He would be so mad he'd be a wild man. Bet he'd start lookin' for me and what could I do? Best I could come up with was - run like crazy. And each time I saw *The Big Hairy Red Thing* - it was growin' bigger and bigger. And farmers were losing animals around here - too.

*"'Twas founded be th' Puritans to give
thanks fr bein' presarved fr'm th'
Indians, an'... we keep it to give
thanks we are presarved fr'm th'
Puritans."*

7

Monday morning arrived crisp and clear. Not a breath of breeze in the air. Stopped by Willy's place, but he wasn't ready to go to school - so I ran on ahead - figured there was no reason for two of us bein' late. Jonsey was sittin' at the top of the steps - waitin', "'Bout time you showed up. Where's Slick?" "Wasn't ready. Sure hard comin' back to school after Thanksgiving." Jonsey wasn't listenin', "Did you think about sellin' newspapers at Patterson's Main Gate?" "Hadn't crossed my mind." 'Course it had, but I didn't want to let on to Jonsey. Didn't pay to look too anxious when there's hard work at hand. "Bull hockey - you and Slick both need money for Christmas." "You talk to Slick?" "Yup - said he would if you would." "What do we have to do?" "Don't have to sell newspapers during the week - only Sundays. You stand outside the Main Gate and sell 'em for a dime. You'll make a penny on each paper." "Where do we get our papers?" "At Old Nel's garage in Fairfield. She's the distributor. Only drawback is gettin' 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 presents and so do you." I looked at Jonsey, "Looks like we're committed." Willy said, "Yup!" Just then the bell rang.

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 still play basketball outside - though it seemed to get 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 at all 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 Greek's and get an ice cream cone. And his looked as good as all get out, but I wouldn't dare buy one. Not if I wanted to beat John D. Rockefeller. Willy's shirt had to be magnet or a mysterious food attractor. Anything messy that landed on the front of it - stuck. After a chocolate 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 a garage attached to the back of her two bedroom frame house. Garage backed up on an alley. Jonsey was waitin' for us - sittin' in the corner folding his evening papers. Newspapers were stacked all over the garage floor and cloth newspaper bags hung along the wall on nails like meat on hooks. Jonsey stood up and 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 pulling 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 chunk of tobacco she had in her mouth and lit a cigarette. Willy and me had never seen a lady smoke before. None we knew did - wasn't proper. And Old Nel's breath? Only way I can describe it - it's like the odor comin' out of the Green Frog's front door in summer. Didn't know what to say - so I didn't, but the silence got to

Willy, "I'm Willy and this is Johnny. What time should we be here tomorrow?" Nel gave Willy a stare that made him look down at his shoes and shuffle his feet. She took another drag on her cigarette and looked us over. The snarl of her lips changed to 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 - almost knocking each other over as we crowded through it.

Didn't stop runnin' until 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." "Smelled like somethin' bubbling 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. What do you think? Should we 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' going 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 as mean and ugly. She even has the 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 going to the library?" "Sure am. Gonna' read up on witches. We may need protection."

Sat there at the reading table looking 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. Maybe we were doin' the devil's business. They were supposed to be ugly. Nel qualified two times over. And if she served Old Ned - why he was the devil himself. Sat back in my chair and commenced thinkin' - which I said before is dangerous for a boy of my age. Really 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 she was operatin'. But since we hadn't begun - I couldn't tell what it was. Decided to ask Father about Old Nel and the Dayton Journal Herald. Besides - I'd need his permission if I was going to miss Sunday School and sell papers. We didn't get the Herald. Father preferred the Xenia Gazette and our weekly Osborn paper. I waited for Mother to lock up, but decided against telling her about our plans. She was the one who insisted I go to Sunday School.

Talked to Father after supper. Didn't pay to bring up a new subject to someone on an empty stomach. Told him about our new job and asked about the Herald and Old Nel. He agreed with me sellin' papers to make Christmas money, but wasn't much help on Old Nel, "I've never heard of anyone named Nel Smith. She could be Ned's sister. What does she look like?" "Like the old queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*." "That bad?" "And she smells like the inside of the Green Frog." "Have you been in there?" "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. Too much yellow journalism." "What does that mean?" "They distort the truth - sometimes." I expected an argument over sellin' newspapers on the corner, but I didn't get one. I did overhear a heated discussion in the kitchen about the value of sellin' papers as a learning experience. Mother said - 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. Radio was mostly swing band music - the syrupy kind - you know - with wailin' saxophones. Worked on a Dad's puzzle for awhile. He'd set a thousand pieces up on the card table and we all gave it a try. Tell you how dull this Saturday night is - I did my homework for Monday. Went to bed early. Six o'clock wasn't far away.

Woke up before daylight Sunday morning - 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 sideyard 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 some mighty poor folks down there. Least that's what Willy said on our walk over to Old Nel's place. We walked through the inner door of her garage door at six-thirty on the nose. Sure didn't want to make the wicked witch of the news mad. No tellin' what spell she might cast on us, but we might as well have been two hours late. She looked up with a cigarette dangling 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 grabbed two bags off the wall - grabbed two stacks of papers and ran out the door together - running into each other as we tried to squeeze out the door.

We were stuffin' newspaper in our bags as we walked to the Main Gate. Willy was so shook up he was stuffin' his in the bag upside down. And he was talkin' a mile a minute, "Boy am I ever 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 all of my breakfast. We were talkin' 'cause we were scared. Cold morning air cleared our noses by the time we reached the Main Gate. Will took the outbound sidewalk and I took the inbound. We were a pathetic lookin' sight - what with holes in our pants and shoes - wearin' patched up jackets and sweaters. Worked - though - we each sold all fifty of our papers and we both made a dollar in tips. Chattered away like two magpies on our way back to Old Nel's garage. We were full of ourselves - bein' successful on our first time out. Probably made too much noise when we entered Nel's garage. She opened the door leading 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 Old 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 and don't bother comin' back until Sunday!"

We ran into each other again - goin' out the door. 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 sore as could be, "You and your big mouth. Now we'll have to sell fifty more papers." "It will mean more tips. It's a good thing we didn't mention 'em - or she'd 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 a dollar 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 seventy-five cents 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 for presents." "Looks of Old Nel - don't think we'll ever see our pay. She owes us fifty cents each." "We made more in 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 again 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 on 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 anyway. Lollled around the house most of Sunday. Nobody asked me how sellin' papers went until Father supper. Father asked, "How was your first day as an independent businessman?" "Willy and me sold all of our papers in about 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. Me and Willy 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 - *Huck Finn*, "I was worried that it might be too old for you. Like Twain's book about Tom, Huck's is about how folks lived 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 Mark Twain makes about slaves. But - it is true to the times it portrays and has lessons about how people relate to each other. There are some real scalawags after Huck. Some of them 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 really 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're worth." "Like comic books today?" "Yes."

I didn't always understand grownups. My Mother knew that 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? She sure knew her books. And that Twain fella could sure write. Here we were a hundred years later and his stories still rang true. Mother said it was because things change - 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 matter who you were or

where you came from as long as you could do the important things - like throw - catch without dropping - spit without the wind blowin' it back into your face and most important - tellin' the truth when it counts. I dug into Twain's book under my bed covers. When I woke up it was morning.

Next morning 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 a winter wash. Wasn't rainin' - it was drizzlin' - a cold wet 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 'em warm, "Hear Old Nel is hidin' an escaped convict inside her house." "Where'd you hear that?" "From Jonsey - and from his description 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 - odor of sulfur and manure is overpowerin'." "Where's Jonsey?" "Soaked to the skin. Went inside." "He owes us an explanation - for us not gettin' paid until the end of the month."

The bell rang and we went inside - so we wouldn't be late. Jonsey made himself scarce all throug the day. We finally cornered him outside 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. We're not gettin' paid until after Christmas?" Jonsey tried to pull away, but Slick got hold of his other arm, "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?" Willy and me gripped Jonsey tighter. He was about to get thrown to the ground and stomped on. Must have known it. Jonsey finally fessed up, "Old Nel threatened me if I told. She's got two thugs workin' for her that carry knives and *A Big Hairy Red Thing* inside - smellin' up her house. I'm not about to cross her.

Won't get any money from my paper route until the end of the month - too." Willy was still mad, "You shoulda' told us - anyway. We're your friends - Ol' Nel ain't. I asked, "Is Old Ned Smith hidin' at her house?" "Someone is. Seen him lookin' out through the back widow curtains, but not good enough to identify." "Does he look like one of those you got with your dynamite cap?" "Maybe, but I can't say for sure." I knew, "It has to be Old Ned Smith." Jonsey twisted in our grip, "Turn me loose. You're cuttin' off the blood to my hands." We let loose. Jonsey began to run - shouting back over his shoulder, "Be late for my paper route and Ol' Nel will kill me." Willy looked at me, "What are you goin' to do." "Don't know, but don't think goin' to Nel's is a good idea." "Let's go over to my place and think about it." Now - as I said before - a boy my age thinkin' can be trouble. And two of us? Well - that can be a calamity.

We sat around for awhile on Willy's side porch steps - thinkin', but not talkin'. Ground was still too wet to bounce Willy's basketball on, 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 and our clothes were splattered with mud. Gave up tryin' to catch the ball before it hit the ground and began a game of Horse. I had a surprise waitin' for Slick. I'd practiced lay-ups. Made everyone he did and beat him by three letters. Willy asked, "You thought about Old Nel enough?" "Yup. Lets check out Nel's house 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're tetches! If she's Old Ned's sister - he's found us. And if he's comin' after me - he will and we can't stop him."

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 out while her boys are busy foldin' their papers. Need to go home and get our bikes." "How come?" "In case we have to make a fast getaway." "Better hurry or they'll all be out on their routes and we won't have cover." Made it back to Willy's house in record time. We checked out Nel's house from the front. Wasn't much of a decision. There wasn't any 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 the 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 down 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. 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 in 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' tell the police." Willy caught up with me before I got on my bike, "Osborn Police can't do anything. Nel's house is in Fairfield. Hop off 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 - my Father."

I waited until after supper to talk with Father. It 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 calling the Sheriff. They both agreed - it was too big for the Fairfield Police to handle. Sheriff promised to pick up Old Ned before morning. 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 morning. 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 asking, "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 for

him to ride in with help." My Father could really get into my fantasy world, but I knew he was pulling my leg. "Wish he could. Old Ned is quicker than local law." "Hurry on to school and keep both eyes open." Willy was waitin' on his front porch, "What kept you?" "I'm ten minutes early. Waited for my Father to tell me about Old Ned." "My Dad called the Sheriff this morning. You were right. Old Ned got away. Sure is slippery devil." "Darn - 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 and said she had 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 ringing. 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 handlebars - 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. Least ways - nothin' looked outa' sorts. 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 'en into his bag - and Nel 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 thugs 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 the New Year - 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 want him down there and he can sneak back and forth across the Ohio River. He worked on the Ohio River on a steamboat early last 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 stick around here. We should be okay 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 almost 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! Autry ain't bad - if he'd only stop singin'." "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?" "I said Tom Mix is dead. Got killed in a car accident." "Are you kiddin'?" "No. My Dad heard it on the radio." "Why didn't you tell me?" "Forgot." "Tom wouldn't die that way. He'd go down with his six guns blazin'. He'd 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 morning walk to basketball at the gym turned into a run and stomp - 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. That made it palatable. After the movies - Willy wanted to read his Dad's National Geographic. Knowin' he'd leaf through the stack to look at topless ladies - I decided to see if Mother had a new adventure book for me at the library. Cold weather - I had time to read another book and maybe Twain had written three. Mother must have anticipated my need. 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 - many more and some 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 chance, but with Tom Mix gone - I wasn't up to another lecture about it. So I hightailed it to the reading table and commenced.

Wasn't long after I opened the book that I was lost in the story. 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 to deliver 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 in the morning. After supper - I picked up where I'd left off. London's story about the Yukon was gettin' my interest.

Woke up in darkness - Sunday morning. I was gettin' up earlier on weekends than during 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 air was loaded with moisture. It was 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 morning. 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 witch. Sure does explain why she is so ugly and mean. If were goin' to 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, "Agree - better hurry or we'll be late."

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 and circus folks had a lot in common. Only problem with newspaper folks is - they don't fold their tents and leave town. My problem now was Old Nel. She'd be keepin' track of me for her brother. And I diddn'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' his side porch steps and bounced on my hind end.

Willy saw the ice coatin' the sidewalks and let his storm door bang - let out a whoop and a holler. 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 unloading 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. Words 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. She looked like she wanted to bully us more - but didn't - too many boys in the garage. We walked gingerly on the ice covered sidewalks to the Main Gate. Couldn't run three steps and slide with a load of heavy Sunday newspapers on our shoulders. We took both sides of the Main Gate and began sellin'. 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. And half an hour later Willy hollered over, "Lets go inside the diner across the street and warm up." He ran and I followed.

The diner across from the Main Gate was - at one time - a real railroad car. Not sure if was a railroad diner or one of the day cars with seats. Had a long counter with stools, but no booths. Diner wouldn't be caught dead with frills like that. We ordered a hamburger and mug of hot chocolate and promptly wiped out a quarter of our morning tips. Had to order somethin' or the boss'd make us leave. We were in grownup's land - a land where there wasn't any free lunch or warmth. And a real diner doesn't have cups and saucers. Had to drink out of a mug. Would have even served us coffee if we asked for it, but I forgot too and didn't. 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 words are gold - we found a mine today. Sergeant from Patterson Field was talking about a German Dictator named Adolf Hitler. Said, "That man is just 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 whup him - just like we did the Kaiser." That really got me interested. Father had more than one book in Grandfather Ropp's attic about boys my age goin' over to Europe and beating up on Old Kaiser Bill. I wondered if that Hitler fellow wore a spiked metal helmet and had a mustache like the Kaiser did on the cover of Father's books. The man - the Sergeant talked too - wasn't at all interested in fighting, "I'm not going over there to save Europe again. They got themselves into it - they can get themselves out. Germans and Frenchies are like two schoolboys darin' each other to fight." "Might have been last time, but not now. Hitler is hell bent on exterminating anyone who doesn't have blonde hair." "That's a problem for Europe. We got problems at home. Why - 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 listened to Teddy we would have gotten in right away and the Kaiser would have backed off. Wouldn't have Hitler around today - not if Teddy had been 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." I really perked up. I had high hopes. As we walked back to the Main Gate - I told Willy, "What great fun - to go to Europe and whip that 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 to go to college 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 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 three dollars in tips and walked gingerly back to Nel's - on ice that seemed to be getting slicker. Winter had arrived early and looked like it was going to stay late. Had to give Willy his due - he sure knew how to manipulate folks. Lookin' poor worked. We received more than our fair share of sympathy and tips - standin' out in the cold with worn out shoes and clothes. Didn't say much on the way to Nel's. Our teeth were chatterin' too hard to talk. Nel was waiting 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, "Don't start anything we can't finish. She's got two pug uglies sittin' in the corner." Willy whispered, "I see 'em. Why - their uglier than Old Nel." Sometimes Willy has no sense at all. He looked Nel in the eye and said, "We want our pay. My Dad phoned the Journal Herald. 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 me a dollar twenty-five each and that's what you owe me. We're square - now git!" Never ever saw Willy so red in the face. 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 her pug by the arm and pulled him back, "Let him up. I don't want any trouble with his father." Willy got up sputtering, "Damn you Nel!" as 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."

We walked away. Woulda' run, but we couldn't because of the ice. I looked at Willy. He was still mad - red in the face, "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 at that old witch's place." "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 better of me." I looked at the clock on the steeple of the town hall - as we walked by, "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 there." "Know when you'll be over?" "After lunch. It'll take me that 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 maneuvering 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 to speed and then belly flop on your sled. Slide about twenty yards. Learned one thing real quick. Didn't have much control of my direction on ice. Kept right on going until Mother called me in for dinner at noon. Just as well. Skies were turning from Ohio slate gray to Michigan coal black and snow was coming 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 peppers 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 off the second bowl of soup - my cold clanks were long gone.

First thing I did after climbing the stairs was to put the dollar and a half I'd made in tips in my pig. I now had two dollars and fifty cents to buy presents with. Sat there and calculated that it'd take two more weekends to make that much at a penny a paper. So the experience hadn't been a total loss. Willy didn't say anything, but I knew we were done with that witch Nel and the newspaper business. My bag was hangin' up in the garage by my 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' on drifted snow with snowshoes when Willy called up from downstairs, "You up there - Johnny?" "Yup - reading a book. 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 began to catch 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. Not sure we can do that. We really don't 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 any curse she could put on 'em or us. You read all the time. What do we do?" I read all right, but I hadn't read anything about getting rid of curses. I have an idea about witches though - fire! We'll destroy 'em by burning. That's how they did it in Salem. Burnt witches at the stake. We'll burn 'em and bury 'em afterwards - just to make sure." I took down one of Father's Shakespear books and copied down a witches chant. Figured if we danced around the fire and chanted real loud - we'd get rid of any curse Old Nel could put on us.

Willy followed me 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 you'll have to build a fire." We walked outside - snow was comin' down thick as a

white sheet. Couldn't see more than five feet in front of us. Willy asked, "Where do you want to burn 'em." "Got to be in public. How about in the middle of the football field - at the fifty yard line?" "Okay by me, but hurry. Snow is really comin' down." I led the way - across the railroad tracks behind my house. Had to guess where we were. Lines on the field had been washed away by rain and snow covered everything. 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 digging a two foot deep hole. Willy stuffed our newspaper bags into the hole and I poured kerosene on top. 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' a witch's chant 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 - they're ours. We got rid of her curse and the

bags - so the problem should go away. Burning my newspaper bag was one of those things I kept to myself. Some things you can talk to grownups about 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." "You look like something is wearin' on your mind." "I overheard my Mom and Dad talking 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 witches curse is back on. We're gonna' move up to my Grandfather Ropp's farm on the Scioto River if they won't renew his 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 - Old Bath High School's football team was a doormat." "Fires out. Better fill it in and get home before we freeze to death." Willy shoveled the dirt over 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' a kerosene can and shovel. Willy and me grew up a bit around that fire. As for me - I knew for sure we were leaving. This would be my last winter in Osborn. Christmas was coming

in two weeks. I'd be up at the farm. Decided I might as well make the best outa' bein' there. Workin' on a farm 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 Old Ned was inside where it was warm or huddling by a fire in the woods - with his *Big Ol' Hairy Red Thing*. Decided I'd never turn to evil ways - I could never be a crook. Stayin' outside in the cold all the time was hard work and a hard life.

*"Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog.
Finger of a birth-strangled babe,
Ditch-delivr'd by a drab."*

8

For the next two weeks I woke up in a cold sweat from a horrifyin' dream. Could almost swear that Old Nel had 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. It was 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 I reconstructed it. Wakin' up in a cold sweat and not knowin' if it was real or not wasn't what I'd call a pleasant experience - not at all. Well - that old witch Nel must have put a curse on Willy and me. After Willy and me burned our newspaper bags and buried 'em - there was no way we'd forget. Then again - it might just 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 that 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, but with his Father was gone his Mother needed the money. Nel told Jonsey she wanted her newspaper bags back. Jonsey didn't bother to correct her - that she'd sold them 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, but I did miss makin' money. I coulda' used those tips.

A week before Christmas - believe it was Friday - right after supper - Father held a family meet around the kitchen table. I was expecting bad news and so were my sisters, but

it still hurt, "Hate to be the bearer of unwelcome news, but 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 us they'll not 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. Doesn'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 is 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 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 the farm - Dad plans on selling it. He'll still help out, but like my coaching - only part time." "Can I tell my friends?" "No - things may change. We still have over half the school year to complete." My sister asked, "Well - if you stay won't we still go to college on your teacher's salary." "If I stay on - I'm due for a large raise. That's one of the reasons I'm not being renewed."

Spent the next week after school in the dime store. Our first snow melted away less than a day 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 only spend a dime on each one. 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 at the

Columbus 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' at home and we didn't exchange presents - just compared 'em. His were always better, but 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 type out. And it was hard to see 'em in the gatherin' dusk. 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 up - too. Didn't see more than two or three cars on the street and none of the black Amish buggies. But it 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 - as moonlight glittered 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 horse." "Cows stay close to the barn this time of year. Wouldn't want your

horses to come down with a cold. Animals around here are all tucked in for a long winter's nap." We drove over Mill Creek Bridge into Bellpoint - Christmas had begun.

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 sweeping 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 removing a roast from the oven of her Cast-iron range, "You look like you could use a good meal - young man." With Grandmother a greeting 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'd always 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 and reached almost to the ceiling. Even 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 dining 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 put our presents under the tree. Played Monopoly with my sisters

until bedtime. My Parents were whisperin' to my Grandparents about us movin' to the farm. Tried to listen in, but they shooed me 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 them. 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. Don'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 - 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 - Christmas cheer before we began. Least ways - that's what they called 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. Inside was a Red Rider BB gun - an Air

Rifle. I always wanted one. Made me feel real grown up to have a gun. 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 when 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 had it up on Grandmother's closet shelf - scolding her brother, "Now - Bus - he's much too young to have a BB gun. Johnny can use it only after you teach him the rules of safety and then only when he's supervised. Until then - it stays up on Mom's closet shelf."

The next gift was in an even longer wrapped 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 snow on the roads and none in the forecast. Each ski had two leather straps attached at the center point. One went over my foot and the other around my ankle. Tied 'em tight and they cut off circulation to my feet, but 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 morning. They came up to Bellpoint in the trunk of our car. We weren't allowed to look in it.

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. Won't be long before 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'd gotten even with me for not getting skis last night. I climbed the back stairs and put on my new clothes - a warm wool sweater and trousers. Nothin' like new clothes to keep a dawn chill from givin' one the clanks. It was a fine - crystal clear Christmas morning - 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 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 toward the bottom of the sky from Bellpoint's wood burnin' 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 - I was like a balloon losin' its air - slowly. Only had an hour to explore - before Sunday School started. 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 was down south on the Ohio River. Around the next bend - I found my four stone markers. Four poplar logs were right where I hid 'em. Leaves were off all the branches - so they weren't hid as good as I thought they were. Lifted the end of one - heavier than I remembered. Worried a bit about whether they would support me without riding 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 Thanksgiving. 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 for Christmas dinner at Grandfather Ropp's - soon after. 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 and then a sound that sent a ripple of shivers up and down my spine. Could only come from a devil - somethin' that had to be 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 - peekin' around the corner. Darned if it wasn't Old Ned Smith and his devil - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* - howlin' - madder than anyone ought to be. Ned lifted the wooden cover - the one that hid his gold coins - high above his head and brought it down on the Old Mill's foundation with a *Crash!* Pieces of wood scattered all over the Mill's dirt floor, "Someone stole my gold!" I crouched down - frozen in place. 'Fraid if I made one sound I'd be caught. Tried to crouch even lower - till my legs almost cramped.

Old Ned began to use swear 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 - doubling over in pain like he busted his toes. Didn't help his appearance any - rollin' around in the

dirt - screamin' in pain 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 was a bit more than upset. And his friend - the devil - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* - had grown even larger. Big enough to eat a horse in three 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 was outlined against the 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 it 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 devil smelled of manure and sulfur. Nel was a witch and Old Ned was the devil's helper. And I'd made both of 'em my enemies. Worse yet - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* looked like he was growin' out of control on the farm animals he was eatin'. I resisted the temptation to cross over the bridge and look at the mess Ned made. Knew it was getting late for Sunday School. Had to get a move on - even though Ned's truck was going upstream - and he might cross over the bridge and return.

I wasn't more than a hundred yards downstream when I heard Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck engine - announcin' that he was comin' downstream on my side of the road. I ducked behind a big elm as Ned drove by the Old Mill. If he didn't leave soon - I was goin' to be late for Sunday School.

Old Ned's truck wasn't movin. He sure wasn't about to give up lookin' for me. Couldn't help it - I peeked around the tree. Old Ned's neck was sticking out the window of his truck - long neck made him look like a cross between human and vulture. And the *Big Hairy Red Thing* was makin' hungry sounds. I ducked as Ned's head swiveled slowly toward my hidin' place -not about to give up lookin' for the one who took his gold - and this time he was right. It was me! 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 with the season. But Mathew's writings 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 in the middle - walkin' out the door. Checked three points of the compass and the general store. If Old Ned was around - he was hidin'. Trouble he was in with the law - 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 driving in his flatbed Ford truck." "Which way was he going?" "Up Mill Creek Road toward Ostrander. I imagine he is looking for his gold." "Did he see you?" "No - when I heard his truck I hid out." "Christmas day - won't do much good 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 picking up. Billowing clouds on the horizon were like great black sailing ships - with tall white sails gatherin' in the 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 of 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 and snow flyin' sideways in horizontal sheets. Grandfather Ropp met us on the porch, "Hurry inside and warm yourselves by the range. Looks like we're in for an 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 to my liking. Soon as I warmed up - I ran into the parlor to another skyscraper of a Christmas tree. Top angel was almost touching Grandmother's farmhouse ceiling. 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 sticking on the yard. Had to be at least six inches, "I'll be able to try out my skis on Doc's lane this evening."

Now - except for presents - fruit cake and cookies - Christmas was pretty much the same as Thanksgiving. 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 - carried it out on the back porch. Spot was curled up in the corner - near the house - warm as toast - laying on top a blanket on top a bed of corn cobs and straw. Gobbled down the goose and half the napkin and caught up and passed me as I ran to the barn. By the time I opened the barn door - Spot was all white and no black spot - covered from nose to tail with a blanket of wet white snow.

Grandfather's wooden spoked - iron rimmed wagon stood - a giant sentry - in the middle of the barn floor - guarding the back barn - keeping 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 meal was going to be topped off with a second treat. Gave that Farmall tractor an extra wide berth as I stopped in my tracks and wondered, "Will I have to drive that monster next year? Maybe I can as long as I don't have to turn the crank to start." I made friends for life - after I gave Sandy and Clyde shelled corn - enough to get them winter fat. Sandy didn't even try to pin me to the side of his stall. Wondered if he knew it was Christmas day? And was it the day made him gentle? "Has to be the treats I gave 'em. 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 he shook most of it off on me 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 planting things and watching 'em grow. And the most important thing about moving here. Give me a chance to grow up - too. And I'll start by cleaning up my language. Place an ending *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 - I not only have to talk and write it, I have to think it." Barn gave off a pleasant odor of aging hay. A smell I'd always remember and associate with the farm. Hog manure after a spring thaw - that's one odor I could do without. Climbed into the front haymows, but didn't find one egg. Hay was easier to walk on. Time and drying had packed it down from 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 s 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. It was 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 - thump - thump - thump of his tail on the dirt floor. I looked out through a crack in the barn doors. Snow was coming down so thick - 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 got to the porch - he was sitting on it - barking at me for being slow. I fixed up his blanket - so he'd be sheltered from snow and wind. Spot curled up again - warm - sheltered from the snow and wind. I closed the kitchen door as soon as I opened it.

Hung up my jacket and stuffed the mittens in my pockets and stood with my backside to the Cast-iron stove. Tried to get warm - 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 only thing that separates man from beast - and high from low. Ned could speak - sort of, but his *Big Hairy Red Thing* could only rumvble. When I got warmed up enough to wander out of the kitchen - I ran into Father and Grandfather. They were still working on how they planned to farm next year - around the dining room table. Didn't pay attention until I heard Old Ned's name. Then I listened up when Grandfather said, "Folks at the County Seat said Ned Smith was in Dublin last week - hanging around the general store. Said he looked mighty thin - and meaner than ever. Running from the law must be taking its 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 telephone the Sheriff after we arrived, but it slipped my mind." "Holiday - won't make any difference when you phone. No one in the Sheriff's office will come out this way for a common thief. Won't bother going after him until tomorrow." "You're right - probably only a deputy manning the phones. I'll call - Ned may have slipped on the ice and broke a leg so anyone can catch him." "Better - otherwise he won't be found."

When Father hung up the telephone - Grandfather asked, "Sheriff going to chase after Ned?" "Talked to his deputy and he didn't sound enthused about going out after Ned in a snowstorm. Can't blame him - we'll be lucky to find our way back to Bellpoint in this storm. Said he'd send out a bulletin." "A lot of good that will do. Sure your settled on 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 drive out from town to help. They've earned a good retirement. Can you arrange for hired help to assist in planting this spring. I'll have to finish out the school year. It will be June before we can move." "Are you going to increase 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?" "For now - yes, but he's a lot like you. Has a bit of 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. Looked along the shelf and found the book I remembered seeing - about two boys my age whipping Kaiser Bill. I remembered the conversation between the Sergeant and the pacifist - one said we ought to get in Europe's fight and kick old Hitler in the rear end and the other said it wasn't any of our business. That discussion in the diner outside Patterson Field's Main Gate - stuck in my mind like gum on a beadpost. I opened it to the last two chapters and paid attention. I wanted to get in that fight - if there was going to be one. 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 we ran by on our way to the Chrysler Airflow. It looked like a giant igloo, covered with snow. I used the whisk broom to clear away the snow from the windows and we crept down the lane. Father had to stop halfway down the lane 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 that hill. Had to park at the bottom - a hundred yards downhill from Grandfather Mac's house - and snow was still coming down. I ran on ahead and opened the front door to the vestibule - covered with snow from head to toes. Held the door open for the rest of the family and they came stomping in - snow flying every which way. I could smell the aroma Grandmother Mac's roast tom turkey - fresh from the oven - cooling on the kitchen

table. The rest of the ladies were helping 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 to the house." "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 of the vestibule 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 spacing. As it is now - from the fourth week in November to New Years day - they're three major holidays - all within a five week period. Four holiday dinners in that short of time kind of took the edge off celebration. Eating Christmas supper called for 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, "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 to the gills. 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's. Leaned back in the 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, "Come along. 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 - floating by. Wind hadn't kicked up, but it would by morning. Shovels were in the livery stable - hanging up on the back wall. Shoveled the car clear and Father brought it up the hill - after 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 - had 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 I had to sit

down to stop again before I almost flew into the river. Sat there - on the edge of the Scioto - thinking, "Has to be some other 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 snow on the seat of my pants. Walking back uphill after each trip wasn't much fun either. Tying and untying the leather straps was a pain in the neck - too, "This skiing isn't as easy as I thought it would be. All in all it seems like a whole lot of bother for a few seconds of fun." I was worn out - like I was after shoveling 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 lane 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 house. Come morning - that's the first thing I'll do after breakfast. Yes sir - I'll build me an igloo." Climbed the steps like an old man and propped my skis up against the house - of Grandfather's front porch. "Or I could build a fort and fire my BB gun from behind its walls. No - Mother won't let me take it down from the shelf in the closet." Looked down and saw snow sticking all over - my clothes soaked almost through. Walked around to the back porch - to use Grandmother's broom to brush it off. Wind was coming up and 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 warm up - and dry off."

Peeked inside the door. Grandmother was putting the finishing touches - cleaning an almost spotless kitchen. She saw me looking in, "Come on in and close the door - Johnny or you'll melt all the snow outdoors." 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 on cold winter mornings, heats water on the side to wash up, bakes bread, percolates coffee and cooks pancakes." Grandmother shook her head, I'd trade the whole kit and caboodle for a gas stove like your Mother's. 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 turkey high, in-between. Poured a glass of milk and went back to the stove, so I could continue drying my hind end. Don't know if I would agree with Grandmother. Her Cast-iron range sure warmed up the kitchen on a cold winter night. 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 as 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, full of 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. This morning I was able to talk her out of a second cup - to help wash down my pecan roll. It was as sticky as ever and 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. In two weeks

the Wolf Moon would make the night brighter than noon on an Ohio gray day. This morning was magic. Came back inside. I'd need to dress warm if I was going to complete 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, won't be able to get up."

Made flat roll-ups out of the snow to build an igloo foundation. Worked fine as I stacked 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. Stepped back and took a look at it. I was left with a small snow fort with three foot high walls. Shook my head, "Wonder how the Eskimos get the top part to close up without falling inside." Now that 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, I ran to the back porch door and ducked inside. I needed a safe haven and a warm up. Old Ned Smith was my enemy. I wouldn't wish him on anyone. Last thing in the world I'd do is throw snowballs at Old Ned.

Put my backside up to the Cast-iron range to warm it up and placed my wet mittens over the oven handle. Father peeked in the kitchen, "Warm up and dry off best as you can. We're going to leave for home in an hour." "I'll be ready. What happened?" "Weather is coming in. Snow line is just

south of Plain City, now. South of there the roads are clear, but we have a major storm system moving out of the west. Should pass through here tonight or tomorrow morning. Can't take a chance on getting snowed in." I turned around to warm my front. Just as well that 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. Anyway, with Will and Jake gone to Lake Erie, wasn't anyone 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 when 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, wasn'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 and they control the purse." "Hasn't changed since the turn of the century. Still 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 waited until I sat 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 then 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's sugar maple cabin. The skies were clear and sun helped to keep our windows free of frost. But, it melted the top layer of snow. Ice formed on the road, great for sleds, but not cars. Father stopped and we helped push five cars out of the drainage ditch on the S curves between Arnold and New California. Both of these villages were smaller than Bellpoint. Our drive from Bellpoint to New California usually took less than twenty minutes. Today, we were on the road for over an hour. After we cleared the S curve hills of New California, I noticed a familiar vehicle trailing us. It looked like the front end of Old Ned's flat bed truck. I turned around and hunkered down in the center of the back seat, hiding between my sisters.

As we drew abeam the Plain City Fairgrounds, I heard a familiar rumble. Old Ned's flatbed truck came roaring by. I looked to my left and saw Old Ned sitting behind the wheel. Looked like his teeth were clamped tight and face red as a beet. His flatbed fishtailed in front of us as he tried to bring his truck back into its 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 was Ned?" "Positive, and he didn't look none too happy." "We'll stop at the restaurant up ahead. The one 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 up 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 next to Plain City's featured 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 a 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 see German Jerry and One Eyed Jack, but how could he? He was wanted, too. Father stood up, "Time to move on. I imagine Ned is all the way to Madison County by now." I didn't mention where I thought Ned was going. Grownups weren't interested in speculation from a kid.

Almost stayed too long in Plain City. Dark black clouds were boiling up on the western horizon. Father wasn't worried, "Should be able to 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 parked outside the Amish Dairy, but it wasn't open. Weren't any other horse and buggies on the road today. Amish were a practical sect. They don't venture out on ice covered roads. Too many fools like Old Ned driving autos and trucks out of control. 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. If so, their life 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 horses hitched to Ned's bumper and was about to pull him out of the ditch. Ned had his *Big Hairy Red Thing* hid under a winter coat - collar up to the neck. Neither it or Ned looked up and we didn't stop. I asked Father, "Do you think Ned will do any harm to 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 when we reach West Lafayette." General store was open and they had those thick potato chips I liked. Luck was with us - 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 northwest were sinking slowly south. We drove downhill by the cement plant into Osborn - barely ahead of the first snow flakes. Snow was coming down - consistency of a white tapioca pudding when Father puled 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 from the London State Prison Farm. A wild eyed red devil rammed the prison fence in a flatbed Ford Truck. Two inmates escaped under cover of a blinding snow storm. Their names were One Eyed Jack and German Jerry. And they were last seen speeding south - on the back of that same truck.

*"If I had the wings of an angel,
O'er these prison walls I would fly."*

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 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 at least five miles away. Bundled up with 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, these skis could use a coat of wax, 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 back up the hill. Sure would like to try them out though, but I knew better.

Put a rope on my sled and pulled it on top of 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 home last night. Where there was snow or ice, I ran and slid, which was most of the way. About halfway there, crossing the highway that goes to Springfield, thought I heard a distant rumble - 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, ten yards short of the fence.

Willy looked up with a grin and 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 up in Bellpoint?" "Got mostly clothes, mittens and gloves for farm work. Oh, 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. Still 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. Did you see Old Ned in Bellpoint?" "Not only there, 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 just 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 a lot 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' an Ohio Prison 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. 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 ever sees him or can catch him. And Old Nel has to be a witch. They both look like they're outa' 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 and began to run, "See you after I get a bite and dry out." "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 all right and his devil - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* sitting there. I wondered, "What in the dickens is he doing here?" 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 couldn'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 that opened up on the alley - and took it.

When I had cover, I stood up and ran. Pulled my sled as fast as I could across the neighbors yard. Wound up on the street that empties on my street, just past my house. Odor of sulfur was getting stronger than ever. Made me wonder, "Old Ned must really be a devil's disciple." 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 its 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 as 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 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 money 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. 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. Peaked out again. He was turning his flatbed truck around - on two wheels - sliding into the curb. Ned sped away - sliding and snaking - in the direction of Fairfield and Old Nel's. I felt a sense of relief. Opened the front door to get a better look. Took a sniff. An odor of sulfur 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." 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, Willy looked over at me, "You smell what I do?" "Sulfur?" "Don't tell me Old Ned isn't a devil outa' hell." Stopped right there, further away than I wanted too, but Willy would go no further. "Johnny, first movement we see, I'm outa' here. Sulfur smell? No wonder he always seems to find 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 in front of her house. I was about to tell Willy I saw movement through the garage window when a hand came down on my neck. Someone had grabbed us by our collar 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' what I caught here. Two snot nosed 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 - right in the face - nose almost touched mine - and the smell of his breath - had to come out of the pits of hell. He spit another stream of tobacco, "Why, ain't you Johnny Ropp. Ned sure been lookin' for you. Looks like you're gonna' meet Ned and your maker at the same time. Where'd you hide his gold?" 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. Fell 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'd get over to Old Ned's garage, Ned and his gang would be 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." Least ways, 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 ain't never gonna' stop chasin' after you." "You still want to go sledding?" "You and me, walking 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 stripes, 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 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. I hung up my cue, "Can't, going to the library and walk home with Mother. Don't want to go

out on my own, not with three convicts looking for me. If I do I'll jump into the bushes every time I here an engine or see a pair of headlights." "Keep an eye out for a flatbed Ford truck." "You sure have a sense of the obvious. Meet you early and we'll ride your Bob." "Be right after sunup. Got a question for you." "Go ahead, shoot." "You're talking funny, you know, like a grownup." "You mean I've added Gs to my words?" "That's it. How come?" "Didn't you listen to German Jerry? Do you want to talk like him?" "You made your point. I'll try it too, but it won't be easy."

Mother was turning off the Library lights when I opened the door. She looked up, "Good, I was worried about you. Did the Fairfield Police capture Ned and his escaped convict friends?" "Not sure, but I don't think so. None of the deputies had 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 adventure 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 book to the table of contents and followed Mother while Mother locked the door. Our walk home was quiet except for stepping on top newly frozen snow. The only sound was the crunch snow made - under foot. Not many people out on an evening like this. I kept looking over my shoulder for the rumble of a truck engine, or headlights, but didn't hear or see anything. We arrived home without ever seeing one car or truck. Looked like the whole town of Osborn was away on vacation. Father and my Sisters had begun preparations for dinner when we arrived. Supper was hardly over when Willy's Dad called. I overheard one end of the conversation and pieced most of it together. German Jerry and One Eyed Jack were picked up in downtown Fairfield. Seems Old Ned saw our altercation with German and took off, leaving his friends to fend for themselves. They were in the city jail waiting for

transport to State Prison in Columbus. Father shook his head as he hung up the phone, "German and One Eyed 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."

Christmas vacation started out with anticipation and had a pretty fair middle, but was ending in the doldrums. After Mother told Father about us sighting Ned and his gang, I was almost grounded. Couldn't go anywhere alone. It was a good thing I didn't tell either one of them about Willy and me being grabbed German Jerry. I'd of spent the rest of the week at home or in the Library. Not that it would've made 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 good 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 at the Movies. Then it was back to school.

Willy said we wouldn't get much snow and his prediction was better than the newspaper's. Except for a few days of snow and six good sledding days, the most we could expect was cold rain and sleet. And the sun didn't shine for days on end. Skies were blacker than a Michigan heart. Can't sled in slush. Can't roller skate either. Roads were too wet and muddy to ride bikes. Didn't mean that 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 earth had the consistency of a mud soup. And if we weren't careful - didn't stay on pavement - we'd sink into it up to our knees. 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 turned wet and slippery. Monday through Friday - 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 climate north of the Ohio River. But, March arrived sunny - with winds of opportunity.

Father announced that we were going north to Bellpoint - Friday after school. He and Mother were going to make final arrangements for our move in the summer. Said something about contracting out our spring planting, too. Knowing that my days in Osborn were growing short, I should have been sad, but I wasn't. My Daisy - Red Rider - air rifle - BB gun was coming down - off the top shelf of Grandmother Mac's closet. And better yet, Uncle Bus was going to meet us when we arrived. Lessons were Friday evening and I'd be on my own over the weekend. On the 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's maple sugar cabin - smoke was pouring upward from its chimney - it was sugar time.

Breathed a 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. After supper, Uncle Bus walked directly to the closet, "Time to train you on firearms, young man." He took the BB gun out of the box and explained how to operate it. I held it in my hands - so proud. It looked just like Tom Mix's Winchester - the one he had 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 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 - shooting at the target. First 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 shooting an air rifle and it hit pretty near where I aimed it. Emptied the remaining BBs into a glass tube and made sure the gun was empty before I propped it against the livery stable to take down the target. Took the target back inside for Father and Uncle Bus to inspect. They quizzed me on firearm safety, just to make sure. I passed with flying colors. Returned my Red Rider air rifle to its box. I was now ready for big game, the 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 for every pigeon head brought to him. Now that alone should have alerted me, but it didn't. I had a BB gun and 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 the fence rows. Spent most of Saturday helping out - until the sun turned the frozen earth to mud - late in the afternoon. Straightening fences, clearing out fence rows and repairing gates is hard work. Must of been boring to Spot. He didn't go back out with us after lunch. But, he was waiting for us when we drove the wagon back into the farm yard.

It wasn't until after dinner that the slaughter began. I had only 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. Like shooting ducks trapped in a barrel - 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 just couldn't seem to 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, is it, Johnny." "Only time I'm going to shoot another sitting bird is at a carnival shooting gallery." "We had to get rid of those pigeons, Johnny. Your Great Uncle Tim lost all of his chickens to a disease carried in by pigeons. Where did you leave their 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 safe to shoot it. Willy was cared silly of anything that looked like a gun, anyway. 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 it down and read the first chapter - to see if it said how we got into World War I - the war to end all wars - which it didn't. Almost began chapter two, because the first one didn't say how we got there. But, 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 the war over in Europe, but 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 go outside to play 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 - I 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 after Sunday dinner 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 who had done something wrong. Walked out on the Church steps after Sunday School was over. Sure glad that 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 now. Knew it just had to be something to do with the Old Mill. I looked up Mill Creek Road, but couldn't see anything because of the fog. It 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 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 to have a muddy bottom. Mother would tan my hide if I returned with mud all over my pants for our trip back home. As I approached the bend in Mill Creek - just around the corner from the Old Mill - I stopped short. Two distinct odors were hanging in the air - riding downstream on the creek - sulfur and smoke. Old Ned was hiding at the Mill, all right.

Fog gave me fairly good cover and a dead tree furnished further 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. 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 at least a quarter mile away and no one would notice he was here - unless they noticed smoke coming from the chimney. Couldn't see where it was unless you walked down the bank and looked up. From the looks of the trash stacked around this side, he'd been here since his gang got captured.

As soon as Ned finished unloading his truck he backed it 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 his lean-to were twelve boxes of food, beer and tobacco. He 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 into one of the holes he's carved. Must have been a hobo at one time, because that was there secret way of cooking 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 had lifted above the trees and Ned would spot me sure as a hawk spots a sparrow. Before I could move, 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 couldn't move. So I leaned up against the dead tree and waited until 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 up and 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 noise I'd made, but he was looking on the other side, just like I figured he would. I smiled 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 of them. 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 hear 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 through 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 had 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 the stomach juices going. All I could think of was food. I ran a hundred paces and listened

- ran another hundred and listened - until I was past the general store and walking uphill to Grandfather Mac's house. Opened the back porch door and was greeted by the aroma of fried chicken. Almost forgot to tell Grandfather about Old Ned's new hiding place and 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. But, by the time the deputy got to the Old Mill, Ned was long gone. Must have left in a hurry. Most of the boxes of groceries were recovered. Old Ned had to have almost supernatural powers to keep getting away from the law. Whatever power he had wasn't good enough not to prevent being discovered, though.

Nothing better than a Sunday fried chicken dinner. And I was feeling safe again, knowing that 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 up here 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 it back in. They're not fit to eat." She talked softly to Mother, but I overheard, "Make sure Johnny keeps an eye out for Ned Smith. He's never robbed the general store before. Folks there have put up with his antics for years. He's acting irrational." I was glad someone else was worried about Old Ned. I was getting tired of being his center of attention. Father looked outdoors, "Fog's setting in. Time to pack up."

We were past the Plain city Fairgrounds before two, with plenty of time to stop at the Amish Dairy. I tasted the Swiss cheese. It was sharp and tasty as ever. My Sisters looked for white horses and landmarks on our drive toward Springfield. I didn't. My mind was preoccupied with an irrational Old Ned Smith and *A Big Hairy Red Thing* that was growing bigger - and bigger - and bigger, "With most of his hiding places under surveillance around Dublin - Old Ned would need shelter and Old Nel lived in Fairfield." Must have been talking out loud - 'cause Father asked, "Did you say something?" Had to think quick, "I'll miss my friends in Osborn."

"Who killed Cock Robin?"

"I," said the sparrow,

"With my little bow and arrow."

10

Spring - wonderful spring - when the old round ball begins to warm up - as it begins an incline toward summer and flowers begin to bloom. Spring is also the time sap runs out of maple trees and sappy boys run out of school. If it wasn't for the sap draining from maple trees - there'd be no syrup. If it wasn't for sap clouding a young boy'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 wasn't until the twenty-first of April. The days flowed by like molasses in winter. Grass was growing - the world was turning green - and here we were stuck in class - thirty-one days crawling by like sixty. Middle of March and Old Ned 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 - and we were getting on Teacher's nerves. She finally snapped at us - 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. Had to give Willy credit. I'd have never thought of it. He looked behind to see if Teacher was watching us. She had gone back inside. Willy walked right past the Superintendent's office - 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 person who knows we've been to the Superintendent's

office is our Teacher and she doesn't speak to him unless he speaks first. She'll think we'll get what's coming and that'll be the end of it." For once, Willy was right. We 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 worlds largest paddle. We'd 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 there was anyone 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 one of those looks - like where were you when the brains were passed out.

Mind you, I 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 were guilty. That's what lawyers do." "If there's a way to weasel out of work, trouble or blame, you can do it. If I ever need one, I'll pick you." Willy was wound up, "Right! Being a lawyer is my cup of tea. I didn't earn my nickname, Slick working my fingers to the bone. And you'll never find a lawyer with blisters on his hands. They

get paid for talking, not working." Willy may be sure about not getting caught, but all of a sudden 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 the foggiest what happened. And you know what?" "What?" "We've pulled off the trick of the year." "True, but what good is that if we can't tell anyone about it." "Well, 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 trick 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 this slow mental torture. When Mother signaled that supper was over and we could leave the table, she stopped me. "You have 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 on me and Willy for talking in class." She 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 the Superintendent's office. Mother had done her share of teaching. She knew that with the first sign of warm weather, a teacher was like an animal trainer. Needed a whip and a chair to control 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 the sky - it was the color of dirty white - like sheets that had been washed in with black socks. If this March had been like that, me and Willy would've never 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 and it had to be the warm weather. Anyway, whatever it was it made us talk out of turn. Words came bubbling up from our lungs and sprang from our mouths - two tongues out of control. Teacher must have felt the pressure, too. She snapped at us and we were on our way - down the corridor to the Superintendent's office - tails tucked between our legs. Willy looked back over his shoulder. Teacher was standing in the doorway, halfway in and halfway out, making sure we went inside.

I looked back before closing the door. Teacher's eyes were still on me and 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 wet 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 on us. 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 reeked with authority, but it was his paddle that got our attention. Worse yet, it looked like we had strayed into his domain. That darn Willy was 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 the classroom. I whispered, "Looks like we'll have to tape over our mouths. We won't be shooting baskets in the gym anymore." Willy frowned, "It's going to be difficult. 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 today. 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 before we went in 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. Didn't 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 - now there was 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.

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 brakes controlled from the handle bars. It would be a year or more before Willy learned how to use this complicated 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 we're on our way to Mad River.

First stop was sledding hill. We counted six dents in the wire fence at the bottom. Sledding hill was getting faster or shorter. This season was a bust. Snowed enough, but it melted as fast as it came. Can't slide downhill on mud. We tried that and gave up. As bad as sledding season turned out, spring was making it up. Trees were still without leaves, but the buds were popping - air was filled with pollen. When we were out this way - late in the fall - there wasn't much traffic. 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 an hour. Never ever saw it this busy. Took us the better part of an hour to get to the path we used that led to Mad River. Willy insisted on bringing his bike further than we had done before, "Might get stolen. Got to hide it so no one can find it." We did, at least a hundred yards away from the road and behind a fallen tree

Trail was still a bit damp. Trees, woods and natural forest mulch had kept the ground from drying out. I led the way, jumping from one clump of grass to another to keep my tennis shoes dry. Later, I gave up and walked along the side of the trail, where, 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 out pants legs. It looked mighty inviting. Stuck our toes in to test the water. Willy let out a yelp, "Isn't more than two degrees above making ice cubes." Didn't stop us from wading along the bank, but that didn't last long. Fish were on vacation or dormant. Only thing moving in the water was our feet and there 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 the spring. "We got 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 was still there. 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, but we'll be careful." "Has anyone seen Ned around after we spotted him at Old Nel's." "I saw him holed up in Bellpoint, but he's gone now. No ones heard about where." "Nel is still upset about not getting her newspaper bags back." "Too late, we burned them." "Jonsey says she keeps her place locked up tighter than a drum. Bet Ned is holed up there. She and her favorites clam up when he's around. It's all mighty suspicious." "She yells at him enough about our newspaper bags." "I think she knows we set them on fire, so she can't put a curse on them and us." "You're probably right. Fire cleans out a witch's curse and any of our wrong doing." "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 signs 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. 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 - sicced the law on him. I imagine he has a right to bear a grudge." "Or two."

Willy nosed around the wood pile - picked up a piece of wood and uncovered a plank. "Hello, what have we here?" "What did you find?" "Fire wood is stacked on top of some planks." He brushed the dirt aside, "Doesn't look right. Help me clear the wood off and we'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 on the strap is we didn't brush away enough of the dirt. Willy and me were looking at a set of stone steps that led down - into darkness. I walked down, halfway, 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. Could be ghosts." "Now who's been seeing too many movies? Got to have people to have ghosts and fire will chase away any snake we find."

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. Willy wound the rag around the wood and fastened it with several granny knots. I checked down below - by the steps where I could see - found a jug of moonshine whiskey. Called up to Willy, "Bring it down here. I'll pour some of this whiskey over it so 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 to Willy to light. He still carried his water proof tin of safety matches in case we needed a fire. He lit it. Made a whoosh as the flames shot up. Almost singed his eyebrows, "Damn! That was close."

Willy handed the torch down to me, "Think you soaked too much whiskey on the rag. How long do you think it'll last?" "Ten or fifteen minutes. Got more rags and whiskey, so it won't be a problem." Willy inched his way down the steps, "Torch sure does light this place up. Looks like someone has been here before. See all those footprints in the dust?" "Sure do." I grinned at Willy, "Let's split up and explore." "You crazy, or what? That'll bring ghosts out for sure." "Just pulling your leg. Look over against the right and back walls. 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 walked over and inspected the pipes along the side wall and I followed with the torch. I looked around, "Old Ned didn't dig this cellar out and 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 when Indians attacked." "Looks like an old basement to me. Except where Old Ned put his kettles, it's full of cobwebs and dust." May be 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." Did you hear something?" "No, what?" "Listen." I heard steps and a muffled voices.

I handed the torch to Willy and crept back toward the steps. Looked up into a toothless grin - almost jumped out of my skin. It was Old Ned - staring down at me. He spit a stream of tobacco juice at my face, but I jumped out of the way. Ned had the door in his hand, "Got you Johnny Ropp. Ain't no one ever gonna' find you. You're gonna' rot!" The door came crashing down - dust flew - and hellish laughter rained down through the cracks. I looked over at Willy and

whispered, "We still have our torch. . We'll wait him out. When Ned leaves we can push our way out." Willy shook his head, "Too late for that. Ned's stacking wood on top the door. 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, has to be at least two of them stacking wood." I remembered the first thing Tom Mix would do - sit down and think. So I did.

Willy sat next to me on the bottom step, "It's your enemy. 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've 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 early 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 that this was once 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 I know that are built underground are subways in New York." I chose to ignore him, "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 should 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." "Get another rag and make another one 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 up against it. Tried to roll it out of the way, but I could only budge it a few inches. Cracked open the plank door and almost passed out from the aroma of sulfur and manure. Wouldn't you know it - Willy chose that time to put our torch out and wrap a new rag around it. I could still see by the red light coming out of the opening I'd made. Now that should have made me stop and think, but it didn't. Then I heard a rumble - it kept getting louder - louder - and even louder. And the smell was just awful. I peeked through the crack and looked inside - *The Big Hairy Red Thing* - outlined against a background of flames - was coming our way and he looked hungry enough to eat both of us. Tried to convince myself that it was a guy with a torch, but my eyes said I was looking into the jaws of hell. Closed the plank door on a big red claw - or hand - couldn't tell which - 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 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 behind 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 all the incentive I needed. Pulled on the false stone front and nothing happened. Pushed right - then left and it broke free - sliding open - revealing a cobweb covered door that looked like it hadn't been opened in a hundred years. I pulled the door clear open and its wooden planks crumbled in my hands. Pushed the pieces away - took the torch from Willy and bent down - looking inside. It was the way out - tunnel we were looking for. Couldn't see how far it went. It was covered with cobwebs and was it ever dark.

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 of it." Pulled the kettle up to the wall and slid what was left of the false front shut, "Hope that gives us a head start. I stirred up a hornets nest when I opened 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 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 - had to burn away the cobwebs. Tunnel was damp, but the floor was dry. Whoever dug it must've known about drainage. Sides were braced with wood that was rotten as the door. Flooring was made of the same stone as the cellar walls. Checked the ceiling and started to worry. It was covered with wood planks as rotten as the side walls. I turned around and warned Willy, "Don't even breathe on the ceiling. 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 - sounds like *The Big Hairy Red Thing* has moved the stone blocking him."

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 trying to open the wall we closed. I can hear it scratching. Is it his *Big Hairy Red Thing*?" "You got that right - came right out of the jaws of hell and it looks hungry." That was 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 Big Hairy Red Thing* opening the wall behind us." "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 - 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, but parts were held together by brush and sod - so all of it didn't come down. I popped up out - like a rabbit scampering out of a hole - all covered with dirt. Willy followed like a cork - popping out of a seltzer bottle - eyes bigger than saucers. "Tunnel is coming down behind me. Did you hear that *Big Hairy Red Thing* scream? Like a bat out of hell. 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. I saw two columns of tobacco smoke rising over the wood. Willy whispered, "Must be two of them. Wonder why they didn't hear the tunnel collapse?" "Ned must have thought it was his *Big Hairy Red Thing* coming up out of 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 from the clearing. 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 - "That *Big Hairy Red Thing* must have worked its head free." Our feet were moving before our minds told them. 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 looked at me, "Do you think *The Big Hairy Red Thing* ate Ned's friend?" "Don't ask." "Don't tell." "Don't worry. No one will believe what happened here anyway."

We were running away 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 *Big Hairy Red Thing*

must have eaten him for dinner." We slowed down to normal 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 that *Big Hairy Red Thing*. Ned's sold his soul to the devil. So - I'm going to stay away 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. 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 way that *Big Hairy Red Thing* looked. And the smell of sulfur and manure - I couldn't get it out of my nostrils. It was awful. No way around it - I'd have 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 was 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 cellar 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 good seats at the movie matinee. Arrived before it began and Willy was all ready inside. I stopped 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. Had to sit almost 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. Something might come up out of the ground and grab me by the 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 have to stick your nose in it. We were almost a devil's dinner this morning and you have to go and tease that witch afterwards. Doesn't make sense." "Saw Old Nel and she yelled at me. Told me to tell Jonsey he was fired." "Bet she still wants our newspaper bags. Did you tell Jonsey?"

"Before the movie. Last I saw of him he was going to build a fire in his backyard. Told him to bury the ashes deep."

"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.

Jonsey 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 better 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. 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 was important for us to burn our newspaper bags." Willy gave me one of those looks - then he remembered what we'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 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." "Well, 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. Stopped at the alley entrance and took a good look around. Didn't see Old Ned's flatbed Ford truck. He was 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 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. Stopped at the alley entrance. 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 this morning. 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 stop at the library. I'll stop by on the way to Sunday School in the morning." Willy began to peddle, "Will it do any good?" "Won't do any harm."

Parked my bike in the rack outside the library. 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. 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 adventure enough 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's

Big Hiary Red Thing waiting for me there. 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 4 H and raise your own sheep." "Will Spot stay at the farm?" "Of course. He wouldn'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. Willy was the most excited, "I hear they hire boys to help raise tents and carry water to elephants." I was just as excited, "We'll be first in line."

*"If two (a dog and a boy) aren't a match
for the devil, we might as well give the
country back to the Indians."*

11

Seemed like it took forever. Circus posters were up on the telephone poles the last of April - and still it hadn't come. When they were nailed up - looked fresh and bright - now the same posters were 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 it wasn't the same, not since Willy saw that *Big Hairy Red Thing* - out of the jaws of hell. And it was almost like Jonsey blamed me for burning the drugstore down when he knew it had to be Old Nel's spell. I was learning that no one liked messengers that carried bad news. So we didn't get in trouble - because we weren't talking to each other in school when we shouldn't. Or it could have been our new teacher. Teacher left early one Friday afternoon and never returned. Superintendent had to take over our class. Now that was a real shame. Took most of the year, but Willy and me had finally got Teacher on our side and now she was gone. Heard whispers about a her having a nervous breakdown. Knew that had to be a lie. No one would ever get nervous in a village like 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 was following her around after school like a sick puppy.

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 out 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 at Waterworks Park. When Willy found out that the circus was going to be set up there he'd 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 there 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 and 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. Almost went out to our swimming hole, twice, but I turned around. Maybe if Willy went along, but he wouldn't venture outside town and not anywhere in the direction of Mad River. And we wouldn't go within two blocks of Old Nel's place. Willy said we weren't scared, just using our heads. If the truth be known it was a little bit of both.

I worried that I'd be sent on ahead to Bellpoint before the circus arrived. Almost happened, but it didn't. Mother delayed my departure because she had too much packing and Father had too much fixing to do before they could take me. A week after school was over good, an advance crew from The Arkansas Circus came to Waterworks Park, on a late Thursday afternoon. Willy and me were the first ones to see it. We were waving our arms - attempting 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 his neck. He brushed us aside, "Everyone in Arkansas has a long neck - just like mine." That's when we found out that his circus wintered in Hot Springs. His crew addressed him as, "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' our way." He pointed in the direction of the water tower, "Stand over there under those trees while my men measure the 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 the advantage of being first. Mr. Promise stepped off an area 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 the ground. After twenty minutes of this, I could see the outline of the big top with its entrances and exits clearly marked by tent pegs. After the other tents were outlined, Mr. Promise walked with large strides to where we stood under the trees. He took down all 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 in the morning - sharp 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 he was gone.

Willy looked down at his feet and kicked dirt, "Damn! I wanted to help put up tents." "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 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 circus is all about. Wonder if Willy smelled the odor of sulfur coming from Mr. Promise's circus truck?

All I could talk about was the circus at supper. Mother didn't look excited about it 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 was waiting - on my front porch steps. He sat down beside me, "Slept in." "Not a good way to start a new 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 of 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 were arranging canvas where he had placed stakes. Willy looked it over, "Looks like it will be a two ring circus from the way the canvas is laid out." "He's putting the smaller tents up first. That one near the entrance has to be the one for their sideshow. Wonder why they have a truck backed up to it." We walked around the tent. Part of the canvas - the side that was next to the truck - rolled up and down to the back of that truck. Whatever it was, they weren't letting it out. Willy walked over to the truck and looked inside the cab. He checked the back. Both of us heard a rumble from inside. He came away - holding his nose, "Smells like that *Big Hairy Red Thing* is locked up inside." We

moved away, quick as we could - walking real fast and not looking - so was Willy - when we bumped into one of the circus roustabouts - looked up - it was Old Ned.

Ned didn't grab my arm and we didn't run. We were too surprised too. 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 that *thing* - 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 I shook it. Quick as a wink he was gone. I shook his hand even though I didn't believe a word Old Ned said, but I gave my word not to tell and I wouldn't. Ned looked back and gave us one of his toothless grins. He turned and joined the other roustabouts - helping put up tents. Willy stood there rooted to the ground like he was an oak tree. I poked him with my elbow, "That *Big Hairy Red Thing* is in the back of 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 *thing* in our sideshow!" 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 on the roustabouts setting up 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 - little 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. Had to be the dirtiest - ugliest - meanest man me and Willy ever saw. He made Old Ned look handsome. Cook had grease staining his hair - his face - his apron - his shoes. And to top it all off - like a cherry on top a sundae - dirt stuck 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 roustabouts around as they finished setting up the kitchen and yelled at me and Willy while we hauled water - filling 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. And that was lunch for the circus folks - greasy soup and hot dogs. And we weren't allowed to eat any of it. We bussed the tables - scraped food and soup off the tin plates - like the ones we see in prison movies. Then Cook made us wash, rinse and dry all of it - including kettles. Nothing really came clean - just less greasy. After we hauled the dirty dishwater to the storm drain - 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. Yelled 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 I'd seen small tents go up before - at the Fourth of July carnival. But raising the big top - now that 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 something that looked mildew green - like MacBeth's witches 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 straightened up - 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. Besides, 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. Leaned up against it with him, Looks like I'm not cut out for show business. And all the circus people we met smelled of sulfur and needed more than one bath. Looks like most of them come right out of the depths of hell. Makes me wonder. Do any of them have tails? And the food you cooked? Has to be greasy enough to burn in a lamp. From the looks of circus folks clothes, pay is nonexistent 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?" I shook my head, "And get fed to the *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 the circus, but not Old Ned. Stop

over when you get a break. I'll save some 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. 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 stiff arms would allow. She shooed me upstairs, "Soak in the tub until you get rid of that sulfur smell from the circus. What did you do to get so greasy?" "Willy and me worked in the dining tent helping the Cook." "Not anymore. You're not going back. Get cleaned up" Scrubbed my hair and soaked my body until grease rose from my skin and made an oil slick on top of my bath water. Should have seen the ring it made. Took five minutes of scrubbing to get rid of it. Dressed and looked out 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 make it. Kept thinking. How did they catch the *Big Hairy Red Thing* without being pulled down into hell? Unless they were part of it. And Old Ned was with them. It was something to ponder about.

Tell you what, listening to circus band music is like listening to a siren's song - drawing me toward the big top. Mother heard the music, too and stopped me - before I ran out the door after supper. She looked at me, "Those are Pan Pipes calling you and every boy in town. That circus smells of sulfur - it has to come from the devil." Now my Mother isn't overly religious, not a fundamentalist anyway. And 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 - folks were crowding the entrance. I snuck downstairs. When Mother wasn't looking I ran outside and across the tracks. It was beyond my power to resist the pull of circus music.

Evening show was almost beginning as I ran across the ball field, drawn to the big top by the circus's Pan Pipe music. I walked around the back 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 the musicians. Even Old Ned played - Pan Pipes. Took all my will power to break away and walk to the dining tent. Willy was still there, but I could hardly recognize him. He was in the Cook's 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?" "Getting used to the sulfur smell." "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 stick it out. You shouldn't be here. Cook wasn't kidding when he said he'd throw you to ..." Willy looked around, "You know that green stuff Cook was stirring?" "Looked like puke covered with mildew?" "That's it. He's feeding it to ..." Willy looked around again - "second batch." "Ten gallons?" "Right and Cook told Mr. Promise that it wasn't satisfying ..." Willy looked around again. "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." I almost made it.

Before I could answer, Cook came back from the truck with an empty kettle - green stuff glued to the outside.

"Told you I'd feed you to *thing* if you ever came back!" He dropped the kettle and came after me, like a banshee. When I stopped running, I was leaning 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 would have fed you to ...". Willy was so scared he couldn't bring himself to say the name of what we'd seen. Do you think Mr. Promise will keep his promise - the free tickets?" "Hope so. He sure is a smooth talker. Like a politician." Willy looked around - to make sure no one was listening. "Clowns are in control." "In control of what?" "The Arkansas Circus. No one ever sees them with their make-up off or out of their costumes." "Not even Mr. Promise?" "He does and they're the only ones that can feed ... you know." "How about Ned?" "Forgot about him. He goes into the back of that truck, too." "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 grinned so big, it makes me wonder. "No honor among thieves?" "Right."

Music stopped, so 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 the music that pulls me to the big top. Look at us, we couldn't leave until it stopped." "And there's something else about this circus and it smells of sulfur." "You got that right. If Ned tries to tangle with those Arkansas clowns, who do you think will come out on top?" "From what I've seen of those clowns - if they 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 Old Ned." "But what if the clowns aren't human?" "Like the *Big Hairy Red Thing*?" "Cousins."

Circus got to have clowns, but unlike this one - in most cases they're human, or at least close to it. Trouble with clown humor - it gets rough, sometimes. There is a fine line between funny and mean. Take Punch-and-Judy. Those shows are full of mean. Judy is always hitting and humiliating Punch. Humor like that can be degrading. And what kind of lesson can we draw 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 all believed 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. And 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 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 that they're the most unsavory group of flim flam 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 will 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's full of 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 this evening. And 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 any other boy in town. We were all drawn to the circus by the magic music and repelled by the cast of characters that performed in it. As twilight blossomed in the western sky and darkness began to envelop 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, sounds and then I smelled The Arkansas Circus sulfur circus smell. I could hear more blood curdling screams coming from the sideshow tent. Mr. Promise must have raised the canvas covering the back of the *Big Hairy Red Thing's* truck. Couldn't understand it. Instead of folks running away, more kept lining up. I waited alone in my room - long after the music stopped - with a longing deep inside my chest that was like a bottomless pit.

Woke up to the heavy odor of sulfur blowing into my window from the southeast - from 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 that was fun. But, all was not lost. I could escape - I still had a few tales left to read in Jack London's book. And after breakfast that's what I did, exactly. 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 I only took time enough for an Ohio peanut butter 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 that circus kitchen, I can't smell anything, anymore." "Are you hungry?" "Yes Ma'am. Cook wouldn't feed me, but I couldn'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." "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 too, but Mother won't let me go anywhere near that circus. She's certain that 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 the ... one of the roustabouts. 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. Willy couldn't say it, but I could - not if Ned's *Big Hairy Red Thing* got loose.

Willy stopped by after supper on his way home to clean up. And he needed cleaning. Smelled like the devil and looked worse, "What happened to you?" "Cook made me clean inside 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 ..." "Bet you don't ever get one." "Don't know. If anyone of us has one, they're making themselves scarce. Mr. Promise and Ned came back with ... you know, and it's moaning like it's starved. Got to get home and clean up to be back in time. Mr. Promise told all of us 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 a one night stand.

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 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 hang around here for awhile?" "Did it get loose?" "I could hear the sound of metal spreading and breaking and I didn't hang around." "Didn't you see anything?" "Too dark, but I did hear it dragging something that was screaming." "Which direction?" "Away from here, up the hill toward seven corners." "Then we'll be home free. 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 carrying billy clubs. Chased us away, yelling it was war. Had to be at least thirty of us that got stiffed. Wouldn't even let us peek through the opening. They're sure leaving in a hurry. Soon as an act is 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 all of us to do the dirty work and then stiffed us. He gets all the credit and his helpers take the blame." "Ought to run for office." "What? And give up show business?" We both laughed. And it was to be our last one - together.

No! It wasn't the *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 was leaving

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-bye. Said he couldn't and mumbled something about me being a Jonah. 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 had would fit into three boxes. And I was getting excited. 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? So nothing happened all week. Not until Friday and that's 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 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 it 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 that my Father used when he was a boy. Farmhouse was in as much turmoil as ours was in Osborn. Grandmother was still sorting things out to take to town. She put a smile on my face. All of the neat old things 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. I looked out from my window. Down the lane was 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. Just as soon take the train to Cincinnati and see a Mae West movie." Grandmother overheard. Cuffed Grandfather behind the ear and whispered. They both smiled. Mae West had to be someone real important. I'd have to remember to ask 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 and 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 they 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 now I'd soon be working on the farm. Wasn't certain I'd be ready to grow up as soon as I had too. More fun being a boy. Began thinking about the *Big Hairy Red Thing* when

Grandmother called for me, "Come inside, Johnny. Going to 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 the mildew spots on the ceiling. I was up to seventy-six or seven 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 that greasy circus food. Remember when you took our children to the circus? They were sick for a week after you fed them." Sat around the house reading magazines; 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 wouldn't. 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. Didn't smell any sulfur and 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, they're no longer alive. But when I was your age they were and they were famous. So famous that when anyone was going to New York 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. Got 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 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 grease - simmering too long in a pan of spoiled onions - like the circus cook was deep frying the inside of a garbage truck. Held my nose, "Reminds me of The Arkansas Circus." Grandfather looked puzzled, "Can't say I've ever heard of that one," "It was in Osborn last week. I helped the Cook. Came home so greasy, Mother wouldn't let me go back." "The one she called the devil's playground?" "And it was. This dining tent smells almost as bad." "Lets walk a bit before we eat lunch. Need to clean out our senses. Sorry that we won't get to see all the animals. Looks like most of them are in the sideshow tent. We can see them when the circus starts - in the big top." "I'd like to see the bearded lady and the two headed calf, but it isn't worth the dime they're charging." "You're learning, Johnny. You're learning. Lets walk in the shade." Didn't tell Grandfather - after seeing Ned's *Big Hairy Red Thing* anything else would be tame.

Took about 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. What a great place to sit while eating a picnic lunch of cold fried chicken and potato chips and potato salad. I was so full - didn't matter that cotton candy wasn't going to be on the menu this afternoon. Even better, Grandfather shared his Thermos of coffee and cream. I helped by rinsing our plates and utensils under a livestock barn faucet. After Grandfather placed them back in the basket, he leaned up against the running board and took an early afternoon nap. Must have known the circus wouldn't be a good place to get athletes heart. I was too excited to sleep and too young to get athletes heart. I wandered over to watch the elephants eat and drink. Barnum sure had a bunch of them and they all performed. 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 and gaining ground. We were so early for Barnum's circus matinee performance that 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 to the bleachers in the center section. Grandfather would have none of it, "Oldest trick in the world, Johnny - bait and switch. Watch closely and remember. You can learn a lot from a circus. Barnum might have the greatest show on earth, but it has the larceny of a cheap carnival." "Remember the larceny, but don't copy the technique?" "Exactly!" Grandfather had seen this scam many times, so we sat where we were told and didn't budge.

Performance was supposed to begin at two o'clock, but it didn't. When the ticket scam was finished 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 - 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, we might win a hundred dollars." "Keep your eye on the four 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 was on the band and the show, 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, under the tent. 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 ever 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 experienced - except Ned's devil's helper. Couldn't believe the lion tamer. Wouldn't catch me in that cage with only a whip and a chair. Holding a chair between himself and the cats kept them from going after him. Wondered if it would work on Ned's friend. Probably not. It would eat the chair and whomever 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 in the top of the tent. Now I wanted to do that, too. Of all the things I saw, that was the best. Elephants? They scared me. One misstep and I'd be jelly. And they ran around the tent - almost 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 left the tent - I was filled with wonder of a truly 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. '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 Old 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. Did you learn anything?" "Promise is always better than performance, but it's right up front for everyone to see - the larceny along with honesty. There's a bit more larceny than there needs to be. Must be a habit that's hard to break. And there's a sucker born every minute." "If you learned that lesson - it was worth the trip. Think you can catch a batch of crawdads? Might go fishing at my favorite hole - the one below the dam next week." "Yes Sir - I will" I'd been to the circus and seen my elephant. It was time - time to build a raft.

*"Circus is a-going - grass is dead at that
Circus is a-going - clowns have grown fat!"*

12

Something about sitting in a hot tent and watching a circus and coming home late. Well, it seemed late to me. It was after five o'clock and I was dog tired. Fell asleep right after supper and didn't wake up until the sun was shining through my bedroom window - early next morning. Still, I was up soon enough, before six 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. Now, run along upstairs and get into something decent to wear to Sunday School. Anyone who has been as close to the devil's business as you and your Grandfather were at the 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." As usual, Grandmother was right and I knew it. I could feel it in my bones. My mind was still on the *Big Hairy Red Thing* when it shouldn't be. Devil can do that to me - you - anyone. She believed, and rightly so, that the circus wasn't any better than a second rate, down and dirty carnival. Seemed the larger the big top the more sophisticated the flim flam con games were. And I knew going to Sunday School once wouldn't rub out the devil's thoughts. Add in Church and two for one would be about right.

Changed into Church clothes and bounded downstairs for breakfast. Wasn't disappointed. Grandmother had eggs, bacon and pancakes. I had a full stomach, Church clothes and was about to carry along a 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 in the rack on the back of the pew. I'd go so far as to say that if anyone did that, they'd have to be a disciple of the devil. No decent person would and you'll not start now. Carrying a Bible to Church, only the damned fool would do that." This had not been my day. Had a chance to do two things right and came up with two thins wrong. Put that Bible back in the bookcase and scurried off before I made another mistake. Tell you what, I listened real careful today. Today's lesson was about Jonah and that's what Willy called me. After an hour of Sunday School and two hours of Church I felt sufficiently punished. If I had a devil in 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. Climbed up into the livery stable loft. If I couldn't find boards to my liking at the Old Mill, there were plenty stacked up against the wall. But, if I had to use these I'd attract too much attention. Wouldn't do. Had to find wood at the Old Mill. Climbed down out of the loft and checked Grandfather's work bench. Grandfather 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 one 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 a 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. Stopped, looked back and there it was. Right before my eyes. Wood for a raft.

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 bramble. Better to float them on Mill Creek and cut them into eight foot sections at the Old Mill. Pushed, pulled and rolled the log closest to the creek 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 - did it again - and again - until all four logs were out of the water and on the bank by the Old Mill. Didn't 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. Leaned them up on it, one by one. Now I had plenty of room to saw. 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 from under a pile of sawdust at least a foot deep at an 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. I was late for supper and 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, the plate will be hot." She was right. My 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 and mashed potatoes. 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 the devil's carnival?" "Yes Ma'am." "Did he have a red hairy thing that looked like half man half goat with him." "Don't know if it was with him, but it was in the sideshow until it escaped." "It escaped?" Didn't want to mention the missing roustabouts. No one reported them and no one would believe it, 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 been a report that Ned has 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, not even me.

Tried to listen to the Sunday night radio programs, but my mind was on the raft. My head was swimming with plans for tomorrow. First thing was to select the wood I needed for the floor and sides at the Old Mill. If there wasn't enough, or it wasn't the right type, which I wasn't sure I knew, 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 didn't collapse. And 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 two weeks. I had to launch soon or my raft wouldn't float downstream. By the time I had it all sorted out in my mind, 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. I 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. Ran downstairs to the kitchen and 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 squeezes water out of the clothes. 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, when 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 before I notched the logs. Good thing, too. The Mill's old two-by-fours weren't all the same dimensions. 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 the 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 and made it through the back door, just in time.

Grandmother took one look at me and shook her head, "Shake the sawdust out of your hair 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, "What in the world are you building? A tree house?" 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. Got the floor started." What I'd done so far could be part of a tree house. I blushed, but didn't show it. My face was red from work and sun. She clucked at me like a worried mother hen, "Be careful, now. I don't want to have to explain to your Mother how you fell out of a tree and broke an arm." Had to smile about that. I'd all ready done it. Thought I could fly like Superman. Jumped off our garage and broke an arm. Flew all right. For about two seconds. "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 could eat anything, except liver. Willy hated liver, too, "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 their 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 it and 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 is different. It can be disguised. Mother mixed pineapple in hers and Grandmother used barbecue sauce. Me, I poured ketchup on it. Even with all the doctoring I could only down two slices.

Grandfather called me into the parlor after supper. My first thought was that he'd found out about my raft. He filled his pipe, packed it and lit it. 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." Did he mention where Ned Smith is?" "He was around here. 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 where it had been. Disappeared right off the face of the earth. Ned may be around here, so stay on your toes. Really had to be a strange circus. Sheriff said it was owned by clowns and no one ever saw them out of their makeup and costumes. Met their match when they came up against our Ned Smith." I handed the check to Grandfather. Almost felt proud of Old Ned. He had challenged the devil to a thieving contest and won. Old Ned needed jail time, but it 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. I was certain Grandmother 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, coffee first. No one can cook breakfast like Grandmother. Not even my Mother. Picked up my tools 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, inserted into the notches. I nailed each one down, using two nails for each notch. Took twenty-four long nails, almost all that I had. Stepped back to admire my progress. Pulled 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.

Grandmother was in her room, asleep. I made my own Ohio special lunch and hurried back to the Old Mill. Next step was to 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. Still, I had more work. I'd need a centerboard and sides. Time to build the centerboard was now, while I could turn it over, so I did. Turned it back over, and that wasn't easy, and sat 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." 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 above 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 be true, even if it isn't.* So I ducked under three times and came out clean, then air dried my skin and shook the dirt from my clothes. Checked the sun. It was well above 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 wouldn'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 in this 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. 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. Stood back again and admired my work. Left the back open for a rudder and a way to get in and out if I fell into the creek. Sat down on the foundation and admired what I'd done and thought about building a rudder. It should be easy to make, but how was I going to attach it? I had a seven foot pole I could use to push it away from the banks or upstream, if the current wasn't too strong. Didn't look like I was going to launch it today. Looked up at the sun. It was moving down at a pretty good clip. I stripped down and jumped into the creek, bobbing three times. I looked over at my raft. It was pretty good work for a boy my age, but how was I going to attach the rudder? Climbed out on the bridge. Willy would have been proud of me, I looked clean.

Supper should have been perfect and it would have, but for those beets. Cooked, sliced or cold - beets are slimy. But, if you don't chew too long they'll slide down. Trouble is - beets take up room that should be used for the good stuff - roast pork, reduced pork gravy, mashed potatoes. Real food. The kind that makes your stomach smile and mine did - once the beets were covered up. After supper I climbed up the ladder to the livery stable loft. Needed 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. 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.

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 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. 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. Out in the livery stable, I 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 there was my rudderstock. Now all I needed was a thick tree branch, that made a V, to make a sternpost to hold the rudderstock. Had to be sturdy, though and I'd need a new pole.

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 the 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 at the morning sun rising into the trees and ran all the way to the Old Mill.

Building the rudderstock was easy as pie. All I had to do was nail the 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, back at the Old Mill, with my finishing saw and nailed it to the stern. Wrapped it with twine to make it secure. 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 up and pulled. Raft had a mind of its own - breaking free - gaining speed - knocking me backwards - tumbling into the creek - clothes and all. Crawled out on the creek bank soaking wet, but still proud of my achievement. Raft floated upright - riding high above the water. Tied the rope hooked onto the sternpost around a tree and sat down to catch my breath. Had to admire my handiwork. Would be fun guiding it downstream. Felt just like Tom and Huck did when they were about to begin a similar trip. Stood up, still soaking wet, and began to unbutton my shirt. Heard a twig snap and tried to turn around, but couldn't. Something hot and heavy was holding me and the odor of sulfur and manure was making me gag - overpowering. Looked up into the hairy red jaws of hell - and the lights went out along Mill Creek.

Came up from the depths - swimming in a deep pool of red blood - dodging hunks of manure that floated on 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 then the other - looking up into Old Ned's toothless grin. He spat tobacco into my face, "Got you - you snot nosed goody two shoes." I tried to sit up and shake the cobwebs out of my head, but I couldn't move. I was lying on my chest - hog-tied to the sternpost of my raft. Looked up at Ned, "Thought we called it quits at the circus." "Not with the circus. Me and my friend stayed behind when the circus returned - to it's underground home." I turned my head toward shore and looked into the jaws of hell - *the Big Hairy Red Thing* was dancing a jig on the bank. Scared - I darn near passed out again. Ned laughed like he was one of them, "Pretty ain't it. You were lucky you were wet or there wouldn't be anything left, but a hunk of hair and a red spot. *Thing* here can't abide water. Fall in and all that would be

left is smoke and sulfur. So, Johnny Ropp, I'm sending you on a one way trip down the Scioto." I tried to break free. Figured if *the Big Hairy Red Thing* would go up in smoke in water, I'd swim for my life. Squirmed and tugged, but I couldn't move an inch. Ned cackled - with a laugh that came right out of hell.

I turned my head and looked over at Old Ned - out of one eye - that's as far as I could turn. Ned had the end of the rope, the one I tied my raft to the tree with, 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 or four hours, maybe five. 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, we're quits. Don't worry about anyone trying to save you. Scioto is running too high and it's too muddy to fish, except below the dam. By the time you get there it'll be too late." Ned cackled as he threw the rope on top of me and pushed the raft off with his foot into the middle of Mill Creek. He stood up on the bank - cackled - linked his arm with the *Big Hairy Red Thing*. They danced a jig in a circle - singing - "Float - float - float! Johnny Ropp is gonna' croak - croak - croak!" I watched, nothing else I could do, as Ned turned away and then looked back. Had his arm around the *Big Hairy Red Thing*, "Wink good-bye to my friend, Johnny. It's almost time to return him to his master. I won't be needing him anymore."

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 then left. My raft was riding in the middle of the stream. Ned had lashed the rudderstock so it would steer straight and my centerboard kept it pointed there. I'd built the darn thing too good. At least I picked the right time of year to launch my raft. Creek was running high and quick, but not too fast. 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. Looked at the sternpost. Darn Ned had tied the rope holding me to it. If I fell over the raft would drag me along - dead or alive. I was in a pickle. Thought to myself, "I sure picked a 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 sit and think his way out. I couldn't sit, but I could sure think.

I relaxed and closed my eyes. Tried to remember. Now in one of his movies, Tom Mix and two of his cowpokes were tied up in 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 - the rope was tied behind my back and I was flat on my stomach. I looked at what rope I could see and discovered it wasn't rope at all. Ned had tied me up with clothes line he stole from the general store. I'd used it before. I knew I could escape. All I had to do was get it wet - without falling in and drowning. I had time on my side, but wasn't sure how much. 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 by a rope. Talk about thinking scared. At the bottom is a ferocious back draft. I'm 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 - right side - front. With my hands and feet tied behind me, I could lay on my back for only a few seconds. That was impossible. And the other three were uncomfortable. I had to wait for the 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. I rolled on my 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 had loosened. I was near the Girls Industrial Home,

floating twenty yards off the east 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 it feel good to be free. Looked down at water rushing by - and up at water coming down. Lightning crashed all around. Measured the distance to the east 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 that held the rudderstock wood to the end of the pole. In a second, the current broke it free. All I had left was a long pole. If I ever built another raft, I'd soak the twine before wrapping it. When it dried it would shrink. Rain was coming down in sheets and the lightning was dancing. Wasn't a fit day to be out on the Scioto. Sky was turning black as night - I was drenched and getting the shivers. Worse yet - I could hear the beginning of a roar - the roar of water crashing over a spillway. It was getting late - my raft was fast closing in on the dam. With all the noise, 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 little 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 the raft may stop on top of the dam or on the cable stretched from shore to shore that protected 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 yards 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.

Landed with a squish - water coming out of all sides of me - sneakers - trousers - shirt - and hair. Laughed - I laughed with the luck of angels. I'd beat that devil Ned at his own game and won. I sloshed over to the downstream side of the road, leading 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. Over half had floated downstream - bobbing along in 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 other side of the dam. Lightning flashed again and I could see Old Ned looking down at what was left of my raft, holding an umbrella over *the 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 hands. As he ran to retrieve it he left that *thing* uncovered in a downpour. It began a scream that shatters brains - smoke rose where it stood. Ned tried to get back in time, but lightning struck. Watched as it raised claws trying to fight off the inevitable. It was like the ground opened up and swallowed ... I couldn't stand the smell of burning manure and sulfur, not even in a downpour. Here I was huddled up against the rail, hunched down and Old Ned couldn't be more than fifty yards away. He threw that umbrella over the rail at my raft and walked back toward the Whiskey Roadhouse. When he was out of sight, I inched over to where the *thing* last stood. All that was left was a pile

of yellow sulfur. Came to a point with a curlicue on top. Like an ice cream cone. Touched it - 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 know 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 - 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 and I didn't have to tell her. After I washed down the remains of those beets - I ate them all - I hopped up the stairs to bed. I barely made it under the covers when my eyes were 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 big elm's branches - brushing against the eaves. Even if Old Ned never came back - looked like it would never be over. Not as long as I could remember. Searched my brain and found Grandmother's Cornish Prayer. Closed my eyes and whispered,

*From Ghoulies and ghosties
And long-leggety beasties
And things that go bump in the night,*

Good Lord deliver us!