

“Where’s the Beef?”

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

In the summer of 1976 my family and I made a trip home to Tennessee from the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific where we had been living since January 1973. We felt it was important to our two sons, Stan and Curt, to have the experience of living in Tennessee for a little while before we went back to our other home in Fiji. On this particular day, we fulfilled our plans to have a leisurely hike in the Fiery Gizzard Gulf below the Partin Dairy Farm near Tracy City.

My brother Freddie, my husband Grady Ward, our sons Stan and Curt and I made the walk on a beautiful summer day. The Grundy Forest was a perfect example of Tennessee’s beautiful natural flora and fauna. My husband knew every inch of this section of the Gizzard Gulf since as a boy it was his playground. He and I had been in that gulf many times before, but our children had never had the privilege of partaking of the wonderful scenery displayed by the large creek with its ice cold waters, the wonderful sandstone outcroppings—some as large as rooms, the foliage, the occasional wild animal and the giant hemlocks reaching for the sky. When we were down in that gulf, nothing could be heard of the outside world because of the rushing creek.

We entered the forest from the farm side of the creek just like Grady Ward had done so many times throughout the years. There was a foot log to cross below the barns that would place us on the excellent footpath build by the CCC men years before. Grady Ward walked us gingerly down the path that ran along the creek as it descended into the gulf. He always told his sons to listen for all the interesting sounds one might hear in the woods. He never wanted them to abuse the trees or disturb the surroundings in any way in such a magnificent setting. Occasionally the boys waded in the cold water, and then we would get right back on the path that would lead us to the Sycamore Hole, our destination.

Following the creek, we eventually came upon the Pillars. I had been on top of the huge layers of rock in my younger days, but I didn’t want to mention that to the boys at this point. Just behind the Pillars the Fiery Gizzard Creek fell heftily into the Sycamore Hole on its way to the valley below. It must have been a good rainy time of the year because to me the pool and creek were so vibrant and full of water. As we scanned the area, and Grady Ward pointed down toward the large pool below, our eyes caught sight of something we had never before seen in these waters—several big fish, but one really big one. The men surmised that it was a large catfish that somehow had come downstream in a smaller version and took up residence in the large pool.

Let me go on record here and state that “I HATE FISHING!” I am too hyperactive to sit still and wait on one of God’s little creatures to lunge at a worm on the end of a string attached to a stick that I am holding in my hand. It just “ain’t gonna happen!”

There must be a million other things one can do with his or her time than laze around on a creek bank with a fishing pole propped on one's knee, hoping that some slimy, scaly being from the dark, dreary, deep will be so brainless as to hang himself on a hook! Are all fish on starvation? Aren't there plenty of *unattached* worms and bugs crawling and flitting around in such ecosystems? Why would the silly thing dare take a chance with his life and make a lunge for the suffering little worm or bug that just happened to be mercilessly forced onto a sharp, pointed hook. I had witnessed the pain one of those things can inflict.

Around 1961 Grady Ward and I were living in Tracy City in the old Daniel Smith house on Shook Street. For whatever reason, my husband thought that the Holy Creator created every dog for him. He had so many dogs that it was hard for me to find money to buy food for the two of us. Two of the dogs were half basset, half beagle hounds named Lum and Abner; their legs were so short that their tummies nearly dragged the ground; I believe their ears did drag sometimes. Even though I'm not a fan of dogs, I really loved those two little animals. I was working inside when all of a sudden, one of the dogs started barking and screaming in terrible pain. I was too scared to look out because I knew my knowledge of dog behavior was limited. My ears wanted the dog to stop carrying on so, but he just couldn't, so as usual, I went into action very much unprepared. Once outside I saw one of the little hounds going around and around in the backyard with something big, like a big beetle, or a big hornet, or a big *some-kind-of-a-bug* on his upper lip. He was all over the place. Observing more closely, I realized that the poor little thing had a big fishing lure stuck in his mouth. At times like this, I always have an extended range of emotions going something like this, "I'm going to kill Grady Ward for not putting his fishing equipment away in a safe place!" or "I want a divorce!" or "Father in Heaven, give me knowledge to help this poor suffering animal?"

I was unable to catch the little fellow, so I ran quickly to Mr. Pascal Marler's house and implored him to come with me. Being the kind neighbor that he was, he came to our house, caught the little dog, but could not remove the lure without help. Now, where do you think my beloved was at the time? No, he was not at work! No, he was not out helping the sick and needy! He was at Tracy Lakes, and guess what he was doing. You are right. He was FISHING!!!! So Mr. Marler, the little dog, and I loaded up, and with pliers, or whatever tools Mr. Marler gathered in hand, we headed to the Lakes. The Big Bug was removed, the wound medicated, and everyone went home although at least one in the group wasn't speaking to one other in the group. That's enough about the pain inflicted by fishing hooks and lures.

We all enjoyed our morning in Grundy Forest, but on the way to Monteagle where we were staying, the talk kept going back to the big fish. The boys were excited with the idea that maybe, just maybe, they could catch that fish. They told their Granny Layne all about its size. She quickly let it be known that if they could catch it, then she would gladly cook it for them. Their Granddaddy Layne who usually was a quiet man, kept needling them by saying, "There aren't any large fish in those pools, and even if there

were, you could never catch it.” Talk like this spurred the boys on; it was decided that the four of us would get all the gear we needed and go back and spend the night. I went along to be the chief cook and bottle washer; I wasn’t the least bit interested in fishing.

Arriving back at the Sycamore Hole, the waters were scanned to be certain that the big fish was still in the pool. There he was swimming around like he owned the world. I wanted to scream, “Your life is in danger; your life is in danger!! Go on downstream!! Save yourself!!” But my sons were so into the project that I behaved myself and did what a super mom was supposed to do—put up the tent, prepare the bedding in the tent, unpack the backpacks, put items to keep cold into the cold waters of the creek, get wood for a fire, build the fire, drop the potatoes wrapped in aluminum into the hot ashes and place the steaks on the fire for roasting. If I got all that done before dark, I was allowed to eat some of what I had cooked. Now, you are asking what did the two men and two boys do—they did the *important* work—set out the milk jugs, cut fishing poles and tie line to them, organize the worms, crickets, chicken livers and bread scraps, then they got in a little fishing before total darkness set in. That big fish ate cold wieners like they were big juicy worms; chunks of loaf bread were demolished in seconds. There was no doubt that that sucker was going to be on Granny’s table tomorrow night.

After darkness fell and the fish could no longer be seen, it was not safe to be near the big waterfall for fear of falling onto the rocks and water below. Everyone gathered around the fire to give thanks for and partake of our wonderful blessings—T-bone steak, baked potatoes, cold pork’n’beans and all the little junk foods one could want for dessert. The boys’ steaks were more than they could eat, so they left good meat on the bone. I was reared in a home where there was rarely anything left on the table at mealtimes, and nothing was thrown away, but what could I do with the cooked steak that would salve my conscience? I asked my beloved if fish would bite at cooked beef; his response was, “I doubt it.” I never listen to anything he says anyway, so I wrapped the meat in Reynolds wrap and put it in the tent with me to keep the night marauders from getting it. After I cleaned the campsite, and the men with their flashlights checked all their jugs and lines with no progress made in catching the Big One, we all bedded down. I could hear my brother Freddie checking on the lines during the night. I also heard the coons having a picnic on our wieners as they lay cooling in the rushing waters. Maybe we should have “fished” for coons or bobcats or cougars. I was really glad that the left over beef was safe in the tent with me.

Early the next morning, I arose to find my brother already up and checking out all the milk jugs and lines. He was placing what was left of the wieners and bread on the hooks—just a last ditch effort before surrender. The Big One had cleaned out the pantry. The boys excitedly asked their uncle, “Did we catch the fish during the night?” He answered with a resounding “No!” We all were remembering what Granddaddy Layne told us about never being able to catch that big fish. No one wanted to go home empty-handed. To get the boys minds off the failure to catch the fish, I quickly cooked breakfast—I was good at that. Bacon, eggs, coffee and all the trimmings—can’t you

just smell those aromas floating out over the campsite? After everyone ate and was filled to the brim, I took time to ponder our trip and our failure to accomplish what we came to do.

I could not swim and was deathly afraid of heights, but at that time there was a tall pole ladder standing at the falls with its base footed on a rock ledge below at the surface of the Sycamore Hole. I would carefully brace myself on that heavy ladder so as to be able to look over into the pool and see all the interesting little things going on below. The milk jugs appeared to be nailed into place for they were resting with contentment. The fishing poles were leaning on the top of the pole ladder ready for any emergency; maybe the fish would leap out of the water and yell, “Okay, I’m tired; get your pole and drop me a chicken liver. I give up!”

My heart was just aching for the boys, and realizing that they had to go home without that sorry ole fish, didn’t set right with me. My brother Freddie had already gone off down the creek just passing time while he walked on a dry bed of stones; he had already thrown in the towel on the project. What’s with a group of men?? They give up so easily on things. I told Stan and Curt and their dad that going home empty-handed was not an option. Frustrated one of them asked, “Well, Mama, how do you suggest we catch it?” Knowing nothing about the art of fishing and aware that I was about to open my mouth and say something ridiculous (*again*), I suggested that we try the left over T-bone steak which I had guarded all night in my tent. “Hey, boys, the fish might really like cooked beef!” As expected, I was laughed at while the statement, “Fish won’t bite cooked meat; they only like it raw,” came floating in my direction. Defiantly I responded, “Well, you tried raw meat, and liver, and bread, and wieners, and bugs and crickets and worms, so what would be the harm in trying cooked meat?” I got no takers on that idea.

I faded into the woodwork and started packing up the camp, carefully keeping my leftover cooked beef well within sight. Once I was ready to head for home, I picked up my little pack of aluminum foil with the beef scrapes nestled inside, and carried it with me to the ladder at the waterfall. Both men and both boys had scattered doing their thing, whatever that was. There I stood in a running creek, looking out over the water below which I was so afraid of, standing atop a high waterfall shaking inside from fear of heights, about to do the unthinkable—*put cooked meat on a fishing hook*. Boy was I glad no one was watching! Mothers are dummies anyway! What do they know? I baited the beef onto one of the hooks and dropped the hook down into the Sycamore Hole. Should I remind you again that I HATE FISHING?

Honestly folks, before I could get a good grip on that old stick, the pole began to bow; I could not control the slender tree limb—that’s what I called it. My head swam (*no pun intended*) with ideas like, “Drop the pole or you’ll go over the falls!” and “Where is everyone when you need them?” and “I wish I knew how to fish!” but more

importantly, my thoughts yelled out, “Don’t you dare let that fish get away! Not now!” What’s a girl to do in desperate times?

I yelled and yelled. That fish was swinging back and forth—out over the Sycamore Hole and back under the bluff and waterfall. I could hear the dry creek rocks tumbling as I suppose my brother had heard my screams and thought one of us had died or something. Unknown to me, my beloved was napping on a pile of gear at the campsite a few yards behind me. When he heard my screams, he jumped up and bolted toward me thinking that I had been snake bitten. After three or four leaps, he stumbled over something and fell broadside into the creek bed, then jumped back up and took off again. All of a sudden he appeared behind me and was yelling, “Don’t hoss him, don’t hoss him!” He yelled for me to control the swing of the pole and whatever I did, I wasn’t supposed to jerk the pole. I don’t think the man realized that I had no, absolutely no, control over the situation. The Big One was angry; he had no intention of letting a woman bring him in. “Hey big fellow, it wasn’t my fault that you didn’t know cooked meat from raw meat. Didn’t your Mama ever tell you that fish don’t eat cooked meat?”

As soon as Grady Ward got to the place where he could look down on the fish, he realized that I had lifted him out of the water. There the Big One dangled on the hook in midair and with one mighty flip of his body he came off the hook and dropped onto a wet, slippery, slab of rock behind the falls at the edge of the pool. At that point, Grady Ward was beside me at the top of the falls and in the blink of an eye, he was down the ladder and onto the slippery ledge below. Being afraid of the catfish’s horns, he grabbed the fish by the tail; it squirted out of his hands like a slippery eel. The big fish writhed upon the wet, slick rock trying to work his way back into the water. Grady Ward kicked the fish back away from the pool. Then he had a bright idea; he jerked out his pocketknife, sunk the blade into the catfish just at the back of his head and planted one foot behind the knife—he had him, the fish couldn’t get away. We yelled for Freddie to bring a fish stringer that he had. He dropped it from the top of the falls to the ledge below. Grady Ward brought the Big One out away from the falls and up to the campsite. Everyone was so happy, and the trip to Granny’s house was such a joyous occasion.

Stan and Curt were so eager to show the fish to Granddaddy Layne who stood in silent disbelief. He really didn’t think there were any big fish in that gulf, and he certainly didn’t think the boys would bring one home. The Big One weighed over seven pounds and was twenty-five inches long—big in the eyes of two young boys and for having been caught in a little mountain pool. Granny Layne served up the fish on a platter with slaw, hush puppies and French fries. From then on, when the boys or their father gathered up bait for fishing ventures, I was always tempted to ask, “Where’s the beef?”

(Note: the Fiery Gizzard Gulf is one of the most beautiful areas in Grundy County, TN. Of course it is now a State Park with rules, but it is a place everyone should visit.)

For more of Jackie's writings click on the book icon to the right



Published on www.GrundyCountyHistory.org