

The Tribe – By Donnie Grimes

My name is Donnie Grimes and I want to tell you a series of related stories about living in Grundy County in the early 1960 and a group of young people I called “the Tribe.” For many of you, it will be a nostalgic visit to yesteryear; for others, it might bring back memories of that time and the people in your life; for still others, it may not resonate because everything you read will seem so distant from the world we live in today; however, as I hope you will see, it was a great time to be a young boy or girl living in Grundy County and specifically Palmer, Tennessee.

I’m sharing stories from both my personal memories and those I overheard from friends and family. I took the liberty, as the author, to formulate some stories around my central characters, but stayed away from last names unless the storyline was about a specific individual.

I lived the first 15 years of my life in Palmer, and even attended Grundy County High School my freshman year before my family moved to East Ridge Tennessee near Chattanooga. After we moved away, I had a strong affinity for the people of Palmer that I continued to return as often as I could. I stayed with my Uncle Woodrow and Mae Tate whenever they would have me. My family went to the Palmer Church of God shopped at Ed Nunley’s store at the Other End, played music with Charlie Tate and Danny Mankin, and swam in the Cat Hole, the Blue Hole, and “The Big Dam” whenever possible.

Some of my fondest memories are of the Palmer Elementary School teachers like Mrs. Hill, Mrs. Geary, Mrs. Hampton, and my all-time favorite teacher, Miss Francis Elizabeth Conry. She inspired my life and many others as she led every student who passed through her classroom to believe they could change the world regardless of being born in a small coal mining town. I loved her then, and still love and hold her in the highest esteem as my teacher and role model.

I do hope you enjoy this trip back into a time when the most important thing on earth was my family, friends, church, and the wonderful adventures we had in the small town in Grundy County Tennessee called Palmer. It took 60 years of researching my own childhood memories to develop this series of short stories into a cohesive narrative. I regret that many of the people I write about never had an opportunity to accept or reject these stories, but they all have my sincere thanks and admiration for the time we spent together. It was all a labor of love!

I will present each story in a ‘serialized” format to conserve space on the site and not monopolize the information on this media. My goal is to update the storyline and release each Sunday Night by 6PM CDT. I sincerely thank the Site Admin, Janelle Taylor for giving me permission to share these stories.

Donnie Grimes
Pensacola, Florida
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Tonight, begins my story about living in Palmer, Tennessee in the early 1960s. It was the beginning of the end to our post WW II innocence. The country and everyone I knew was changing and our way of life was evolving. We didn't know it at the time, but after writing this story, and remembering how my life was back then, it was never the same.

Each week, I will attempt to keep the post to a less than 20-minute read time; however, it is sometimes difficult to cut-off, or expand the flow of the storyline to reach a reading time. I will certainly try to keep it flowing for you and discipline my post times. Each chapter is a self-contained story but linked to the overall adventures of the "Tribe."

So, let's meet the "Tribe."

Chapter 1 - The Tribe

The morning air was crisp as the pine trees across the gravel road in front of our small frame house sent their strong fragrance directly at me as I stood looking out the front screen door. The sunrise over the eastern hills cast a silhouette of our small house into the yard and part of the road. Although it was the last of May, the cool spring breeze blew through the screen door as I pushed it open to look outside. A pesky fly buzzed by my head when I turned to go back inside the house. I sighed under my breath for letting it in and smiled as I heard mom tell me, "Donnie, shut the screen door and come to breakfast before you let all the flies in!"

As I gently closed the door and placed the hook through the eye on the door frame, I turned toward the kitchen as the smell quickly changed from pine rosin to the aroma of fresh biscuits coming from the oven. Dad left for work in Chattanooga a few hours earlier, so it was only Mom, my sister Rhonda, and me. I knew there would be gravy with scrambled eggs in the mixture, and I would top it off with a generous dusting of black pepper.

After quickly praying a short prayer over the meal, I caught Mom's stern look in my peripheral for my expediting saying grace. I quickly drank the few ounces of orange juice already set on the table while trying to ignore her disappointing gaze at me. I began crumbling two biscuits with my fingers into a cereal bowl and then spooned some of the gravy and eggs over them. I didn't remember if I had washed my hands or not! To my surprise, Mom poured a small cup of coffee, put in a teaspoon of sugar along with a lot of Pet milk, and passed it to me. This was a rare occurrence in my life because although I loved coffee, I was not allowed to drink it very often and only my granny, Uncle Woodrow, and sometime mom would permit me to indulge in the greatest drink ever created.

Living in Palmer, Tennessee, located on the southern end of the Cumberland Plateau in the early 1960s, was some of the most memorable times of my life. My birthday was two weeks earlier, and now that school was dismissed for the summer, it was time to stay

outside and do as much as I could for the next three months. I finished another year at Palmer Elementary School and was excited to start enjoying time away from school and take advantage of the long days of summer. My mind was already planning what my friends and I would probably do: play softball in any empty lot or field we could find; swim in the many creeks and ponds in and around Palmer, explore the hills and mountains surrounding our little town, get up early, and stay out doing something until the sun went behind the Goat Rock ridge every day possible.

As I was finishing the cup of coffee, I heard the screen door bang into the door-facing with the familiar 6-count knocking sequence we saw “the three stooges” do many times in their short movies, “Shave and a Haircut, 2 bits.” Because the door had not ceded properly when I closed it earlier, each knock caused the door to strike the door facing which made it sound louder than normal. I bent forward to stretch my neck over the table and saw Martin, Mike, and Sam with their hands cupped around their eyes as they looked for me through the screen. The “Tribe” was ready to go!

I once read a story in school about how different Celtic families in the Scottish Highlands of Great Britain, who shared strong common interests, formed extended family alliances were called “Clans.” Both blood relatives and closest friends would come together for protection and share in most everything they did. I was always a dreamer and sometimes imagined being a pirate, Viking, or some loyal Knight sitting at the round table in King Arthur’s court. Although my family was certainly not from Scotland, after reading about them, I loved their sense of family and loyalty; however, I knew using the word “Clan” in and around Palmer, regardless of how it was spelled, would not be a good idea. Therefore, I decided to adopt “Tribe” as my own endearing label to describe my close group of friends.

Martin was almost a year older than me and lived down the hill from us with his mom, dad, older sister, and three older brothers. His dad was a part-time farmer and prison guard at the Brushy Mountain State Prison facility which required him to be away from his family five days a week. According to my mom, the freckles on Martin’s face and deep blue eyes, along with his reddish-brown hair, were indicators of his Irish family. Although a little shorter than me, he was fearless. Martin was my best friend, but he was also my greatest nemesis for many years when we were growing up together. We would get bored with each other and have a falling out about something trivial which usually ended in a fist fight and wrestling match at least once every few weeks. Otherwise, we were together almost every day during the summer, and were like brothers. His three older brothers and one sister were good to us, and we loved his mom and dad just like we did all our friend’s families.

Mike lived across a field behind Martin’s house with his parents, older brother, and one sister. Mike and I had been in the same classroom since the first grade. Although we were the same age, he was taller and thinner than the rest of us and had a distinctively older deep voice. He sounded like a man when he spoke but was otherwise quiet most of the time. He rarely spoke to anyone but his friends unless necessary. Mike was a solid friend to everyone and one of the most dependable and loyal boys in the Tribe.

Mike's mother was a sweet woman who obviously loved all us boys as demonstrated by her always being interested in what we were doing or had to say. We never went to Mike's house unless we took the time to sit and talk with his mom for a few minutes. She would ask us what we had planned to do that day and then listen intently to our answers, tell us to be careful, and to watch out for each other. We were all very comfortable around Mike's family, especially his mom whom we never forgot for the love she showed us in those formative years.

Sam, the only girl member of our Tribe, lived just a couple of houses down the road from Mike. She and her family moved into our neighborhood the previous year, so we knew very little about her family and rarely saw her other family members. We knew she had an older brother and sister who were already married, so she was the only one still living at home. Sam had a younger brother who died when she was very young. When the rest of us would easily get a sunburn and more freckles at the beginning of each summer, she would just get darker and the only place she had freckles was on her nose. Her blonde hair was almost white, and she always wore it in a ponytail with a dark blue New York Yankees baseball cap, and a pair of cut-off overalls. Although she was not always available to be with us, we all considered Sam to be a member of the Tribe.

Mike gave her his old Daisy BB Gun and a thousand BBs when he got a new pellet rifle the previous year. She turned out to be a good shot and a solid softball player who always played first-base. She was a year older than me, but acted more mature than most of the girls we knew; however, not many of the kids we played with were girls. I never thought her to be a "Tom-boy" per se, although she could hold her own in most situations with all of us and her peers. She seemed to quickly fit into our Tribe perfectly, so we all considered her to be a good friend. She even hung out with us in school on the playground.

We did not pry into her family life, nor did she talk much about it. The only member of Sam's family we knew was her great-grandmother Ethel, who was probably the oldest person in Palmer at 102 years old. Since Sam was in the Tribe, we all helped her with her "Grams" as often as she needed.

I yelled for them to sit down on the porch, and that I would be right out. I did not want to start the summer on the wrong foot with my mom, so I picked up my dishes, got my toothbrush, and began brushing my teeth. Although we had running water, it was only in the kitchen, so I had to brush in the kitchen sink before mom started the dishes. My younger sister Rhonda was already playing and singing to her dolls in the next room. After a short tooth brushing, I told mom that I was going outside and going to ride our bikes around Palmer, and maybe play some softball if we could get Lanny and Carlos to go with us. They were the two oldest members of the Tribe.

My cousin Lanny lived only two houses away just over the hill toward Palmer. He was the middle of five kids with two older brothers and two younger sisters. Lanny was also tall and lanky with lots of black wavy hair that he kept full of hair tonic. He always carried a comb that he would pull out anytime we were just standing around, including on the

ball field. We would yell at him and tell him no girls would be seeing him, as he continued to comb front to back until every hair had been stroked. Of course, it was all in his face two minutes later playing softball. I felt he was my older brother, not just because he was a relative, but because I always knew he would look out for me. Evidently, my mother believed the same thing about Lanny. She liked and trusted him and was glad he stayed around the younger boys.

The last member of the Tribe was Carlos who lived directly behind our house with his mom, dad, and older sister. They were a noticeably quiet and private family, but Carlos was always there with us throughout several summers. He was the smartest kid I ever met and although quiet for the most part, when he had something to say, everyone paid close attention. He had a fair complexion with blonde hair like Sam's that he kept neatly combed and he never wore a cap or hat. His face and arms would get red, but he never seemed to get a sunburn. However, his eyes were a distinctive trait of his family as they all had the same color green. He was highly respected by everyone who knew him, teachers, and friends alike. He always seemed to figure out an answer or give options to situations or problems the Tribe came up against, or sometimes created; however, he obviously enjoyed our friendship and fellowship because he was always there with us every summer.

Living in a coal mining town, everyone seemed to have a connection with the many coal mines that surrounded Palmer at one time or the other in their life. I remember my dad coming home with coal dust on his face and arms when I was younger, but then he got a job at a wire and cable manufacturing plant in Chattanooga, and I never saw him with coal dust on him again. Although every man in Palmer had some history with working in the mines, none of the Tribe's parents worked in there by 1960.

We knew very little about the outside world but could have cared less. From our perspective, we were together and although we did not talk about it, we knew we were fortunate and blessed to live in a place like Palmer. Our adventures kept us together. There were many kids our age we spent time with, but the Tribe were "best friends" for many of our formative years which helped us develop our sense of extended family while growing up.

It was going to be a warm sunny day full of fun and adventure for my friends and me, but I had no idea just how much drama awaited us. I yelled through the screen door, "I'm getting my bike, glove, and pellet rifle from the back porch and be around there in a minute." They just kept talking and swinging their legs off the front porch, so I was not sure they even heard me!

Next Week: "Palmer"

Chapter 2 – Palmer (Published September 24th, 2023)

Living in Palmer was like being in a permanent “kid world.” Sitting in a small valley surrounded by many streams, hills and forest provided us everything a ten-year old boy could ever desire. Most of the Tribe’s extended family lived within one, or no more than two miles of each other. Our small frame house had only four rooms, but we had running water and two acres of land sitting on a hill with a grove of small pine trees in back.

The houses surrounding us were mostly built by the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company for their miners. This was the second house built on the lot where I lived because the original company house burned in the late 1940s. Most of these small houses were little more than a shelter from the wind and rain with little to no insulation, and no bathroom per se, with only an “outhouse” for a toilet about 30 yards behind the house. Very few people in Palmer had an indoor bathroom. Only the mine owners and superintendents, schoolteachers, and a couple of other families, who we considered wealthy people, had such a luxury. However, it was no big deal because it seemed everyone else was in the same situation.

I picked up my air rifle and some pellets from my room, slung it over my left shoulder, and went out the back door picking up my ball and glove. After throwing them into the handlebar basket, I rolled my “Western Flyer” bike off the three steps and into the back yard. I could already feel the warmth of the sun on my face and arms as I walked the bike around our small tar-papered house to meet up with my Tribe. When they saw me, they jumped on their bikes, and we all rode out to the road and the top of the hill on our lane. I quickly realized my flannel shirt would be coming off as soon as I cleared my mom’s view of us.

The top of the hill was a central place where we always met up. We could see both Lanny’s and Carlos’ front doors, so I immediately gave a loud whistle for them and waited to see if they heard me. My uncle taught me how to whistle the previous summer in Smyrna, Tennessee. He trained bird dogs to respond to specific whistles, so one day he taught me how to whistle loudly. My mom was not impressed with my newly acquired ability when I returned home!

Lanny and Carlos both waved at us after my second whistle, so we knew they would be there within minutes. We rode in circles while waiting for them to come join us and just talked about what we could do on such a beautiful Spring Day. Sam wanted us to get together to play softball in the afternoon at G.W. Mosley’s empty lot with “the other end” kids. After Lanny and Carlos arrived, Lanny brought up the idea that we could take a five-mile road trip to Henley’s Switch in the nearby town of Laager. However, Carlos pointed out that a bike trip that far would require a little more planning and careful preparation with some food and something to drink. We all decided that might be too much for today. Martin wanted to finish one of the log cabins we had started in the woods behind Lanny’s house. All that idea received was a couple of grunts. We probably had three cabins we started but never finished somewhere in those woods.

After much discussion with everyone throwing out ideas, we decided to ride into Palmer, put some air into our bike tires, and see what came up. Sam let us know that she had to go sit with her great-grandmother for a couple of hours but would ride with us into town since it was on the way her Mamaw's house in Chiggertown. We all moaned a little that she would not be with us very long but told her we would see her sometime in the afternoon to play ball. I asked her about the bruises on her legs and arms, but she just laughed and told us she "... hit some loose gravel in front of her house and crashed into the ditch a couple of days ago." I didn't believe her!

So it was that the "Tribe" once again officially began the summer. Our day would begin by riding the half mile to the downtown Phillips 66 gas station for some air in our tires. As we had done many times before, we would delay making any decisions about the rest of the day until that important task and ritual was completed.

I felt both the warm sunshine and cool mountain air on my face as we rode Southeast through the alternating shady and then sunny areas along Tennessee state highway 108. I just knew it was going to be another great summer full of many new adventures as my level of anticipation kept building while we steadily peddled toward Palmer.

I caught a glance of Sandy Pemberton waving at us as we coasted down the hill toward the first railroad tracks in front of her house. No one else saw her, except Sam, so I took the wave to be for me. I did not care that she was older than everyone in the Tribe, at that moment, I knew she was smiling only at me. I suddenly realized that I was off the side of the road in the loose dirt and gravel and within seconds of crashing into the "RR" sign. I finally got the front wheel back on the pavement thus avoiding a head-on collision with a sign on the side of the road. The Tribe turned and looked when they heard me in the gravel as I veered off the road, but other than Sam's quirky grin as she rolled her eyes, the rest never knew why.

The section of Highway 108 that ran a little less than a quarter mile through the business area of the tiny town of Palmer was the Main Street. The road ran West to East from the railroad tracks to a short bridge over Mill Creek which ran throughout the community. The flashing yellow light in the middle of town was the center of Palmer and the crossroad to the Elementary School, about a third of a mile north of town, and the "Big Mine" located over a mile to the south.

Palmer was small, but there was life and energy when the coal mines were in full operation. People were working, and the town was the central hub where they met and talked with each other in the restaurant, draw (payroll) office, gas station, company store, and train depot. The old movie house between the draw office and the restaurant was still standing but had closed four years earlier after a preacher came to town for a revival sermonizing that going to "picture shows" was a sinful act of worldly lust.

Old miners would sit outside the company store under a persimmon tree "whittling" on a piece of cedar, chewing tobacco-some without teeth-while spinning stories with each

other about everything from Tennessee folklore to the latest gossip around the coal mines in the area. My grandfather told me a story that one of the oldest retired miners in Palmer, who could not even read, was looking at a passenger ship in the newspaper and holding the paper upside down. When asked by one of his friends what he was looking at, the old miner told him, "I'm not sure Chester, but it looks like there has been a "shipwreck" on the ocean!" True story or not, my Papa loved telling me those kinds of yarns.

The Phillips 66 gas station was the only one in Palmer and was owned by Bill Wiggins. Bill, or one of his cousins or uncles, would pump the gas, check the oil, and put air in your tires, if you were driving a car or truck; however, putting air in bicycle tires was left to us on a space available basis. Soon we were riding in circles again under the flashing light in the middle of town near the train depot, still talking about what we wanted to do.

Lanny stopped riding and stood straddling his bike while looking west. He brought up the possibility of our finishing the construction of a dam someone started last year on Lick Creek next to the cemetery so we could swing out on a rope and drop into some water over six feet deep! Most of the creeks were no deeper than two or three feet at the most, so if we wanted to dive, we would have to dam it up with tree limbs, rocks, and mud to get it deep enough. We also could explore an old mine near Mill Creek which had been abandoned for a couple of years.

The road to the mine had long since grown up with foliage and little trees, so the only way to reach it was through a thick forest of pine trees, honeysuckle vines, and some blackberry patches. We also had to cross a couple steep high ridges.

We had not been there since last summer, but the real reason we liked to go there was because there was also a great place to swim near the mine with deep water. Swimming was something we loved to do during the summer around Palmer. However, what we really did mostly was what we called "mud crawling" because the creeks were so shallow. Strangely enough, most of us learned to swim by first "mud crawling" around the creek beds to get over the fear of the water, then "dog paddling" into deeper parts of the creek where our hands could not touch bottom.

Everyone liked the idea of swimming rather than building dams or exploring old mines, so it was settled, we were going swimming. Since Sam would not be with us, we would not need to go back home to get our swimming trunks and explain to our moms what we were doing. Sam was obviously disappointed at not going swimming with us as she peddled off toward Chiggertown holding her ball glove up with one hand and yelling "don't forget the game this afternoon."

Our plans were suddenly interrupted by what we first thought was a sonic boom. While we were looking into the sky for the contrails of a jet, one of the older Garner boys was getting some coal oil and told us they must be blasting at the mines today. When we asked which mine the explosion came from, he yelled, "the Big Gulf Mine". We now knew not to go near that mine that day. We all agreed to head for the Mill Creek mine area for the best swimming hole anywhere around.

Because Palmer had been a prominent coal-mining community for several decades, there were many abandoned mines in the area. When they were producing coal, access to some of the smaller mines was only possible by rail or old logging roads. To get to the mine, miners had to ride on an open work car about a mile to two miles back through the hills and ridges. There was a rail switching yard at both ends of the track so the work car could be unhooked, a load-car attached, and loads of coal could be brought out throughout a shift. When these mines closed, the rails were removed, and the track-beds became overgrown with plants and small trees leaving no direct access to the mine. Most of the openings to these abandoned mines were blocked off with some type of barrier, trees, logs, rocks, or boarded up with foliage growing over the entrances. Some of the entrances had been blown up and blocked with dynamite.

One of these abandoned mines was the Mill Creek mine. The mine was named for the creek that flowed from the mountain in front of the mine. During Mill Creek's production days, there was a conveyer system that transported the coal directly from the mine to awaiting rail cars across the creek. The tracks ran parallel to the creek through Palmer and then turned north to Tracy City.

Because the creek flowed from the higher elevations of the Cumberland Plateau around Palmer, the water would sometimes overflow its banks creating the possibility of the water going into the mine. To ensure the creek did not overflow and reach the mines, the company built dams up-stream, and even rerouted some creeks if the mine showed promise of providing several years of coal; however, the Mill Creek mine had a relatively low yield of coal, so the owners used dynamite to blast large holes in the creek-bed above the mine location to act as a catch-basin reservoir for the large amounts of water flowing near the mines. Over the years, and after the mine closed, the creek-bank around the reservoir eroded, making the area even larger. As the water came rushing off the mountains during the spring thaws, the large hole would filled up with crystal-clear mountain water.

These became favorite destinations for the Tribe looking for a place to swim and cool down during those hot summer days. Some called this particular place, "Big Mill Creek," others "The Big Dam," but Carlos named our swimming hole "The Cistern".

Next Week: THE CISTERN

Chapter 3 - The Cistern (Published October 1st, 2023)

Although the railroad track bed had been overgrown for several years, the Tribe knew another way to the Cistern which was located only about a third of a mile across a couple of steep hills covered with trees and honeysuckle vines. Off we rode west on highway 108 and turned left on "Church Road" by the Church of God. As we started up the steep ridge, we got off our bikes and push them to the Coffelt junction. When the dirt and gravel road made a right turn to the Coffelt house, we went left taking an old logging road that eventually led us to the back edge of their farm.

As we walked our bikes around the decaying old barn still standing on the edge of their property next to a fence, there were two more explosions, one right after the other, and then after ten seconds, another one. We looked in the direction of the Big Gulf Mine and could now see a small cloud of smoke and ash just above the tree line against the deep blue sky. Explosions and sonic booms were nothing new in Palmer, but this one seemed to be stronger than usual.

After leaning our bikes on the back of the barn, we started walking across two the steep hills to the Cistern. We had to move a certain post on the fence-line so the Tribe could walk through into the forest. There were no paths or trails we could follow, because the honeysuckle plants would cover up where we had walked in just a few days before. We once tried cutting a trail with a couple of sling-blades we borrowed from the Coffelt's barn, but the vines kept coming back and covering up our work. We instinctively knew the general direction to the Cistern and Mill Creek, so we gave up on the idea of cutting the path. We usually came out within 20 to 30 yards of where we wanted to be anyway in either direction.

Although the Cistern was just one of our swimming holes, and the most difficult one to get to, the water was clear, about 15 feet deep and perfect for diving off the rocks surrounding it. After hiking across the two hills, it did not take us but a few seconds to be out of our overalls and underwear, and diving into the very cold water. When we surfaced from that first dive, our yells about how cold it was echoed off the two surrounding ridges.

There was no wading into the Cistern because less than two feet from the water's edge was an immediate drop of 10 to 15 feet straight down. The water was so clear, we could see the huge creek-bed rocks on the bottom. Several large smooth boulders surrounded the Cistern that we used to jump or dive and swim the 20 feet from side to side. As I was treading water, Martin climbed out on the rocks and did a cannonball to the middle of the pool splashing everyone. When he surfaced, he yelled that certain personal parts of his body were turning blue. Everyone laughed and agreed that it was happening to all of us. It was not long before we all knew we needed to exit the cold water and warm up.

After slowly climbing out of the cold water, (the wet rocks were slippery) we found our own personal boulder to lay in the warm sun and dry off. I began to think about what

would happen if our parents found out where we were and what we were doing. I knew them well enough that we would all probably been removed from the Tribe. I quickly shook off that thought! It eerily became quiet, except for the steady sound of the water running into the creek bed away from the Cistern. "I love days like this," I mumbled to myself.

I laid down on the smooth warm rock, stared up at the sky, and picked out a huge cluster of floating clouds to watch. My shivering stopped as the heat from the sun and rock warmed me up. I closed my eyes as I listened to Carlos and Lanny talking and drifted off to sleep.

I must have been asleep for several minutes, but immediately woke up at hearing the excitement in Lanny's voice saying, ".....right up there...can't you see it." My entire body jerked awake as I opened one eye, lifted my head and attempted to see and focus on what he was talking about. The sun was so bright that although I was squinting, I could not immediately locate where Lanny and Carlos were looking. I was finally able to see them pointing to the side of the hill on the opposite side of the small gulf where we had been laying by the Cistern.

Lanny continued to point over my head and said, "There is something up there, about a third of the way up the hill, and it's reflecting the sun!" I finally got up and turned, but I saw nothing but pine tree limbs waving in the light breeze. I tried to keep my eyes focused in the direction Lanny was pointing, but I finally had to walk to where he was standing before I saw the reflection too. At first, I thought it might be a bottle someone threw there when the mine was operational. However, the reflection was bright like a piece of chrome or mirror.

Whatever it was, all five of us were now looking up the side of the hill trying to figure out what was so shiny! Not sure who said it first, but either Mike or Martin said softly, "Let's go find out what it is"! Carlos immediately spoke up and sarcastically asked, "Ah, you boys do realize that we are all naked? Don't you think we should put our clothes on first?"

We looked at each other for a split second, then everyone made a dash for their clothes and shoes. We were dressed almost as fast as we took everything off, while gazing in the general direction Lanny had pointed out. Lanny was the first to start up the hill with Carlos only a few feet behind him. I stayed focused on Lanny as he seemed to know the exact spot of the reflection. I could hear the other Tribe members talking and laughing behind me as I was trying to stay upright while slowly finding my way up the hill's sharp incline.

Like the opposite side of the gulf, this hill was covered with pine trees and honeysuckle vines and pine needles covered the ground. The hill was so steep that at one point, Lanny lost his footing and started sliding back down the hill until he grabbed a handful of honeysuckle vines to gain his balance. We all would walk a few steps, stop, look up and around, and start up again. The trees on the side of the hill were not very tall, perhaps 10 to 12 feet, so they did not provide any shade because the sun was to our back.

Lanny yelled to the rest of the Tribe and asked if they could see anything. "No!" Carlos answered quickly. "Nothing but honeysuckle vines and pine trees!"

Lanny took a couple more steps, looked up the slope from side to side, then suddenly stopped. He was staring intently into one of the pine trees set back from the tree line. Suddenly, I saw what he was looking at as a cold shiver ran up my back.

Wedged into the Y-branch of a pine tree, about three feet off the ground and covered by a limb of pine needles, was a yellow miner's helmet with the carbide lamp attached. What caught my eye was the reflection of something on one side of the helmet, which turned out to be the words "THINK SAFETY" in huge reflective letters. As we got closer, we could also see the emblem for the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company. Mike, who had pulled himself further up the hill using a small tree root laying on top of the ground, was now looking closely at the helmet. Only the trees could be heard as the wind rustled through the pine needles for what must have been over a minute as we all looked at each other with our mouths wide open.

Within a few seconds, everyone was standing in front of the helmet. We all recognized it because we had seen these helmets around town for years. It didn't take but about 10 more seconds until I heard myself saying what the rest of them were thinking: "Whoa," I said with a shaky voice. We immediately started walking and sliding down the hill. Mike and I both fell on our butts into the soft honeysuckle vines and like the others, slid the rest of the way down. When we got to the bottom, we wasted no time in heading toward the Coffelt barn.

The fluffy white clouds that the sun had been peeking in and out of throughout the day had now turned darker. We began to feel some light sprinkling rain as we climbed the hill away from the Cistern. The water made the vines slippery and more difficult to climb the steep terrain. We did not talk, look at each other, or do anything but move as quickly as we could over the two slick hills and into the pasture. The rain became harder as we ran across the open field with water sloshing beneath our cloth Converse High-tops and finally made it to the back of the barn.

We quickly picked up our bikes and rolled them inside. We were all soaked, including our ball gloves and air rifles. We grabbed handfuls of hay to dry our gloves as the rain became so heavy that we could barely see the pasture we just ran across. We decided to just wait it out in the barn. Although we could see some blue sky toward Palmer, black clouds surrounded us as the rain intensified. We eventually moved to one of the corners of the barn because it was the only place there were no leaks.

We huddled and sat on some left-over hay bales from the previous year as the rain pounded the tin roofed structure. We just listened and stared at each other for several minutes before Lanny finally spoke: "I'm not really sure what we saw today boys, but somebody probably put that thing in the tree to scare people from coming around the mine or the swimming hole" he said confidently. "But how could someone get to the Cistern from that mine in such a short time if they just wanted to scare us off" I asked.

Carlos gazed at his best friend Lanny with a scowl, and then looked at the rest of us and said, "Maybe so, but that thing sure looked new to me. It could have been one of the minor's helmets from the explosion this morning." Mike immediately spoke up and said, "Yeah, I did see coal dust on the helmet, but are you saying the helmet could have been blown all the way from the mine to the Cistern? That would mean that somewhere between the tree and the mine, there is a....." his voice faded.

As our wide eyes looked at each other, Carlos smiled and started chuckling. "We saw something today boys, but I don't believe we should tell anyone but Sam. First, we were not supposed to be at the Cistern, second, no one would believe us, and third, we cannot let our imaginations run away with us." We decided never to speak of the helmet again and not tell anyone about it. The rain suddenly stopped pounding the old barn roof. We were still cold and wet as we started riding toward Palmer. The warm sun returned to dry our clothes as we dodged limbs and small ditches created by the hard rain on the road. When the logging road ended, Church Road was completely dry as if no rain fell around Palmer.

As we came to the main road, we saw Sam peddling hard to get to us from visiting her grandmother in Chiggertown, so we waited at the bottom of Church Road. When she arrived, she braked, slid her back tire on the road sideways, and sprayed us with pea gravel and dirt. Our clothes were still wet, so much of the dirt and some of the gravel stuck to us. She laughed and yelled "payback" for the many times we had done the same thing to her.

We brushed ourselves off and started riding north on the main highway toward home when we saw Jack Morrison and some of the Other-End kids riding toward us.

We stopped to talk with Jack who wanted to play a ball game in the vacant lot across from Fred Tate's place. We immediately agreed and played softball for the next two hours, never mentioning what our day had been like earlier except for getting caught in the rain. We only kept score, and really did not care how many innings we played.

As we were getting ready to leave the vacant lot for home, Jack asked us if we heard anything about the explosion at the Big Gulf Mine earlier. We told him that we had and wondered if anyone was hurt. Jack didn't know any more than we did, so we changed the subject and agreed to play ball again in a couple of days. After Jack and the Other-End kids left, we told Sam everything about our previous adventure while at the Cistern. She actually wanted to go back and see it for herself that day. Carlos told her we would go again in a few days, but he had to get home.

By now, our clothes were completely dry as we rode toward home. I had no idea where my flannel shirt was as the sun beat down on my already sunburned face. My dad would be coming home within the hour, and supper would be ready shortly after he cleaned up. Suddenly, Sam and Martin decided to do some tricks on their bikes. Sam got up on her bicycle seat with one knee while going down a short hill and Martin had

his hands up in the air off the handlebars while peddling faster and faster. They always liked to show-out on their bikes.

I yelled to Mike just before he, Carlos and Sam made the turn for their house, “we should have won that ball game today against Jack and the “Other-End boys!” He nodded his head in agreement and said “yep” and made his turn for home. Lanny, Martin, and I stood up on the pedals to climb the hill to our houses.

We never heard if anyone was hurt or missing from the explosions that morning. The Tribe did return to the Cistern to swim a couple more times during that summer and the next one. Neither the helmet we saw that day, nor my flannel shirt were seen again.

Next Week: Rusty