

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

Chapter 4 - RUSTY (Published October 8th, 2023)

When I arrived back at the house mid-afternoon, I immediately started drinking lots of water. My mom asked me what we had been doing, so I told her about the ball game (she knew we would play softball all day and night if we could). She also asked if I heard the explosions that morning and where I was when they went off? I told Mom we were in Palmer airing up our tires. I mentioned that Sam spent a few hours in Chiggertown because her grandmother was not feeling well. "So Sam missed playing ball today," Mom asked. I quickly told her "No way...she made it for a couple of games."

It was almost time for dad to get home from work, so she offered me half of a leftover biscuit from breakfast with grape jelly and a glass of milk before she started cooking supper, and I gladly accepted. After finishing the snack, I heard the distinct sound of my dad's Chevy pulling into our gravel and dirt driveway. He tapped his horn as he drove to the back of the house. Usually, he parked the car out front, or on the side, but rarely did he drive around back unless it was to unload groceries. I assumed he stopped by the store and wanted me to come help unload.

Pushing the screen door open to go out to the back porch, I could see my dad already climbing out of the car and headed for the trunk. He now worked in Chattanooga, which was the largest city near us, and commuted over 70 miles round trip each day. He worked in the local coal mines for a few years when I was younger. I still remembered him coming home covered in coal dust.

As I came around the side of the car expecting to help carry in the groceries, dad was opening the trunk. He had a strange smile on his face looking at me as he pulled it open and attached the keys to his belt. The sun was still very bright, so my eyes had to adjust as I looked into the dark recesses of the trunk. There were no sacks of food, but I could see something moving when a pair of eyes caught the light. Within seconds, I saw a tail start wagging, and ears going up and down. It was a dog!

He was mostly black with huge patches of white on the front of his face, chest, tail, and legs. Dad quietly whistled and snapped his fingers for the dog to get out of the trunk. After hesitating for a few seconds, he sat up, looked at us a while longer, and finally started walking toward the trunk opening. Dad put his arms around him and lifted him out of the trunk and put him on the ground. He was beautiful. His eyes were clear and brown and after he was on the grass, his tail began to wag in a slow purposeful motion. I had seen similar looking dogs, but before I could ask what kind it was, dad informed me that his name was Rusty and that he was a mix of Collie and some breed of Australian Shepard. It didn't matter to me what his breed was after dad told me that he was now my dog.

In addition to his chest, tail, and legs, he had a patch of white, with a slightly brown outline, and small black spots just below his tail on his back side. After seeing those markings, I chuckled as I thought I knew why his name was Rusty. As I was stroking his head and rubbing his ears, dad told me that a friend from his work, who lived in the city,

gave him the dog because Rusty was digging up every inch of his small yard, and felt the dog needed more space.

I really did not care about the circumstances as to how and why Rusty was given to us, only that he was now mine. He had dirt throughout his coat, some matted hair, and he smelled like a dirty dog. When I would pet him on his back, I could see dust come out of his hair. As I started thinking about a plan to clean him up, mom came down the back steps to see what was going on. I could tell she and dad were having a quiet conversation about the dog, but after a few seconds, I was more interested in Rusty.

Rusty and I started to get to know each other. It wasn't long until he was jumping up on me as we started the bonding process. He was not a small dog and could place his paws on my shoulders and chest as we played. Early on, he started chasing me when I would run. When I sat on the ground, he would sniff my hair, ears, and neck, and although he could never do it because of his size, attempted to sit on my folded legs. I walked a few steps away, and he ran to me. I went around the corner of the house, and he was right there. He was my dog alright, and I was the happiest boy in the world.

I caught a glimpse of mom and dad still talking quietly and overheard something about my taking care of a dog, so I immediately went into my "I'll take care of him" mode. They both listened to me without saying a word, looked at each other, gave me a small insincere grin, and then walked into the house. My sister Rhonda timidly patted him on his head a few times and then quickly left us to do whatever sisters do.

It was obvious to me early on that Rusty was not familiar with the word "bath" and from what I could smell had probably never had one. I located one of our galvanized tubs, and asked mom for some pots of hot water, Prell shampoo, and an old sponge to squeeze the soap into his hair as I washed him down. The evening sun had not gone down behind the many hills in front of our house, but I moved away from the house a little to ensure both Rusty and I would stay in the warm sunshine. I then mixed the hot with the cold water from the garden hose to make it warm for Rusty as mom brought me a few towels.

Meanwhile, Rusty continued walking around sniffing and raising his leg at every opportunity while keeping an eye on me. He was curious about what I was doing, but continued sniffing everything and seemed unaware of what was about to happen. I did not have a collar for him at that time, but I found a small chain on the back porch with a clasp on one end that I was reluctant to use. However, it had nothing sharp on the chain, and the clasp would allow me to size it for his neck without choking him.

Everything was ready, so I whistled to call Rusty to me, slipped the chain on his neck, adjusted it to be snug without choking him, and began walking the few steps to his bath area. At first, his tail continued to wag, but his demeanor was soon to change. After I got him situated, and he sniffed everything, I began to spray him lightly from the water hose for the initial rinse. I had wrapped one end of the short chain around my foot before we got started, but as soon as the water was sprayed on him, he let out a terrifying whine

and bark at the same time. A passerby would have thought I was torturing this poor dog as he began jumping around, and yelping. I immediately stopped the water and calmed him down by stroking his head and ears while talking to him softly.

I started using the warm water and sponge and squeezed the water on him a little at a time. I then began applying the shampoo and washed that dirty dog from one end to the other. I took the sprayer off the hose and used a light stream of water to rinse the soap from his coat. Using a washcloth and clear water, I cleaned his beautiful face, around his eyes and ears, and rinsed him off again. Rusty's hair was longer than I had thought, so I performed another round of shampoo, and gave him the final rinse.

I could feel the tension in him as I could see both ears pinned straight back on his head. His tail seemed to be tucked so far under him, it was touching his front legs. When I was satisfied that all the soap had been removed, I immediately grabbed one of the towels and began gently drying his head and ears. As I dried his back and tail, he began to shiver, so I wrapped him with a clean dry towel, and began rubbing his belly and legs to get them dry. He did not move very much after the initial water shock, but his ears remained pinned down as I located the hook on the chain to let him go.

As soon as I undid the clasp, Rusty started running. He first began running in wide circles in the grass, flipping around and around, jumping, and biting the air. After twisting and turning for well over 20 seconds, he then took off around the corner of the house. There were no fences, so I could only imagine that he was running off into the forest that was less than fifty yards from our front yard. I ran to the corner of the house to see where he was going.

When I got to the spot where I could see toward the woods, my heart sank because I could not locate him anywhere. However, within a couple of seconds, my panic was interrupted when I first heard, and then saw him come running around the opposite side of our house in a full, stretched out, and low to the ground run. He was making noises I had never heard from a dog that were somewhere between a growl and howl as he glanced up at me and kept running around the house again.

By now, I was laughing so hard, my stomach was hurting. He seemed to get faster as he completed another lap while still making sounds that were in-time with his breathing. After three full trips around the place, I could see he was beginning to slow down a bit as he rounded a corner of the house and left my sight.

As I waited for him to reappear as he came back around on the opposite side, I could hardly breathe myself after laughing so hard. After about a half minute, he had still not appeared. My laughter quieted as I began following his path to see where he had gone.

Initially, as I looked in the distance to see if he was headed down the hill to our neighbor's property, I did not see him. Suddenly, I heard what sounded like a bull blowing out his snout and I saw Rusty's tail wagging close to the house. His tail and backside were sticking up in the air as dirt was being thrown between his back legs and

on to the grass. He would stick his nose down in the hole, sniff and snort the dirt, then raise his head and look around. When he saw me, he put his nose back in the hole, shook his head, and then started digging again. I fell to the ground laughing and started coughing to the point of almost losing my breath. It seemed the more I laughed, he would glance at me, start digging again, which would prompt me to laugh even harder.

All the digging, and laughter came to an abrupt halt when I caught a glimpse of my mom coming around the house. "What in the world is going on out here," She yelled out as she walked toward Rusty and the hole he was digging. At that precise moment, Rusty looked at my mom, twisted his head, turned back to look at me, and went back to digging the hole. I ran over to him and pulled him out of the hole just as mom walked up with her hands on her hip, looking at the pile of dirt where Rusty and I were standing.

She was not laughing, and told me to fill in the hole, pack it down, and find more dirt if needed to ensure the place would not turn into a small pond on the side of her yard when it rained. I grabbed Rusty's mane on the back of his neck and guided him back around the house to find a rake. After mom went back into the house, I raked all the dirt back into the hole as Rusty watch me with great interest. He just sat there panting as I packed down the dirt by walking and stomping on it.

Since it was so late, and the sun was beginning to set behind the western hill, I decided not to give Rusty another bath to wash off the mud until the next day. I did find an old brush and brushed his coat from one end to the other. I really wanted him to sleep with me on my bed but thought better of it and focused on making him a bed on our back porch. It had a roof and walls except for the opening to the stairs, so he would have a place to sleep that would keep him dry and warm at night.

Mom set out a bowl for his water dish, some old blankets, and a quilt for his bed. I found a cardboard box, cut out one end, and made him a small shelter. I played with him in the yard a long while before Mom called me in for supper. Rusty sat outside the back screen door during the meal, then we gave him all the leftovers for dinner. He ate everything in what seemed to be a couple of gulps and then drank an entire bowl full of water.

I showed him his bed once again before I finally went in for the evening. He sniffed and scratched around to get the blankets just right, and laid down. He had a long and eventful day, but I felt he knew he had found a home and was loved. As for me, I had a new best friend and member of the Tribe. I could hardly wait for him to meet the rest of the Tribe.

Rusty became my new shadow. From the time I got up until I went in for the evening, he was at my side or close by. He could get easily distracted, but he always kept me in his sights. I believed he was the smartest dog in the world, and his loyalty to me was evident to anyone who saw us together. He was not aggressive, but he always seemed on alert. When I walked or rode my bicycle someplace, he was right there with me. Early on, we learned to put him on the back porch and block off the stairs so he could

not get out when I went somewhere in the car. Otherwise, if he saw me get into the vehicle, he would follow.

Soon after we met, while we were playing around the yard, he bumped me and knocked me down, so I started an exaggerated moaning and crying noise. He came to me, laid down next to my head, and began sniffing and licking my ears and neck until I stopped. Once I raised my head and started smiling and laughing, he went into his “ready” stance by putting his front legs out, his butt in the air, and his head down on the ground until I started playing again or reached over to scratch his ears to calm him a bit.

We spent a lot of time with his head in my lap and me rubbing his head and ears while we just sat, or sometimes laid, in the grass watching the big white clouds by day, or the stars and moon at night. He was my friend.....my closest friend!



Chapter 5 - A Rainy Day (Part One) (Published October 13th, 2023)

Playing softball and swimming throughout the summer was our way of life during those years. We spent many hours just riding our bikes around Palmer before we would settle on something to do. We would go into the woods and hills surrounding Palmer exploring the thick forests while pretending we were early settlers with the pioneers and Daniel Boone. We all had BB guns or pellet rifles, and we would spend hours using our imagination in creating scenarios to conquer and save the country from hostile animals to old West outlaws.

We were never on different sides, but always created an imaginary enemy who lived in the forest attacking us and the settlement we protected. We would climb trees, build hidden "blinds," and ambush anyone who came near us. We yelled out the script or situation as we played such as "I can hear the outlaws on two or three horses riding hard toward us;" or "Five tigers have escaped the circus, and they are looking for someone to eat." Sometimes, we would play camouflage games where we would hide in the trees or ditches around Palmer and watch heavily traveled paths used by our neighbors or other friends until they walked by and were out of sight. This could go for hours until we got thirsty or hungry; however, we were usually less than a quarter or at most a half mile from the top of the hill near our houses, so coming out of the woods for lunch was an easy 5–10-minute hike or bike ride.

The weather around Palmer did not always cooperate with our grand plans for exploration and playing softball with a blue sky and a few white clouds. When we got caught out in the woods or playing ball, and a shower popped up, we would most likely keep going or find some kind of shelter. Many of the company houses in Palmer were built on the side of a hill and had front porches sometimes 8 -10 feet off the ground. We would crowd under one of the porches until it stopped raining and return to the ball game, or we would just get wet! Getting caught in the rain was no big deal for the Tribe and it usually passed within a few minutes; however, if we were in the woods and saw lightening or heard the first clap of thunder, we knew to immediately head for home, or to find some shelter like a barn or sometimes a deer blind.

The morning after Rusty entered my life, I woke up to flashes of lightening coming through my bedroom window followed by intense thunder that shook the metal bedpost and caused it to rattle. The rain pounded the tin roof in waves as the wind and force of water made the glass blurry as I attempted to look outside. It was nothing new for the electricity to go off during heavy thunderstorms but surprisingly, other than a flicker or two, it was still on. The little frame house structure moaned as the gusts of wind and rain seem to be attacking it. At one point, I thought I felt the floor being raised and lowered by the wind circulating under the house. Since the entire structure was only resting on cement blocks, I recalled how the house in the "The Wizard of Oz" movie was lifted off its block foundation with Dorothy and Toto inside as a tornado whisk them away from Kansas to the land of Oz. Suddenly, I didn't feel so good!

As I listened to the sheets of rain hitting the window and the north side of the house, I remembered Rusty was on the back porch and jumped out of the bed to check on him. I darted through the kitchen and barely noticed mom sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. The back door was already open, but as I bumped the screen door, it became obvious to me the hook and eye hardware was securely latched. I looked through the screen waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark recesses of the porch and for the spot I fixed for him the night before.

Meanwhile, my imagination was conjuring up a scenario where he got scared and ran away. I could see where the rain had blown a few feet onto the porch from the open doorway, but as my eyes were focusing, it did not look like the box I made for him for his bed was wet.

Finally, with the help of the kitchen light shining through the screen door, I saw him move and look at me with his eyes catching the glow. I quickly unlatched the screen and dashed over to sit down on the floor next to his bed as I could hear his tail thumping against the porch flooring. I put my arms around his head and hugged him until he gagged and coughed from me holding him so tightly around his neck. As I quickly recoiled to make sure he was OK, I heard the phone ringing in the house at the same moment an intense rumble of thunder made its way across the sky as the rain beat down on the tar paper on the walls outside the porch.

The ringing stopped and within seconds, my mom came to the back screen to tell me Carlos was on the phone. Within the Tribe, only Carlos, Sam, and I had telephones. Very few phone lines were private but were on a “party line” where several people used the same phone line although we all had separate numbers. Sam and I were on the same line as Carlos along with about 10 families, and his family shared a line with others who live in another part of town closer to where he lived.

In true Carlos’s fashion, his voice was clear and almost monotone as he asked if everyone was OK at our house. “We lost power and I think the houses north of us on highway 108 lost their electricity” he declared. Although his house was no more than a hundred yards behind ours, I had not noticed all the houses behind our place were dark as I was attending to Rusty. Our phone had a long cord, so I picked it up and walked toward the kitchen to glance over the table where mom was sitting and looked toward Carlos’ house.

Everything was black, including the two houses on either side of his and one across the road that I could see. I told him we were all good as I wondered if we were safe to even be on the phone with all the lightening. Before I could say my thoughts out loud, I heard a crackling on the line, our lights went totally off, and came back on as I dropped the phone to the floor. I quickly picked it up to hear Carlos say, “the lights are flickering now and trying to come on.” Before I could finish telling him what just happened at our place, a rare sound of excitement could be heard in his voice as he told me that power had been restored at their house.

The rain began letting up, and although I did hear some thunder off in the distance to the East, I looked out the window to see the clouds already breaking up. Carlos was still on the line when I heard another click on the telephone that I knew was not due to the storm. The click was distinctive as we both knew that someone had just picked up their telephone on either our "party line" or the one Carlos was on. Usually, if someone picked up the phone and the line was in use, they would just hang up; however, whoever picked it up had not done so. "Hey," the voice on the phone called out. "Donnie, is that you?" "Yeah, it's me Sam, and Carlos is on the line talking about the storm and the power failure at their house," I answered. "We lost power too," Sam explained, "but it just came back on a few minutes ago."

After a couple of minutes of talking about the storm, we realized it was still early in the morning, and began talking about what we wanted to do today. I told them about Rusty, and what had happened yesterday after I gave him the bath. Sam wanted to know if we could get together and play Monopoly later in the day since it looked like it could rain on and off all day long. Carlos agreed that might be fun, so I cupped the phone with the palm of my hand and asked my mom if she minded if the Tribe came over to play some board games.

She reluctantly said OK, given our small house and living room, but made it clear that our boots, shoes, and bicycles stayed outside. I told Carlos to get hold of Mike and for Sam to pick up Martin while I would let Lanny know our plans. The game could start around around ten in the morning but had to be finished by two or three in the afternoon. We hung up with our plan to play Monopoly for the rest of the day.

Part Two (Sunday)

Chapter 5 - A Rainy Day (Part Two) (Published October 15th, 2023)

Our living room had a huge area rug covering part of the wall-to-wall linoleum. Once some of the Tribe arrived, we moved the coffee table out of the way, put the Monopoly board in the middle of the room as we all gathered around and sat on the floor for the game. Having played this game with the Tribe on several other occasions, we always selected Carlos as the banker because we all knew he would not steal cash from the bank! We were all competitive, but when playing Monopoly, we were also careful of who controlled the money.

We made up the rules as we went about “free parking,” “jail time,” how many “doubles” we could throw before we went to jail, and “what transactions we could perform while ‘in jail.’” My mom fixed us a few peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches and gave us all a big glass of milk a couple of hours into the game as she informed us that she and Rhonda were going to the company store for a few minutes.

We gobbled down the sandwiches while still playing the game, but it was obvious that Sam, Mike, Carlos, and I were just barely holding on while Lanny and Martin were taking all our money with their houses and hotels. We knew the game was ending soon unless some off-the-board deals were made which was unlikely since everyone seemed tired and starting to get cranky. It was not long until Martin landed on “Boardwalk” with 2 hotels (again, we made up the rules as we went), and had to give up all his cash and properties to pay Lanny.

The game was over, Lanny started bragging about how he was a great real estate developer, and suddenly, everyone was ready to go home. It was always great to be with the Tribe, but these moments playing board games were special. These were my best friends, and we cherished our time together for many years.

While the rest of the Tribe picked up the Monopoly board and straightened the rug, I opened the back door and let Rusty into the house to meet everyone. He acted shy at first, but soon seem to understand who all these people were, and the tail wag started with everyone petting his head and haunches. We all eventually migrated to the front porch to see a steady drizzle of rain still coming down. We could still hear the intermittent thunder in the distance. The temperature had fallen a little, and the wind had picked up as the treetops were moving in all directions. Rusty did not seem to mind the rain, thunder, or so many people being around him. His tail was constantly wagging as everyone gave him a pat as he wandered around the porch.

As Sam sniffed the moist air, she pointed at the water in both ditches on the side of the road running rapidly off the hill. “All of our favorite creeks will be high or even overflowing for the next few hours. I wish the sun would come out and warm up so we could go swimming. I didn’t get to go to the Cistern with the Tribe the other day,” she exclaimed. We all quickly exchanged glances, but Carlos broke the silence with a strong, “I have an idea,” as Mom and Rhonda turned into the dirt and gravel driveway

from shopping. Mom would not be happy with me bringing Rusty into the house, but I did not want him or me getting wet bringing him around to the front porch.

Carlos continued, "According to the radio, these thunderstorms will probably end this afternoon and we will have some clear skies for the next few days. Anyone up for a hike to the Goat Rock?" We all chuckled at his idea as Lanny said, "yeah, right" gazing at Carlos with a doubtful look. For the past two years, the Tribe had hiked up to the Goat Rock, a series of rock formations on top of the highest ridge, west of town. We had been there back in October of last year and it was a cold and damp trip, so we certainly did want to repeat that.

Carlos assured us the weather would be great, so it didn't take much for everyone to agree to the trip. "I'll call Arch and TJ, since we can ride to their house and start the climb from there and maybe invite Billy Wayne since he lives on the way to their house" Carlos continued. We quickly decided to meet the next morning, ride up to Arch and TJ Saunders' house, and climb to the Goat Rock.

Although Arch and TJ were not formally part of our little tribe, they were our friends, so whenever they could, they would do things with us. Also, since their house was at the end of the road, and close to the path we needed to use for the hike, we always invited them to come along, and left our bikes behind their house.

There was only a couple of year's difference in age that separated Arch and TJ, but it was enough to create what seemed to me to be a constant state of friction between them. Their parents were very strict, especially their dad, who was in the military for several years. I heard that he sometimes made them stand at attention for long periods of time as punishment. I didn't believe that, nor did I believe they were abused physically, but there was a distinct difference in the way they acted when they were away from their parents than when they were home.

They were good boys however, lots of fun to play with, but they would fight each other over the slightest conflict or contention. I don't remember either of them fighting with other boys, but between the two of them, when something didn't set right, they would go at it. Whenever we did anything with them, we always tried to keep them separated from each other to prevent conflict. We expected to have to break up at least two or three conflicts any time we were all together.

Sam was the best peacemaker of the Tribe, so she usually was strategically positioned between them when we were together or even riding our bikes. Otherwise, they blended well with the Tribe, plus, they always carried some tools we sometimes needed like a couple of Swiss Army Knives, extra candy bars, Cokes and Sun Drop sodas. They carried two military style back-packs full of their stuff, while we would just roll our lunch and drink in our jackets and tied them to our belts.

Carlos mentioned that he would also call Billy Wayne and ask if he would like to hike with us to the Goat Rock. Billy lived near the Saunders house, so we could either pick

him up at his house or meet him at Arch and TJ's house. We had known Billy all our lives, and although he had to use two crutches to walk because of some type of birth defect, they never slowed him down.

Billy was a year younger than me, very smart, and agile with his crutches. Although he could not ride a bicycle, he had few other limitations. For example, Billy was never the last one picked when we had a softball game. He would be the pitcher by using just one crutch as he pitched. When he came to bat, he would stand on both crutches spread wide in the batter's box with the bat in perfect position, and usually got on base. He would hit the ball, drop the bat, with what seemed to be one motion, and using his crutches, run the bases. I had seen him hit a home run several times and he ran almost as fast as any of us. "I am not handicapped!" He would emphatically tell us. "I just need a little more room to get around."

We never doubted he would be able to make the climb using his crutches. We also knew he would not slow us up because rarely did Billy bring up the rear in anything we did together. Knowing his determination and guts, he would probably lead us up the mountain.

As the rain became just a mist, everyone left the porch and headed home. All we needed now was a clear day, and all our friends to go with us. Unlike Billy, the rest of us, other than Carlos, would not tell our parents about our plans to go to the Goat Rock on Friday. They did not like the idea of our climbing the mountain and being so far away. I leaned down and grabbed Rusty, cupped my hands around his ears and rubbed them gently while whispering to him, "You are in for a fun day tomorrow."

Next Week - "THE GOAT ROCK"

Chapter 6 - The Goat Rock (Part One) (Published October 18th, 2023)

Waking up the next morning was easy as the bright sunlight came through the same window the rain pounded the day before. Instead of wind, rain, thunder, and lightening, I could hear and smell bacon sizzling in a skillet, and what I thought was the slight scent of pancakes. It didn't take long before I was up and getting dressed. I remembered what we had planned for the day, so I rolled up an extra pair of socks around a small jacket and put my favorite ball cap on top of the wad of clothes. I picked up my pellet gun from the corner of the bedroom and pulled a box of pellets, BBs, and my last two CO2 cartridges from the top of the armoire.

After looking at everything I had to take with me, I remembered my softball bat was on the back porch, so I went out to the kitchen and after greeting Mom, I told her I wanted to wipe down my bat and wrap it up in my jacket. Rusty was waiting at the back door looking through the screen wagging his tail. After I grabbed him, stroked his head, and then rubbed him from head to tail, I picked up the bat from the corner of the porch and brought it inside. Mom had an old rag ready for me to wipe it off, so within a couple of minutes, I returned to my room and wrapped both my pellet rifle and the bat in the jacket. I grabbed two dollars from my "cash stash" located in my Sunday shoes and put it into my pants pocket.

Unlike Billy, and Carlos, the rest of us would not tell our parents about our plans to go to the Goat Rock. My mom never liked the idea of my climbing the mountain and being so far away. I did feel guilty for not telling her exactly where we were going, but my 10-year-old moral compass had not matured enough when it came to the Clan, so I would leave under the guise that we would be playing ball all day.

After three pancakes and bacon, I bragged to mom about how she was a great cook, knowing I was deceiving her with my secret plans to go to the Goat Rock. I then asked her to fix me a sandwich and told her that I would pick up a Sun Drop at the company store. She made two peanut-butter-jelly sandwiches, wrapped them in wax paper, and put them in a small Tupperware dish. I tossed it into the basket on my bike, grabbed all the stuff I had prepared, strapped it to my back, and left the house around 9:30 with Rusty alongside. This would be the first of many adventures with Rusty.

As usual, the clan all met at the top of the hill, and we started for the Saunders' place, with a stop at the company store for drinks and some more air rifle pellets and BBs. I had enough money left over to get myself a Planters Peanut Candy Bar.

Everyone in the Clan, and most of our friends, owned an air rifle or BB gun. Daisy BB guns were popular with the kids between 7-9 years old, but by 10, most of us had a Crossman Air Rifle that shot a .177 pellet or BB. Sam still used a BB gun, but she was a good marksman and had a top-of-the-line Daisy repeater. We all used our guns for target practice, shooting outhouses, playing war and cowboys. We also shot small vermin and field mice when we had the opportunity. We never shot at each other because we knew the pellets could possibly penetrate our skin, and the BBs would get

our attention and even put out an eye. However, most kids who lived in Palmer knew and respected firearms, and many of them owned a 22 rifle or at least a 410-gauge shotgun. We watched a lot of Western movies, so we liked guns and loved to shoot them almost as much as playing softball and swimming.

Taking the trip to the Goat Rock provided us an opportunity to do some target shooting while we were there without worrying about hitting a house, or another kid. We heard that Arch and TJ both had new air rifles and would probably have plenty of pellets needed. This would make their back packs heavy, but they were always generous and shared their pellets with us when needed. We were certainly glad they would be going along. Most of us had to save up our money to buy the pellets, but BBs were inexpensive, so we had plenty of them.

It was initially slow-going to get to the Saunders place, so we mostly walked our bikes up the steep gravel road and past where one of Lanny's uncles and grandparents lived. We were tempted to stop by his grandmother's place for biscuits she always seemed to have freshly baked along with some honey from another uncle's beehives. This time, we overcame the temptation, and kept walking and sometimes riding our bikes to Arch and TJ's place which was still another quarter mile further up the winding road.

As Rusty kept his nose to the ground walking in the high grass on the side of the road, we rounded still another switchback curve and started up another slight grade of the road. We then walked out of the sun and into the shade from some tall pine trees. The warmth of the sun suddenly left as we were reminded that this was still only May, and in the shade without the sun, the sweat we generated walking felt like ice against our skin. However, within a few yards, we were back in the sun, and all six of us seem to moan at the same time about how good it felt to be warm again. Being a little cool in the shade but having the sun so warm on our faces was a small price to pay for such a beautiful day.

A couple more twists and turns and we left the gravel for only the dirt road which was the entrance to the Saunders property. Their house was built on the side of a steep hill with stilts of wood holding it up. It had a high front porch that look to be 10–15 feet high, and the rest of the house angled back toward the mountain. It was an optical illusion of course, but there was no flat ground anywhere around it except for a small garden spot about 30 feet north of the house. It was well kept but looked like a company house that had been remodeled and upgraded. There was a large picture window on the front of the place that looked out over Palmer. It was the highest house in town.

We arrived a little after ten that morning, and I could see that everyone, including Billy, was already there sitting around on some large boulders in the yard and leaning on their air rifles with both hands! In all the excitement, I forgot about Rusty, and suddenly, I remembered that Arch and TJ had a dog also. Rex, a Beagle, and Collie mix had always been friendly, but with another dog in his territory, I had no idea of his or Rusty's reaction.

Suddenly, both dogs alerted, and slowly started walking toward each other. My heart began palpating as they approached as I listened for a growl or bark, but there was total silence except for the breeze through the huge poplar tree in the Saunders' front yard. Both dogs started wagging their tails immediately after completing a mutual backside smelling ritual, and the tension faded. Within a few seconds, they were walking around together with tails in full fury as they approached everyone there to get their smell into their brains.

Billy, Arch, and TJ were packed up, and ready to go. We parked our bikes, drank some water from their well, talked about how much fun we were going to have, secured our rifles and jackets on our backs, and started up the path toward the Goat Rock. We now had nine of us making the hike up the mountain. Their back yard was on a slight slope, but less than 50 yards from the house, the path began for the steep ascent to the Goat Rock. Rex and Rusty seemed to sense the direction we were going, so they took the lead with their nose on the ground, as we started up the mountain.

Based on our previous trips, Carlos told us he anticipated it would take us about one hour to climb the mountain before we could even see the Goat Rock, and another 20-30 minutes to climb to the top of the rocks. Some wild goats had been spotted on top sometime within the last few weeks by other kids who had been there. We were all very excited as the sun had already cleared the surrounding trees and was warming us up.

We certainly looked well prepared and armed. Each of us had food, rifles, and we all wore a baseball cap. It had already warmed up, so we knew by the time we got to the top, although it was a higher elevation, the sweat would be pouring out of us. There were clean streams all around the mountain, and even a natural spring on top of the Goat Rock, so we were not really concerned about water.

The path was only wide enough for one person at a time, so Lanny took the lead for the climb, Billy was next, and the rest of us filed in with Carlos bringing up the rear. Rex and Rusty were already up the trail, but I knew they would keep us in their sight. Rex had done all this before, and obviously loved both his freedom and the journey up the mountain. I turned around to look at the line and realized that we forgotten to separate Arch and TJ! I tapped Billy on the front of his shoulder and nodded for him to look at the line. He saw they were together, and turned to me and rolled his eyes. We both chuckled as we continued up the mountain.

The steep grade of the path became more prominent as I felt myself leaning forward more and walking at a slower pace. There were thick pines and some small oak trees all around us, so we had to dodge and weave our way through the branches that overhung the path for the first hundred yards. After that, the forest opened, as we were in a sparser area of oak and poplar trees. Although the path was obvious, brown leaves and some green foliage covered it. The bright sun was trying to get through the spring leaves on the trees and strips of sunlight were distinctively coming through them where it could. The absence of direct sunlight on the path made the leaves slippery on the

steeper grades, and it was a lot cooler than I had anticipated. Reaching one of the flat areas of the climb was a welcome break after our walking up such a steep grade. By now we had spread out on the path, so Billy, Rusty and I stopped and caught our breath for a couple of minutes before everyone arrived at our location. I leaned down and rubbed Rusty on the head as I looked around. We still had a long way to go, so after Carlos got there, we rested for another five minutes, then started up the trail again. There was a smell of pine in the air with just a hint of cedar. I noticed more rocks on the trail than I remembered, and the higher in elevation we walked, the bigger they became. Carlos surmised the heavy snow in February probably moved many of the smaller rocks down the mountain when it melted.

At this point, all we could see were the leaves on the ground and some scrawny thin trees. There was a distinct ridge directly in front of us where the path would shortly cross over as we continued up the mountain. At this point, it was more rugged than steep because of all the different sized rocks on the trail. We were getting more sun now and it was much warmer as we continued moving up and over the ridge, down into a small hollow, and over another ridge. We did these two more times before we finally got a visual of the Goat Rock.

Our destination looked closer than it really was; but now, the grade felt like it was almost straight up! We took another short break, and started a series of switchbacks as we climbed another 200 feet to the bottom of the rocks. We then walked along the base of the Goat Rock for a few minutes until we found the trail to the top.

Evidently both Arch and TJ were looking up at the rocks when TJ accidentally bumped his brother, knocking him off-balance, causing him to fall, and then roll about six feet down the mountain in the soft and still wet leaves. Arch was clearly not hurt, so our immediate reaction was laughter so hard that it echoed off the rocks.

Arch was not amused! He got up slowly off the side of the hill, brushed himself off, and fastened his eyes on his brother. TJ was still laughing and pointing at him when Arch started crawling up the hill rapidly. TJ must have had his eyes closed while he was laughing, because he didn't move until Arch gave him a line-backer shove back into the face of the rocks. TJ hit the rocks with his backpack, so he did not get hurt, but he immediately changed his laughing to anger as he lunged at Arch gritting his teeth. Arch stepped aside, and TJ went flying landing in almost the same spot his brother had rolled a minute earlier. Sam was yelling at them to stop, and stop acting like babies, but her voice was only heard by the rest of us.

Everyone laughed again, but by then Lanny and Carlos stepped in between them, and told them what had happened had not been on purpose. Sam shushed us with her finger over her mouth and we all stopped laughing. The brothers seemed to calm down, but Lanny and Carlos kept them apart for a while to make sure this incident didn't cause a flare up again.

As everything calmed down after the skirmish, we were about ready to start our final climb up the rocks. The path that ran on the ground next to the face of the rock was about three feet wide, with a steep drop for several feet on the opposite side. We paused and looked over the trees and saw part of the valley just north of Palmer. The sun was beaming on us as it was approaching midday, so we decided to climb and have lunch on the Biscuit Rock.

The Biscuit Rock was one of many formations on top of the Goat Rock that could not be seen from below. There were other formations like the “eagles’ bath” which looked like a giant bird bath that had been carved out of a huge rock. There was also a narrow ledge on one of the formations that we called the “spy rock” that provided a great view of Palmer and the surrounding ridges and mountains. There was just enough room for one person to crawl out on the rock, but the view was spectacular.

Next to the “spy rock” was the “doughnut rock” which was an almost perfect circle of one rock formation that looked like it was lying on top of another rock. Finally, the “Biscuit Rock” looked like a round pan of biscuits that had been perfectly formed. Each of the “rock biscuits” was about 18 inches in diameter, and there must have been 20–25 of them. It was located close to where the trail came out on top, and we would each grab a rock to sit on for lunch. I estimated we had another 15-minute climb, and we would be eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drinking Coke or Sun Drop.

The route to the top was not really a path or a trail, but just a series of rocks and places for our hands to help balance us as we climbed. It would be a slow process, and by the time we reached the top, we would be tired. The split in the rocks was only about two feet wide and required extreme care to maintain a 3-point climb. In other words, we had to ensure we had two feet and one hand, or two hands and one foot holding on, or firmly resting on a stable rock before we took the next step in ascending. We would make sure to allow some distance between, so no one crowded each other.

The face of the Goat Rock was flat and straight up for well over forty feet. Although there were easier access points to get to the top by walking further north and then working your way back on series of switchbacks, we always chose to the most rugged trail, which was the most challenging and fun. Mike said he would go with Billy and take the easier trail to the top and would most likely be waiting for us by the time got there.

Billy and Mike were ready to leave us and take the other route when Rex and Rusty both began barking and howling with such intensity that it sounded like they lost their breath. We immediately alerted on all the noise and attempted to locate which direction it was coming from. Their combination of barking and howling at the same time was echoing off the face of the rock, so we listened closely and agreed that the sound was located southwest on the path next to the face of the Goat Rock. We began walking briskly on the narrow trail following the sounds with the face of the rock on one side and a steep incline on the other.

With his Collie and Beagle breeding, Rex was an unrelenting hunter, so we thought he had probably run upon the scent of a raccoon or squirrel and forced it up a tree. However, Rusty also seemed extremely upset, and was alerting on the same direction as Rex. After following their compelling barking for about 60 yards, we finally saw Rex and Rusty. They were not looking up into a tree but standing on the trail and glaring down the slope toward Palmer. Rusty quickly glanced at us and immediately returned to howling and barking at the top of his ability. The grade down the mountain at this location was not as severe as the trail we followed coming up, so I wondered why they were not going down there to check it out.

Although we were all straining to see what Rex had alerted on, the shadows of the trees, tall grass, and the bright sunlight kept us from focusing on whatever it was. We all purposefully stood in front of Rex to see what he would do, but he kept barking, and moved around us while keeping his gaze down the mountain. Sam began pointing down the mountain as her eyes became acclimated to the distance and shadows. We all agreed there was something down there, but we were not sure what it was.

Arch un-slung his new Crossman Air Rifle and put in a Diablo Basic pellet into the chamber. His new gun had a scope on it and was a thing of beauty. As was the custom on adventures like this, once we got on top, we would all shoot each other's rifles for the rest of the day. Between us, we had over 10,000 basic pellets, and about 400 of the Hyper Velocity type. Arch put the rifle up to his shoulder and began to peer through the scope toward the area we were trying to see.

TJ attempted to quiet Rex, but the dog was following its primal instincts and kept barking. As Arch moved his rifle from the left to right and back again, we were all becoming anxious for his report. After about 30 seconds, he took the gun down off his shoulder, and just shrugged at us.

Arch then turned toward Rex and called him a "stupid dog," slung his rifle over his right shoulder, and turned to walk back to our final climbing point, when he stopped cold in his tracks, and put his nose in the air as if he was sniffing for Ma Green's muffins.

It was certainly not muffins he, or any of us smelled! The stench was pungent, an almost overwhelming scent. Billy was quick to point out that it smelled like bear scat. I felt my heart begin to race a bit as I started looking again, as did everyone else. Meanwhile, Rex and Rusty had changed their barking and howling into a low angry growl.

It was all enough to make us all turn around, look at the dogs, whose teeth were now visible, and then slowly look back down the mountain. As I brought my eyes around, I could see the two big teeth sticking up and out the side of the mouth of what appeared to be a hundred pound "wild boar" looking directly at us.

THE GOAT ROCK CONCLUSION (Part Two) Sunday, Oct 22, 2023