

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
September 1, 2023

Published on Facebook - Sept 17th 2023

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 palpitating 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

Chapter 6 - The Goat Rock (Part Two) (Published October 22nd, 2023)

He was no more than 40 or 50 yards down the mountain climbing toward us in what looked to be a zig-zag pattern. Before I could say or do anything, both TJ and Arch had their air rifles out and firing pellets at it. They were both good shots, and as the lead hit the animal, it did flinch, but kept coming. We obviously had its attention. As it continued to come up that steep mountain at what seemed like a faster pace, we could hear it breathing. Both Rex and Rusty's bravery began to wane a bit and they did not appear as brave as they were earlier.

Lanny yelled for us to shoot at it with whatever we had. Everyone had basic pellets in our pockets and rifles, so all nine of us started shooting at the boar. There were plenty direct hits, and although it seemed to slow it down, this ugly hog was still coming up the mountain. Mike was the first to yell out nervously for us to get out of there, so we didn't discuss it further and started running back toward the entrance to the trail up the rocks to the top. Billy had to sling his Crossman, but the rest of us loaded another pellet, and carried our guns at the ready, and started moving.

Evidently even Rex sensed what we were doing, because within 20 yards, he came running by us and got out front with Rusty closely behind. Billy was moving his crutches as fast as I was moving my legs as we traversed the 3-foot path. As we were running, I first thought about my not telling my mom where we were going, but shifted gears and thought about how important it was for us to reach the trailhead at the base of the Goat Rock. A wild boar would not be able to climb the rocky trail to the top, but then again, neither could Billy!

We did not look back until we arrived at the entrance to the rock laden trail up to the Goat Rock. Billy and Mike just kept running to take the alternate trail to the top, so we immediately started climbing. Rex and Rusty must have realized they would not be climbing with us and started running toward Billy and Mike who were almost out of our sight.

Lanny and Carlos had taken up defensive positions behind a rock next to the trailhead, while Sam, Arch, TJ, Martin, and I slung our rifles, and started climbing up the rocks. I looked back to the path we had been on but did not see or hear the wild boar. I had a clear visual of everyone, and within four or five minutes, we were all climbing as quick as we could put one foot and two hands on those rocks. I was glad we were on our way up, but that feeling was short lived. Even 20 feet off the ground, we heard it coming!

The boar was not quite as big as I originally thought, but the tusks sticking out of its mouth were much bigger than I saw earlier. It was huffing and puffing and making sounds of what could only be described as "anger." I suddenly had a chill go through me, and immediately my stomach ached.

Where were Rex and Rusty? I had not seen or heard them since they took off after Mike and Billy. My imagination did not have a chance to kick in because we all immediately

started shooting the boar with rapid fire. I had eight Hyper Velocity pellets, so I started using them as fast as I could put them in the chamber. Martin saw what I was doing and yelled to the others to do the same. I know Arch and TJ had at least 150 rounds, but I was not sure about everyone else. Sam was pumping her Daisy BB gun faster than anyone I'd ever seen. Each shot hit its target as the boar yelped and groaned, but it was obviously mad and not afraid of us.

Lanny and Carlos were already 10 feet up the rock trail while the boar had its hoofs on a small ledge looking at them but did not attempt to take another step. Lanny yelled that he saw some blood but did not know much more than that. As we were climbing up the rugged rocks, TJ reminded us that if it stayed focused on us, it would not be harassing Billy and Mike on the other trail. We were all obviously relieved with that thought, but the location of the dogs still weighed heavily on me. Rather than being distracted from the task of climbing this mountain, I resolved in my own mind that they were with Billy and Mike, so I kept going.

Although the path at the bottom of the rock face was now out of my sight, Lanny and Carlos yelled that it was still there, huffing and puffing, and looking for us. Suddenly I remembered that we would eventually have to come down from the Goat Rock, and I wondered if Mr. Boar would be waiting for us. I was not able to dismiss that thought for the rest of our time on top.

The last 12 to 15 feet of the climb was accomplished by using a cable that had been installed by older boys some years earlier. They had driven a two-foot metal stake in one of the rocks and attached the cable to it. It was all part of the excitement of making the climb to the top. Although there were some indentations in the rocks for our feet, we had to use the cable to move up the wall of flat rock. I personally did not like to climb using a cable while carrying my gun, coat, and lunch on my back. Arch and TJ had back packs full of stuff, including more pellets, which they would have to carry up the cable. We had done all this before, but not after an encounter with a wild boar!

Within 15 minutes from starting up that last leg of the climb, we were on top of the Goat Rock. Looking around, we ensured there were no other animals within our vicinity, but we were glad to make it. Billy, Mike, and the dogs were nowhere to be found. We jumped a few of the rocks and were on Biscuit Rock where we were supposed to have lunch. There was a stout breeze coming out of the south, and we could hear it through the trees, as hundreds of leaves were flying around from either the trees or off the ground. The sun was still blazing down on us, but the breeze kept us cool.

A few minutes passed and everyone was looking to the north along the tops of the rocks for Billy and Mike. We all knew they should have been there when we emerged at the top of the cable, but still nothing. We looked at each other as if to ask what we should do. In situations like that, the imagination can run crazy, especially knowing that Billy was on crutches. The trail they were supposed to be on was not as steep as coming up the mountain, and we reassured each other they would both be just fine. As a matter of

fact, the elevation gain was the most gradual of the trails and paths coming up the mountain. That was little comfort to me because I could not see them.

We could see along the entire top of the Goat Rock which was a little over 100 yards and then there was tall sage grass and small trees as the incline began down the trail. The wind was coming from our backs as we were motionless looking for them to come over the rise. Finally, I saw Rex running toward us at an almost relaxed pace. His tongue was hanging out of the left side of his mouth, but when he saw us, he started into a full run. He started barking as he ran the final 50 yards into the arms of Arch and TJ, and then made his rounds with the rest of us. He first sat down, and then lay down from what I thought was exhaustion. Martin called him over to him and Rex spotted one of the small streams near where we were. He did not drink much, but he sat near the water so he could indulge when necessary.

The distraction of Rex was short lived as there was still no sign of Rusty and our missing friends. Even walking leisurely up the grade, they should have been there by then. As hungry as I was before, Billy and Mike not being with us took my appetite away. I quickly announced that I was going to look for them, and everyone jumped up at the same time ready to go. I was not going to argue with them, so we started walking northeast toward the path they should have been on. Rex just sat and watched us for about a minute, then came running past us toward the trail.

There was an emptiness inside me with my dog and two of my friends missing. My imagination was creating numerous scenarios, all of them ending badly. I kept saying to myself they were just fine, all the while hoping it was so. My thoughts were interrupted however, when I could not see Rex. He would normally go out ahead just so far, turn, and look back. If he ever got out of sight, I had seen him many times turn around and come back to a point that he had line-of-sight with us. Given all that had already happened, his not being where I deemed him to be was just one more thing.

The wind blowing across the small plateau, where the Goat Rock was located, made the tall grass swish around some big rock boulders that marked the entrance to the path down the northeastern side of the mountain. Although there were larger rocks, and jagged edges on this side of the mountain, the path down was not near the severity as the one we came up.

It was the reason Billy was supposed to come this way with Mike. As we approached the path down the mountain, Rex came back up the trail as if he was just checking in. I was certainly happy to see him, but still very concerned for the other two and Rusty. With the wind at our backs, I was just about to yell down the path to see if I could get a response from Billy or Mike, when I caught some movement just over a small rise on the trail. Still jittery from our wild boar encounter, I immediately un-slung my air rifle in anticipation that the movement was that pig. As we took up a defensive position behind one of the rock boulders, we quickly determined it was certainly not a wild boar, but Rusty sitting down with his tongue hanging out, and our missing pair of wanderers about 25 feet east off the trail.

Billy and Mike were both laying on the edge of the cliff on their sides with their index finger across their mouths telling us to be quiet. They motioned for us to come to them, so we hunkered down and started moving across the tall grass as quietly as we could. Rex was now bringing up the rear as he was probably confused about where we were going.

When we got within a few yards of Billy and Mike, they shushed us again, and told us to gently crawl to the edge of the cliff. I motioned to Billy and questioned if I needed to bring my rifle. He shook his head no, so we all took off our packs and coats and put the guns on them and started crawling the remaining 10 feet. When we reached the edge of the cliff, Mike began pointing down the side of the mountain to a small ledge about 40 yards back toward the place where we last saw the wild boar. I swallowed hard and gasped as I focused on a small area on the side of the mountain and could not believe what I was seeing.

I had no idea of how he got there, but he looked like something from a Walt Disney nature program. He was beautiful with an almost arrogant look about him the way he held his head so high. He had a sizable hump directly behind his head, a beard that started beneath his lower jaw and continued to the top of his chest. He was as white as snow, with no blemishes or other markings on his fur that I could see. His two horns were sticking up at an angle just above his eyes that accentuated his ears, which were sticking straight out at a 45-degree angle under the horns. I imagined that an animal such as this was the inspiration for the name, Goat Rock. All my life I had heard about people seeing a wild goat on this mountain, and now my Tribe and me, plus Billy, Arch, TJ, and of course Rex and Rusty were all witnessing one of the most thrilling sightings in our many adventures.

He stood on the edge of a small flat surface on the side of the mountain, but none of us could see how he got to it. There did not seem to be a path or trail on the rocks surrounding the place he was standing, but he was just looking around at what he probably believed was his domain. He would turn his head slightly as if to look and listen, then become almost stoic for a few minutes until turning again. We could not take our eyes off him and his hoofs never left their position on the ledge. Billy whispered to me that he suspected this wild goat knew we were there and was just letting us admire him. It really did not matter to me; the entire trip was worth this sight.

We must have laid there for 15 minutes before the goat made a slow turn to his left and seemed to walk down the side of the mountain on an invisible path, then continued to walk back toward where we last saw the wild boar. We all looked at each other in sheer amazement, and we could not stop talking about what we had just witnessed. Billy told us that Mike just wanted to look off the bluff as they were coming up the trail, so they went to the cliff to look down when they saw the goat. They had been there watching it for the entire time we were worried about them. As we gathered our gear and rifles, we started strolling back toward the "Biscuit Rock."

As we walked, Carlos suggested that the goat we had admired could have encountered our “boar” friend that chased us up the mountain earlier! We looked at each other quickly and took off running toward the other side of the “biscuit rock” to see how close we could get to the edge of the cliff. We determined that “spyglass rock” would probably be the best place to observe the path we had been on earlier with the wild boar, but only one person could get a look. TJ was the smallest one of us, so he volunteered to crawl out there, and the rest of us would have to go a bit further south to find a place that we could see what was going on down on the path. We continued to run across the rocks and the tall grass hoping to see the goat and wild boar.

TJ stopped and took off his pack, and slung his pellet rifle over his shoulders, and climbed out on spyglass rock. The rest of us walked further to find a spot, while keeping TJ in our sight. The slope of the terrain began going downhill as we went further away from TJ. We had gone no more than 20 yards, when TJ whistled at us to move closer to the cliff and look down. He had seen a spot where we could all watch the path below. We took off our packs and coats once again, slung our Crossman’s, and crawled to the edge. It was a perfect view of both directions, and we could still see TJ; however, it all looked very quiet down below.

After lying in a prone position for a few minutes with nothing happening, my stomach began reminding me of the sandwiches and Coke still in my jacket. I slowly moved back, and quietly picked up my Tupperware dish and drink, and returned to the area. I parked myself a couple of yards back from the cliff and started to eat my lunch. I looked over at TJ, felt sorry for him that he could see me with my lunch, and walked over to his backpack and placed it as close as I could to where he was laying on the rock. He thanked me, and I returned to my spot and continued to enjoy rest of the sandwich.

Within the next few minutes, everyone else was eating their well-deserved lunch and taking turns keeping watch on the path 40 feet below. Rex and Rusty began socializing with everyone, up close and personal with those big brown eyes, so we all shared our lunch with them both. All in all, I believe the dogs ate better, and more food than all of us. They seemed content after they both got a drink from one of the small streams, and immediately stretched out their back legs behind them, and laid down for a nap in the sun. I remember thinking that everything always tasted better outdoors, and peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches were great to bring on trips like this.

Life was good as we laid around in the warm sun on top of the rocks talking about the day. Everything had transpired in less than two hours of our arrival at the base of the rocks, and there had been one exciting activity after the other. I do not remember how it started, but Arch and TJ began telling us things about their dad when he was in the Army that we had never known.

We listened as Arch relayed how his dad was a soldier in the 24th Infantry Division in Korea under General Douglas MacArthur and that he received the Silver Star for “gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States.” The brothers swelled with pride while speaking about their dad and told us that he did not talk about specific war

experiences but would talk about his unit and the men he served with in Korea. I felt bad for ever thinking that he was a mean father, considering all that he went through. Arch and Tim obviously loved their dad and I never looked at him the same again.

Billy, who was normally quiet compared to the rest of us, told us that we were his best friends. Carlos asked him why he considered us to be his best friends. Billy began telling us how so many kids, and especially girls, had mocked, and made fun of him when he first started in school. But when he showed them all that he could run as fast, or faster than they could on his crutches, they shunned him even more.

Answering Carlos's question specifically, Billy told him that the Tribe was always good to him and accepted him, despite his disability. Carlos looked at Lanny and me and winked, and then looked back at Billy as he asked him in a solemn tone, "And what exactly is your disability?"

Before Billy could open his mouth to answer, we were already laughing under our breath. By the time he was ready to seriously respond, we were all laughing out loud, and he finally figured it all out. His disability was irrelevant and immaterial to our friendship.

We spent the rest of the afternoon shooting at everything we could put in our sites. There were lead pellets from one end of that mountain to the other. Each biscuit, on its namesake rock, had at least a hundred rounds fired at it, and according to all concerned, we collectively shot over 4,000 rounds that day, and each of us went through two CO2 canisters.

We could see it was getting later in the day, so we took the easy trail off the Goat Rock that afternoon, descended the mountain uneventfully, and never heard of anyone encountering the wild boar or goat again. We all made a couple more visits up that mountain that summer, even carrying a new Kodak Brownie Instamatic camera one year, but we never saw the wild boar or beautiful mountain goat again; however, we did a lot of talking about our adventure with every other friend we knew that Summer.

Chapter 7 – John Mark Davis (Published October 28th, 2023)

“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.” (John Wooden)

John Mark Davis had the reputation of being the meanest and most menacing individual when I was growing up in Palmer. Although I never heard that he was aggressive or a troublemaker, he was known to fight anyone, anytime, and beat them so badly, they would never want to be around him ever again. He never had to fight the same person twice.

His reputation was legendary in and around Palmer, but eventually spread throughout the county and beyond as the toughest boy, and later man in that part of the state. His hands were big, but when he made them into fists, they were even larger. I once heard someone describe his fists as being the size of a car headlight. His arms were thick, especially his forearms, which looked like the animated cartoon character “Popeye, the Sailor.”

He had broad shoulders and a muscular upper body with a slender mid-section. John Mark’s physical appearance did not appear to be mean or nasty because he had a “baby face” and fair complexion; however, his blue eyes could speak without saying anything verbally. We admired him from afar and although he never treated any of us badly, we knew of his reputation that he was one not to be trifled with, as many folks found out.

John Mark never carried a weapon but disarmed many others who had a gun or knife. He was very cool under even the most frightening circumstances, and he never raised his voice. He always tried to talk everyone out of fighting him, but when he was unable to back them off, they probably regretted their decision not to walk away.

John Mark’s reputation was that he was just as comfortable in church as he was fighting. His family were long-time residents of Palmer, and some of the nicest people in the county. His father was famous for selling fresh fruit from his truck all over town and would give kids coming up to him a banana. John Mark was a role model and well respected by every young boy and most men in Palmer, not because he could fight well, but because he didn’t seem to fear anyone.

One well-known story kids told was that he once faced down both a knife and a gun and then beat the guys who were carrying them bloody. However, John Mark always seemed to know when to quit. He would first win the fight, and then some say he would offer to help the guy he just pulverized get up off the ground. When a person said they had enough, he would stop, seemingly to assess if they were serious or not, and either put out his hand, or just walk away. I don’t know if he ever got beat up himself, but I never remember his face being swollen or bruised whenever I saw him.

He also had the ability to seek out anyone he heard was looking for him and then cut through all the emotion and determine if a wrong had been committed, or something was, what he called, 'just sour grapes.'

To a 12-year-old, John Mark Davis was someone we feared, but also esteemed and looked up to him. The Tribe roamed all over Palmer on our bikes and every time we would see him, he would always speak or wave at us because he knew every one of us by name, our parents, and all our siblings. We always felt that John Mark was our secret protector, although we never had a need for his services, but our just believing he would take up for us was enough.

One year, in late October, the air was crisp as we all prepared to go out knocking on people's door doing our "trick or treat" ritual. I was once again dressed as the Lone Ranger, and someone would be my partner Tonto within the Tribe. As we gathered on top of the hill close to our house, we could see parts of highway 108, which was the main road through Palmer. We then heard a car engine and another noise we had not heard before. It was shrill with no pattern to it. Suddenly, we saw an old beat-up Ford pulling a huge cast-iron pot behind it as it shrieked down the road with sparks flying as it met the resistance of the asphalt on the highway. The old pot would jump off the pavement, drop back on the road as the sparks came out the side and rear of the pot traveling about 30 or 40 miles per hour. We all laughed out loud and try to figure out whose car it was pulling the big pot.

After seeing all that, we knew it was going to be a great Halloween in Palmer, Tennessee that night. Before we could even finish laughing and pointing at the excitement on the road, Lanny yelled for us to go chasing after the car and see what was going on. So, we took off as hard as our legs could peddle down the hill until it intersected with Highway 108, and we went after the old iron pot headed for the small downtown area of Palmer.

The air stung my lungs a little as we peddled as hard as we could toward the middle of town which was less than a half mile away. Everyone in Palmer had their front lights on to give the kids candy. Little ones were on both sides of the road, and we could see them up and down the hollers surrounding Palmer. We also heard a couple of outhouses hit the ground as we grew closer to town.

As we crossed the railroad tracks, we could see several cars in a semi-circle with their headlights on just off the main road. When we pulled up to the back of the cars, we could see their lights focused on three men in the middle of their light beams. Whenever we saw the cars lined up this way, we immediately knew someone was ready to fight. We quickly dropped our bikes and worked our way to the front of the cars to see who was about to come to blows.

All the lights from the cars were centered on a big man, dressed in overalls wearing an old dirty baseball cap who was saying some cruel things about one of the local girls in the town and their family. We chuckled a little because at first, we thought he was drunk

and out of his mind from the way he was slurring his words and staggering around. We had seen drunks before because we would sometimes hide on a small hill next to a local beer joint and watch the drunks stagger out of a roadhouse, talking and cussing, as they tried to find their keys and we laughed loudly at them. They could hear us laughing, tried to locate us, but we were in the darkness laying down on our bellies, so they never did see us; however, they would swear, cuss, and threaten to come and beat us up. We knew that would never happen since the hill we were on was about 25 feet higher than where the drunks were standing with a straight up wall of loose dirt and rocks. Tonight however, the idea that this was just a drunk yelling at someone quickly faded within a few seconds.

A couple men, who looked to be his friends were trying to get him to leave and calm down, but the man would not have it. He broke free from them and started cussing with words I was not sure I really understood.

Fist fights were common while I was growing up, and although I had had my share with the very friends I ran with now, they seem to be a quick way to settle differences and misunderstandings between friends. Usually the day after the fight, everything returned back to normal, and the incident was soon forgotten; however, when men fought, it never seemed to be about a misunderstanding or disagreement, it was my observation that they hated each other and some wrong had been committed by one of them against someone they knew, or an insult had been lodged against a family member. They were not pleasant nor were they always fun to watch, but as long as one of us was not part of the fight, we were always curious.

After a few minutes, whoever this man had been waiting for drove up, and started taking off his jacket as he walked to the lighted area. Immediate quiet came over the crowd gathered around as the brother of the girl the older man had been talking about looked angry as his eyes locked on the older man. My heart was racing as we could all see this was heating up to be a big fight between two men who were both angry and extremely upset. The man who came in last brought his 2 brothers and a cousin with him also.

The air was filled with the smell of corn liquor, or white lightning as we called it which was a scent we all knew well since we lived out in the country on those mountains. I could not hear some of the mumbling and cussing that was going on, but it seemed to be building, so I knew there was going to be a fight shortly. Across the lighted area where all this posturing was happening, I could see John Mark Davis with his huge arms folded across his chest and leaning against the fender of someone's car watching everything unfold. He didn't seem to be a part of any of it, so like us, he was just waiting for what came next.

Suddenly, I heard the distinct sound of a bottle breaking on the asphalt, and then another one crashed shortly afterward. My eyes attempted to locate where the sound came from, but by the time I located the wet splash mark, another one broke, but this one was on the back of the head of one of the men arguing. As he dropped to his knees, I could see the red patch of blood on the back of his head where the bottle hit

him. He fell forward without putting his hands out to catch his fall and hit the ground on his face. I had never seen grownups fight before, and I immediately felt queasy as my stomach flipped watching this unfold. I found out later another cousin or relative of one of the men had ambushed another man from behind. It was now getting serious.

My friends and I took a step back behind the car light and stood beside the front fender. There were no adults in front of us so we could see everything unfold but being behind the lights still did not take us out of the light from the other vehicles in the circle. I felt scared. Suddenly, one of the men came into the light holding a gun. It was a pistol with a long barrel, so of course my first thought was it was a revolver like we had seen on the TV show, Wyatt Earp. He was not pointing it toward anyone but held it loosely by his side with the muzzle pointing down to the ground. Everything suddenly became quiet, and I heard a couple of gasps, in addition to the one from myself. No one moved or spoke for what seemed like a minute or two.

A cold breeze swept across the area where we all stood as we heard the distinct sound of a round being chambered into a pump shotgun. Everyone stood frozen in place. I could not see exactly where the sound emanated from, but the only thing I could hear was my heart pounding trying to get outside my chest, or so it seemed. I could see the man with the shotgun coming into the center of the circle as the guy with the pistol, and two more men advancing from the other side of the lights. Nothing was spoken as they approached as both men stopped within 10 feet of each other. No one was pointing his gun, but I'd watched enough TV to know, it could happen quickly. Meanwhile, neither man took his eyes off the other as they stood and continued glaring.

A lone voice, off to the side, broke the silence with a loud "hold on", and began walking toward the two men with guns. I immediately recognized both the voice and swagger of his walk as belonging to John Mark Davis. He walked directly up and stood in the middle between the two men and began talking softly to them. I could not understand what he was saying, but the armed men were paying attention.

It wasn't very long before John Mark held both his arms out toward the men with his hands open. After a few seconds in what looked like a synchronized motion, both men put their guns into John Mark's hands. John Mark immediately handed the weapons to one of the friends with him, turned back around, and motioned for both men to come closer to him. As they begin to talk, everyone knew there would be no war on this night. The toughest man in the county had quelled what could have potentially been a disaster.

Within a couple of minutes of the two men talking with John Mark, we could hear a siren in the distance, and shortly saw the lights of the Tennessee State Trooper barreling toward the center of town. I could hear engines start all around me, and the first thing I thought about was where we had dropped our bicycles when we arrived. Someone said, let's go, and we went quickly and grabbed our bikes and started peddling back toward home.

In the seconds before we turned to go, I saw John Mark give both the same men back their guns, and they immediately turned around and started running toward their vehicles. As we left, John Mark was still standing waiting for the Tennessee State Troopers to come to him. I later heard that he told the Troopers exactly what happened but refused to give up the names of the men involved. That night was more about John Mark Davis' character than it was his reputation.

From that night on, I never heard of another fight where John Mark Davis was involved. His tough guy reputation remained throughout my years living in Palmer, and I was told what he did that evening in defusing a potential killing incident was spread throughout the county and beyond. I never heard from or about him ever again until I saw a video later in my life that he was an accomplished fisherman and living somewhere in Florida. His reputation as both a fighter and peacemaker remain in Palmer and the surrounding counties to this day.

Chapter 8 - The Circus (Published November 4th, 2023)

A big white tent sprang up on what was, just the day before, our favorite softball fields. A huge tractor drove onto the field pulling a trailer full of giant poles, ropes, and large pieces of white canvas. Several men with huge wooden and metal mallets began pounding stakes into the ground and securing the ropes that were attached and surrounded the piece of canvas. It did not take long before the men stretched the huge piece of canvas and covered much of the outfield.

The Tribe had just arrived early to the field that Saturday morning for a game with our friends from Chiggertown and Burnt Orchard; however, before the Tribe could toss the first ball between us, we heard the truck coming toward us and saw the dust it was kicking up. Following the truck was a small bus loaded with men wearing yellow helmets. As they started walking off the bus, we started moving out of the way to a small noll behind home plate near the edge of the tree line.

The men immediately started to unfold the canvas and attach it to the poles with chains and ropes they had initially laid out on the ground. The man giving the orders used a bullhorn to tell everyone what and when to do it. "You men there" he yelled out, "secure the poles and make sure there is no slack in the ropes!" Ten men carried what looked like two telephone poles that were laid under the canvas.

Finally, the boss walked about half-way up the bank where we were sitting so he could see the entire worksite, and yelled into his bullhorn, "Prepare to raise." There were six groups of three and four men who grabbed six ropes that surrounded the giant canvas as if they were going to do a "tug-of-war". The man with the bullhorn yelled out one word: "Raise" ...and as the groups of men started pulling the ropes, the canvas began to rise using the two largest poles as if they were guiding the canvas to inflate. About 30 feet apart, the canvas was sliding along the poles on a metal ring that looked like it had been sewn into the canvas around the holes.

After it had been raised to what looked like about 30 feet, the boss raised his right arm, made a fist, and yelled "stop"! Everything came to a halt until the man with the bullhorn yelled for the last time, "Anchor the tent". He immediately ran to the work site and inside the tent. The men on the outside pounded in metal stakes, wooden pegs, and placed the ropes around them and pulled tight.

All this took less than two hours and then two coal truck showed up with what looked like wood shavings. They spread them out on the grass floor of the tent, while another man started running wire from one of the light poles near home plate to the tent. It was not long before we could see the lights were on inside the tent.

By now, we were all excited and wondered how much it would cost to get into the circus tent when they opened. Next came a large truck load of folding chairs, a Public Address (PA) System, some lumber, and a skid of plywood. We waited for the little wagons filled with animals, the games, and the small trailers where the performers stayed and

changed clothes. The circus was in town, we thought, albeit a very small one; however, we could not have been more mistaken!

Although we were certainly disappointed about them setting up in the middle of our ball field, we couldn't wait to see it. The last circus that came to Palmer was two years earlier, but it was much bigger than this one. We decided not to wait for the other circus people and animals to show up, so we picked up our equipment and headed for Chiggertown. It was still a beautiful Saturday with just enough of a breeze blowing off the mountains to keep the summer day cool.

As we were leaving the ball field, our friends from Chiggertown and Burnt Orchard showed up. We stayed with them for a few minutes while they watched all the action, but we eventually decided to ride up past the Baptist Church to Burnt Orchard and play ball in their field.

We talked about nothing but the Circus during the game until we finally said "see ya" and started for home. Riding down by the Baptist Church toward Palmer was much more fun than walking our bikes up the long hill a couple of hours earlier. We stopped at the company store and got a cold Sun Drop, sat on the concrete porch, and excitedly talked about the circus. We would all be in church Sunday morning, but planned to meet at the top of the hill in front of my house right after church dinner.

Our plan was to ride our bikes over to the ball field where we saw them setting up the tent and ask someone about tickets to the circus., then to the Other End and play softball until time for Sunday night church. Carlos told us that he wondered why we had not seen posters about the circus like the last time they were in town. He evidently forgot about the posters when we started naming all the kids we could round up to play for a couple of hours Sunday afternoon at one of our old ball fields; however, we would never play that game. On Sunday morning, something else came to this small coal-mining town that would change the lives of many people who lived there.

Living in Palmer, Tennessee on a Sunday morning meant one thing.... Church! This small community of approximately 1,600 people had every denomination known to exist at that time except for Catholic, Jewish, and Jehovah Witness. All the rest were within a few miles of the center of Palmer. There was the Baptist Church on top of the hill just above the town. The Methodist church was the oldest and closest to town. There was a Church of Christ not far from where we lived just west of Palmer, and finally, my church, which was the Palmer Church of God. Each of these churches all had a reputation for the way they worshiped: the Baptist had the best singers and the prettiest girls because they could wear makeup, lipstick, and get their hair cut.

Most of my cousins, aunts and uncles went to the Baptist church and sometimes they would take me with them. My uncle Woodrow, Lanny's dad, led the singing, and my Aunt Mae sang in the choir. This was Lanny's church. They could smoke, but not drink, and they cried a lot in church services. They also could cuss a little bit if they would quickly ask for forgiveness.

The Methodists were a quiet group of elderly people. I went to the Methodist church one-time with one of my teachers and her mother and father. It was all very organized, and everyone received a schedule of the songs they would sing, the prayers they would pray, and even the name of the man who took the offering. I believe I was the only kid at that church the Sunday I attended.

I never went to the Church of Christ, but I heard they were very strict and did not allow any music with their singing. That was weird to me! Finally, there was also a Seventh Day Adventist and Nazarene church in nearby Laager. Carlos and his family went to the Nazarene church. He never talked much about it, and I never asked.

The Church of God, where my parents attended and insisted my sister and I go every time the doors opened, was also strict about what you looked like, what you could wear, and sometimes described themselves as “holiness” people. They did not permit jewelry, even wedding rings, women wearing pants or cutting their hair, every girl had to wear a dress, and the men all wore white shirts, some with ties, and others with their overalls. The older women wore dresses below their knees, and their hair would always be pulled up on their heads in some sort of bun or a beehive.

My mother never participated in that part of the religion. Church of God people were also very loud and preached about hell fire and damnation a lot....! I was afraid of some preachers because they would shake their finger at the congregation and tell them they were going to hell if they didn't start living the straight and narrow. Sometimes he pointed at my family.... I didn't like that very much!

Unlike many of the other churches I visited with some of my friends or extended family, the Church of God believed in singing, preaching, shouting, running through the church, crying, and screaming at the top of their lungs. Sometimes, one of the men would yell so loud that it would hurt my ears; but the women would scream at decibels that could probably not be measured.

People outside the church sometimes called us “holy rollers” because Church of God people would roll around on the floor when they “got in the Spirit.” That part was kind of embarrassing when I brought members of the Tribe with me; but church was fun because I loved to sing. Also, there were always testimonies about “what the Lord had done” or “not done”. A man stood up one night and asked the church to pray for him that he would “get married and have children, before it was everlasting too late.” The church immediately prayed for him.

Church of God folks were also known as “Pentecostals”! That meant they had been given a gift to “speak in some other language, or unknown tongue, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” The way I understood it all, regardless of if you were a Baptist, Methodist, or Church of God, when a person got saved and accepted Jesus, the Holy Ghost would take up residence inside them to help them become a better Christian.

The Holy Ghost was not an “it”, but the very Spirit of God that Jesus sent to us when He departed for heaven. His job was to comfort us and try to keep us out of trouble. Pentecostal people would eventually get baptized, or filled to overflow, with the Holy Ghost, after they were sanctified (separated) from worldly things. Now the way you could tell if someone had been baptized in the Holy Ghost was that they would be able to speak in an unknown language, that is, the Holy Ghost gave them words no-one else could understand but God.

Sometimes however, God would tell another person in church, and they would proceed to tell us what God was saying. We had to be very quiet when that was going on. None of the other churches had been given that gift. One time, I brought my friend Carlos to church and the preacher was screaming, yelling, and running up and down the aisles. Others were waving their arms and running around in the church. Carlos, whose family went to the Nazarene Church in Laager, watched everything very carefully, but never said a word to me about the preacher, or the service. I never asked him anything about it, but he never came back to the church with me again.

Around the middle of every summer, most churches would have a very special event called “homecoming”. A church homecoming in the 1960s meant people would bring an entire meal that would be placed on a long 50-foot table of wood and chicken wire, and everyone would have lunch outside on the church grounds after the Sunday morning service. People, who otherwise never came to church, would come for the “homecoming”. Even some of my dad’s aunts and uncles would come to eat and stay afterwards for an afternoon service. After lunch, we would all go back into the church for lots of singing and preaching for the rest of the day.

Although the Palmer Church of God fellowship had been around since the depression, the actual church building was constructed in the 1940s. I had seen old pictures of my mom and dad at the church, and it looked the same as it did in the 1950s. It was built with large concrete blocks and the floor was constructed with long strips of hardwood that did not have a finish. In the winter, the only heat available was an oversized pot-bellied coal stove located on the floor of the sanctuary just below where the piano player and other musicians sat. The stove would get so hot that the stove pipe leading to the outside would turn a bright red from the heat and stay like that for most of the church services. I heard stories that some of the faithful had been known to dance in the Spirit all around that old stove, but no one ever got burned. Where you sat in church depended upon how warm you wanted to be when it was cold outside. Very few times had I seen anyone sit on the front row close to the stove.

The pews were little more than benches with backs on them made with slats of wood that had been sanded, stained, and then painted with clear varnish. The pews always had an outdoor odor about them that you could smell them when you walked in. Since the church sat on a small hill, the back faced the road and had stairs that rose at least 20 feet off the ground, with a small porch attached. Very few people used that entrance because it had so many steps, so they chose to use a side door to the sanctuary. I once

heard my dad say the church would hold about 250 people, including the choir section with a few extra chairs from the Sunday school rooms.

I knew my dad was one of the most respected young men in the church. He was an exceptional electric guitar player who played for the choir at every service and lived his life according to the teachings of the church. My mom was also highly regarded by the ladies of the church and followed its teachings as best she could. However, my mom had been a Baptist for a while when she was dating my dad and probably wore make-up and lipstick..... but not anymore. Although she was now considered a "Pentecostal holy roller" who sang in the choir, taught Sunday school, and held me accountable for everything I did. She was still a classy dresser, got her hair cut when she pleased, yet kept her focus on Jesus instead of man-made rules. I guess she was a bit rebellious in a sanctified and respectful sort of way.

The church was only a ten-minute walk or a three-minute drive from where we lived, but my dad and I would leave our house about an hour early before each church service, so he could go to a nearby town called Laager to pick Uncle Tom Turner (no relation) and take him to church. Uncle Tom was an elderly man with white hair, and bright blue eyes that were as clear as a mountain stream. He was always happy, grateful my dad picked him up for church, and offered my dad money for his gas to come and get him. My dad always refused. I don't know how old Uncle Tom Turner was, but he would get happy in church and kick up one or both of his feet above his head, and yell, "praise the Lord." He would laugh and cry at the same time. Everyone loved Uncle Tom Turner.

My dad would drop Uncle Tom and me off at the church, and then go pick up my sister and Mom. While he was gone, I would typically find me a folding chair and place it as close to the piano and guitars as possible, so I could watch my dad and the rest of the musicians play during the church service. If it was early enough, I would pick up the songbook and thumb through it to some of my favorite songs. My favorite was always, "He Set Me Free." However, before we could sing, there was prayer, and then Sunday school!

Everyone who came to church at 10:00 AM went to Sunday school for the first hour. There were different classes by age group, including the adults, and we would be taught from the bible and a little thin book called Sunday School Lessons. Sometimes the teacher would bring cupcakes and punch, but most of the time, all they did was talk about sin, sin, and more sin...!

After Sunday school, everyone would go to the main church area for the Sunday Morning Service. As we would come out of the classes, there was something called a "penny march" where all the kids would pass by the altar and put their pennies into the offering plate. I would then make eye contact with my mother, so she knew I was not doing anything bad, and take my place near the musicians for the "singing part" of the service. My dad and the other musicians would be tuning up their guitars with the piano while everyone was mingling into the sanctuary for the service. There were always a

few people who did not go to Sunday school but came only for the singing and preaching.

On this Sunday morning, I was thinking more about when I was going to the Circus with my Tribe, and that big white tent we saw being put up Saturday afternoon. However, it was 11:00 AM, and time for the service to start. Typically, the Pastor would go the podium first to greet everyone and welcome them. He would then call everyone willing, to come to the choir. This was my favorite part: the singing service! Everything went according to every other Sunday morning, with the exception that our Pastor, Reverend Milton White, told us that we had a guest evangelist who would be preaching in today's service. He introduced the preacher as Brother J.B. Ramsdell. There was no clapping for him, and as he stood up, he just nodded his head.

J.B. Ramsdell stood well over six feet tall, with thick coal black hair full of Vitalis Hair Oil and combed straight back on his head. His eyes looked to be the same color as Uncle Tom Turner's, but when he looked at you, it was like Jesus himself was peering into your very soul. His hands were big, and he wore a black suit with a starched white shirt, and a bright maroon tie. His shoes were black and very shiny and looked like two sizes bigger than Pastor White's. He did not smile, but his eyes cut around the church as if he was looking for someone.

Pastor White continued to speak while the members of the choir assembled behind him. Since most churches did not have microphones or a public-address system back then, the Pastor had to talk loudly so everyone could hear. "Today begins our long-awaited Revival here in Palmer," he began. "We have prayed, fasted, and believed for a spiritual up-lifting and touch from the Holy Ghost. Starting tonight, Brother J.B. Ramsdell will hold tent-revival meetings at the ball field here in Palmer until the Lord releases him to go!" People began to say, "Amen Brother." Pastor White continued, "We are ready brothers and sisters for God to move in our lives and the lives of our families and Brother J.B. Ramsdell will be preaching for us this morning. Church tonight is cancelled here, so everyone needs to make plans to be at the ball field starting at 7:00 tonight to attend an old-fashioned tent-meeting revival. Now, let's sing to the Lord."

I immediately knew something other than the "Circus" was in town!

NEXT: Sunday Service