

I had a thin little body, spindely legs, blue eyes, and they called me "cotton top" because that was the color of my hair. I have never liked the color of my hair. From the beginning, I wanted black hair like Momma's.

I was full of curiosity, and never backed away from trouble. I was quite creative in finding self entertainment. I was over-gifted with energy, sometimes to the disgust of the rest of the family. They told me later, one of my obsessions was to ride a broom-stick. I would straddle

the broom-stick, holding the front end with my left hand, and let the back end drag the ground. Away I'd go as fast as I could run. I knew for certain I was a rip-snorting cow-boy riding a galloping horse. With

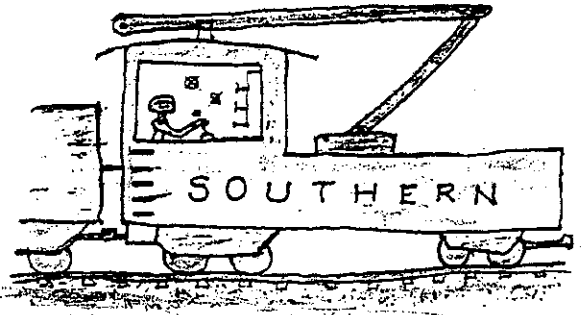


*A three year old boy ~
riding a broom-stick*

that broom-stick horse, I galloped around and around the house, while my right hand was vigorously switching the horse to make him go faster. All the while, at the top of my voice, I was yelling, "Gid-dap". I must have attracted some kind of attention. My sister Eunice told Momma, with earnest dissapointment in her voice, "Momma, I don't think Verne's got a bit of sence. He rides around the house hollering just like a fool".

One of those days when a three year old boy looks out across the world, and wonders what's out there, I was standing in our back yard looking at a string of cars on the switch tracks of the railroad at White Station. Those cars being there was not unusual. I had seen similar ones there many times. That day something caught my eye. I could plainly see some kind of engine midway in the string

That discovery stimulated my curiosity, so I decided to explore. Over the fence and through the neighbors field, I approached that huge black iron monster. There was no one in sight. I spied a ladder, so up I went. When I reached the landing and looked, I knew I was in heaven. In front of me there were those pretty shiny brass valves with little wheels on them. Over by a window was a seat with a cushion on it.



*A three year old boy
inside the cab of a
railroad crane.*

No-one knows how much I was enjoying turning everything that moved. The passing time never entered my mind. Suddenly my heaven vanished. I looked down and there was Momma, climbing up the ladder. Her face was as white as a sheet. With a trembling voice she said, "Thank God I've found you. All of us have been looking everywhere for you". To my surprise, instead of a whipping, all I got was a hug and a kiss. It turned out that the engine I invaded was a railroad crane, or derrick, used to pick up heavy articles along the right-of-way. The incident did have a lasting impression on me. I grew up with the burning ambition to become an engineer and run a railroad locomotive.

The story about me, I have heard repeated most frequently, was the time I burned down the privy. At that time our excess milk was poured into a slop bucket. It sat outside at the edge of the back porch near the steps. It was used for hog food. Late in the fall after the grass in the back yard had been killed by frost. It was mid-afternoon and Momma was in the house sewing. A devilish idea

crossed my mind. I had often watched Papa get some matches from a box on a high kitchen shelf. I climbed up and got some of those matches. Then out in the back yard, where the grass was short, I struck a match and held it to the grass, but it wouldn't burn.

Over by the privy, there was some taller grass. I yielded to the temptation. With the first try I started what I thought to be a small harmless fire. To my surprise the fire began to spread. I tried to stomp it out with my feet, but it kept spreading. I got a piece of plank and swatted the fire with all my might, without success. Some of the planks on the privy began to burn.

It finally sunk into my hard head that I needed help. I ran into the house where Momma was sewing and yelled, "Momma, the privy's on fire". She dashed out the back door, grabbed the slop bucket, and threw its contents on the raging flame. The effort was useless.



*A three year old being
punished for
burning down
the Privy*

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mud-hole". That information was unnecessary. Momma did acknowledge my identification, and led me into another room and ~~showed me~~ those filthy clothes. The borrowed clothes she put on were too big. I still rate that as one of the most horrible Sunday visits.

Sometime in May, the Sunday school would give a performance called "Children's Day". The program would feature a combination of religion and patriotism. Each of us had a little flag as we marched and sang. Little skits would be performed by reenacting



Children's Day at Church

acts of valor. We each had to memorize and recite a piece. When my time came, I shook all over, my squeaky voice quivered, and I hated myself. There was only one performance I enjoyed. It happened when the head lady, who made the assignments, gave her little boy the most impressive piece to recite. He marched onto the stage, turned and silently looked at the audience for a minute. Suddenly he threw his flag down and said, "I can't remember this damn thing". When he ran off the stage, his mother had the reddest face I've ever seen.

There always were special services at the church on Easter. Each class would have a place on the program. Each would recite an appropriate verse, and all would sing as a group. I enjoyed the regular choir, when Mr. Doc. Massey would sing loud with his fine voice.

Before services were over, in some mysterious way, Easter Eggs were hid in hard-to-find places in the church yard. After services, we children were directed to the general area and told, "Look good, you might find a pretty egg". Children never overlooked the chance to gambol. One boy would say, "My egg will crack your egg, and, when it does, you'll gimme your egg". Those little hands would

worker on the farm. The why, when, and how, needs for
 vation was no puzzle to him. He got along well with his companions.
 He was a good mixer even with neighborhood adults.

As soon as we settled in our new home at Ramsey, Eunice, Chester,
 and Massey enrolled in the public school. The gravel road between
 our home and the school was slightly wider than one traffic lane.
 When a vehicle came along the children had to step aside in the mud.
 The gravel had three paths, two made by the vehicle wheels, and the
 center one made by the horses. Those paths were the only easy place
 to walk, except in the valleys between hills where standing water was
 a problem. Keeping shoes clean was almost an impossibility.

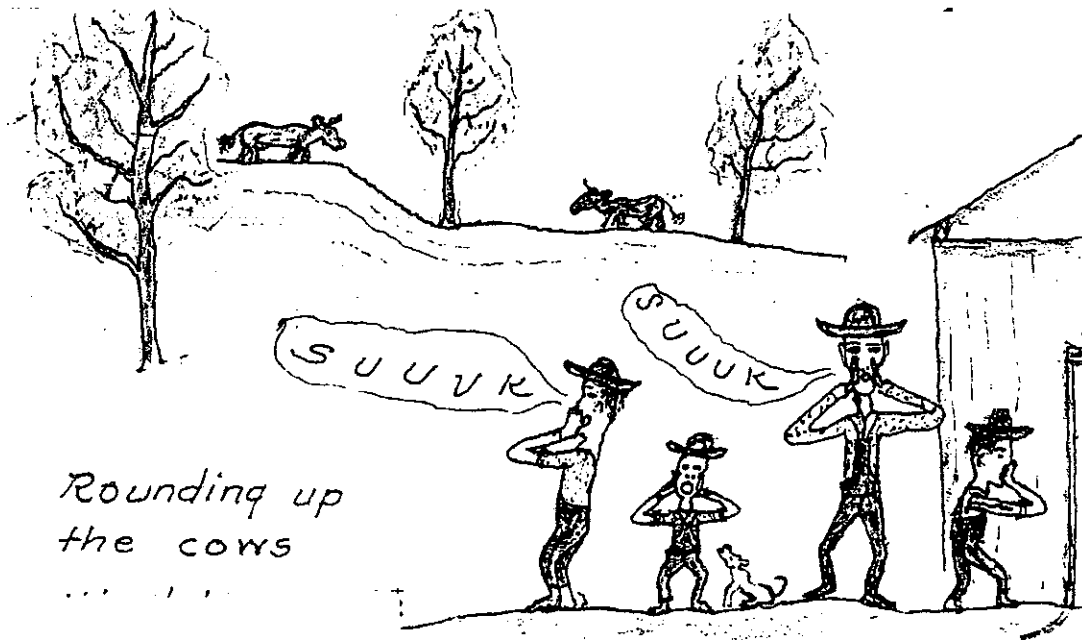
I will never forget the first
 spring and summer season I spent
 at Ramsey. All I had in my head
 was curiosity. I was living in a
 new world and was determined to
 explore all of it. Clad in a
 little pink shirt, faded overalls
 and a wide brimmed straw hat, I
 skipped down the cow-path leading
 from the barn to the woods. The
 cow's sharp hooves had pulverized
 the dirt and made it soft to my
 bare feet, I carried a stick for
 protection. Momma had told me to
 watch out for snakes.

In the woods, I tried to get
 acquainted with each tree. To me
 it was like meeting a stranger
 that I liked. I explored the



*A five year old
 exploring the woods*

Papa right behind me. My little legs were taking about three steps to his one. I wanted to get some space between us. On the way he grumbled a lot of advice to me. Such as, "When you got work to do, don't stop and play". And, "Work comes before pl
now, he hoped his scolding would last me for a life time. ~~Some~~
it didn't work. All my life I wanted to play instead of work.

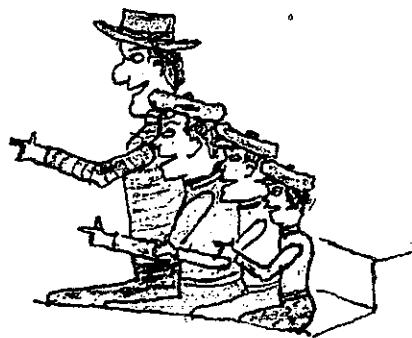


When late afternoon came, it was time to milk the cows. We would go out to the pasture gate and try to call them in. Papa with his strong adult voice, would put his hands to the sides of his mouth and holler, "Suu-uuk Cow" over and over again. Chester and Massey did the same with their high-pitched voices. My little squeaky voice was of no help at all. We had a yellow dog, we thought he was part hound, but we did get him interested in bringing the cows in. It worked fine until a cow kicked our dog under his chin. From that time on he stayed away from big animals. Our cows, by nature, were uncooperative, unless they already wanted to do whatever was being asked of them. When nothing else worked, we'd go and round them up in person.

heard from John, her voice expressed agony as she answered, "John, I'm lost, I want to go home". Then John's consoling voice from still another area answered. "Go on home Mary, I've found a good looking gal over here, and I'm gonna stay with her".

hollered and cheered as if someone had won a big victory. I couldn't agree with the crowd. My Sympathy went to Mary. Massey gave me peace of mind when he explained that those two people were putting on an act to amuse the crowd until the show started.

Across one end of the arena was a series of curtains preventing us from seeing backstage. Suddenly out from each end of the curtains came Indians. they were scantily dressed, they wore strings of glittering bead about their necks, there was war paint on their faces, and large feathers in their hair. They were yelling at the top of their voices, as they rode bare-back swiftly on multicolored ponys. They rode in single file; each line circled the arena. As they crossed each other in the end zone, each going in opposite



*Papa and his three sons
at the Buffalo Bill's Show
1910*

and miss me. He did yell at me, and call me a damn fool, but I thought it was funny.

Late in the afternoon, somehow or other, I got home. Papa recognized my condition. Without hesitating, he grabbed a belt and laid it on me with all his might. When he got through he said, "You're supposed to milk that cow tonight. Get a buck and get started NOW". I did milk that cow all right, because Papa was standing over

me with that belt in his hand. It was many years before I had the to taste whiskey again. I have always remembered, when that stuff gets in the stomach, it makes a person do crazy things.

In the fall of 1917, I was anxious to go to Whitehaven High school. The County Board of Education provided a wagonette to transport the grasuates of Levi. Bill Mukes, a resident of the Raines Neighborhood, had been the driver for the past several years. There was something fascinating about that slow moving horse-drawn covered wagon. The seats ran along each side. The passengers facing each other, were encouraged to be part of the general conversation. It would be easy to get acquainted with the other children,

The first morning of school, I was at Mr. Gill's store across the road from Levi school. Mr. Mukes came driving up in the wagonette. With a smile, he welcomed the passengers. We had hardly taken our seats when Mr. Lamar drove his new Reo truck up and parked alongside the wagonette. "Hey you kids, get out and go with me. I've got the job running this route". Mr. Lamar said.

