

# JOHNNIE

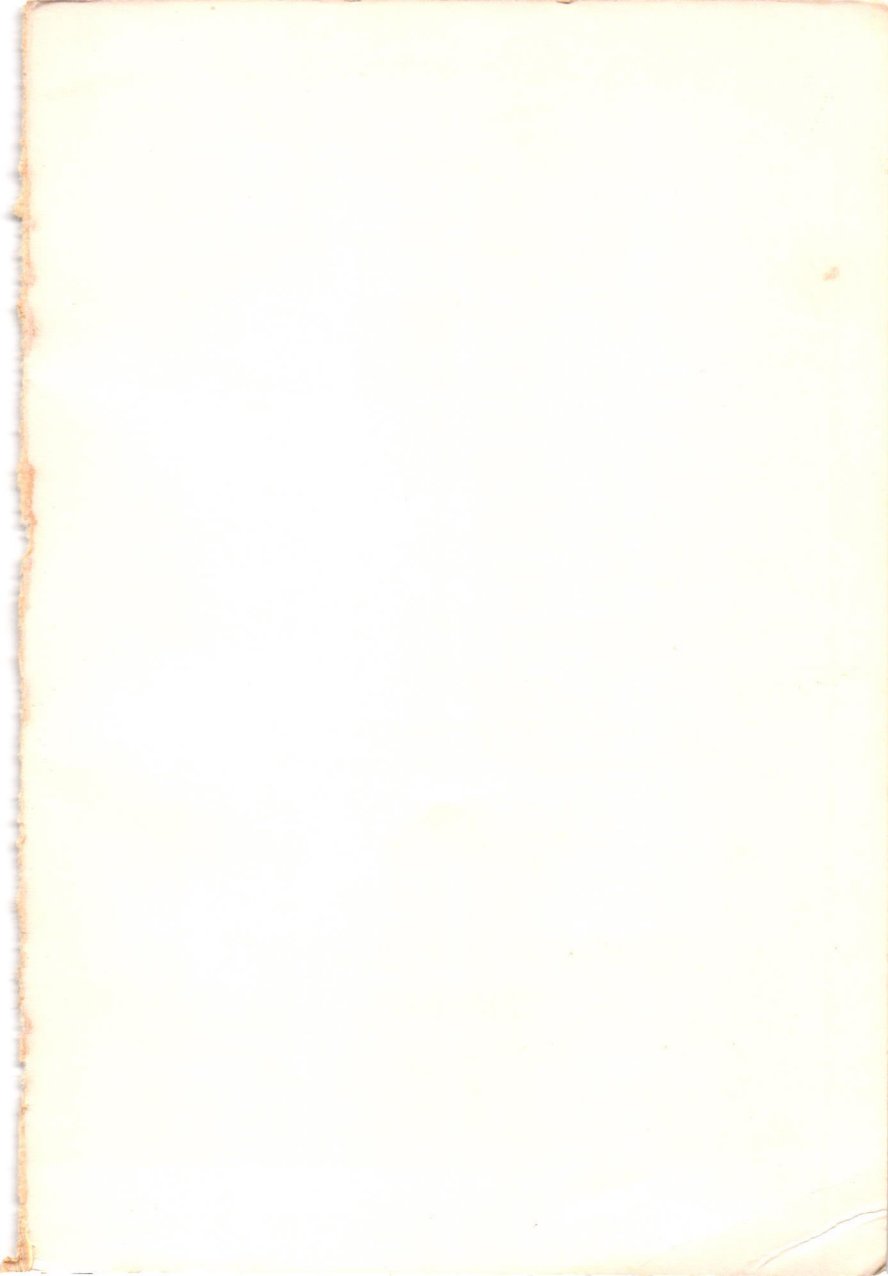
## THE BAREFOOT DREAMER

The boyhood story of Johnnie Barnes  
—founder of The Royal Rangers



\$1.50

by  
David Summers



\$1.50

# **JOHNNIE THE BAREFOOT DREAMER**

The childhood story of  
Johnnie Barnes,  
founder of the Royal Rangers,  
as told to David Summers.

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## FOREWORD

**HOW** I wish that every boy in our land could have the kind of pleasant memories Johnnie Barnes recounts in these pages.

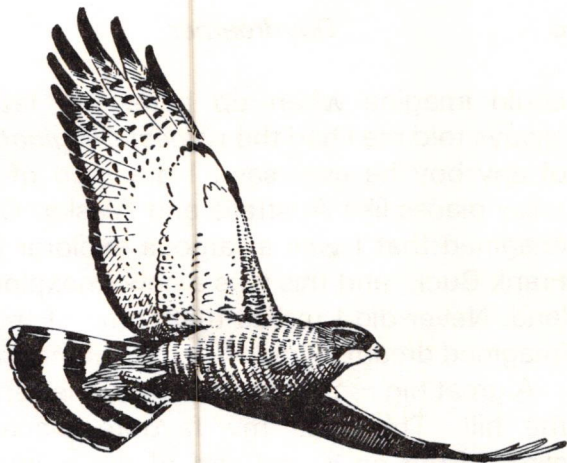
Fortunately for me, I had the kind of good ol' American upbringing which seems so rare today. I, too, can recall with Johnnie the fresh smell of a country spring evening, the sights and sounds of the old swimming hole, and even the excitement and lore of the crackling campfire.

All of this would be a *paradise lost* to city boys today if it were not for a young man who grew up to fulfill a dream. This dream is the Royal Rangers, and Johnnie Barnes was the young man who dared to ask, "Why not?" Whenever thousands of boys sit around a campfire, they can remember that it all began with a God-given dream, back in the Texas countryside. And always remember this: Only God can make a dream come true. But don't be afraid to dream, and dream, and dream.

Bob Summers

## FOREWORD

In loving memory of my mother and father—especially Mom who passed away just as this book was going to press. Their sensible rural-American virtues inspired their children to value character above materials.



## CHAPTER ONE

### DAYDREAMER

**APRIL!** The rolling Texas hills were awash with the color of bluebonnets and scarlet Indian paintbrushes. The air was spring-fresh with a delicate scent of warm new grass, much like the smell of fresh cut hay. A hawk drifted lazily, high in the clear afternoon sky. I shaded my eyes and studied the broad expanse of land below.

I loved this hill. As often as I could I would come up here. Sometimes I would just sit and daydream for hours. And the things I

could imagine when up here! My father always told me I had the *wildest imagination* of any boy he ever saw. I dreamed of far away places like Australia and Alaska. Or, I imagined that I was a famous explorer like Frank Buck, and this was a new unexplored land. Never did I realize that some of those imagined dreams would one day come true.

A great big rock jutted out from the top of the hill. This was my favorite place. I climbed out on it and settled down into a peculiar bowl-shaped depression. Once before, when Uncle Charlie and I had come up here, he had told me that the early Indians used to grind their corn at this spot. I could seat myself in my makeshift grindstone chair, and see all of the surrounding countryside for miles in either direction.

Below me lay the old rambling ranch house where we lived. I could see the road running from the house and disappearing into a grove of giant pecan trees. It then reappeared and wound down the valley, before crossing the old iron bridge on Big Sandy Creek.

Just to the right of the house was the



barn and large log corral. I suddenly remembered the time when R.C. Patterson brought his little sorrel mare over to saddle break her. It was the first time this skittish little horse had ever had a saddle on her back. She threw me right over the top of the corral, and I landed plop in the middle of a patch of stinging nettle! My hands and arms burned for three days and nights. The old corral was empty now. All the stock were in the pastures grazing on spring grasses.

I settled back into my hole in the rock and imagined I was Geronimo, the Apache warchief. He might have sat right here himself...a hundred years ago, I thought. I dreamingly closed my eyes and wondered what he might have seen as he gazed across the same gentle rolling hills. "I'll bet he had a thousand brave warriors in the valley below," I mused. I dimly pictured the bright feathered headdresses and the painted Indian ponies. I could almost smell the smoke of the signal fires.

Suddenly I was jolted back to full attention. The shrill shriek of an angry scissortail bird almost scared me out of my wits. About the same time I heard the

frightened "Caw . . . caw . . . caw" of a large black crow, who had apparently flown too close to the scissortail's nest. I could hear the frantic whir of his wings as the crow beat a hasty retreat. The little scissortail was right behind him in hot pursuit.

The noise had shattered my peaceful daydream. It took me a few moments to regain my composure. Then I began to chuckle over the situation. It was amusing that a spunky little scissortail would take on the much larger and stronger crow. What's more, he had won! "Boy, that's my kind of bird!" I thought. But what gave this little bird the courage to fight when he appeared to be hopelessly disadvantaged by his opponent? Why didn't he just flee for his life as maybe would a sparrow? I pondered these questions.

That evening at supper, I told Dad about the incident: "How come those little scissortails are so brave?" I asked him.

"Well," Dad slowly replied, "I guess they just never learned to be afraid."

I was still puzzled. "What do you mean, Dad?" I pressed him eagerly.

"Well, son, as long as a man, or a bird, for that matter, does what he knows is right he has confidence in himself. That old crow probably thought he could rob the other bird's nest. But, he knew the nest belonged to someone else. So, he couldn't be too sure about what he was trying to do. When you're not sure of yourself, it's always easier to become afraid," he said.

I nodded my head.

Father's lesson in courage continued: "Johnnie, courage is a gift that man is born with; fear is something he has to acquire." He paused for a long moment. "It seems to me, son, that as long as a man does what he is sure is best for him, he never need worry about what he is not sure of."

I went to bed that night thinking about what Dad had said. It did not make too much sense to me, but one thing I was sure of -- the scissortail had become my favorite bird. It never got used to being afraid!

The warm idyllic spring days passed quickly. By the end of May, school had let out, and I was itching to do something really fun. The spring rains had pretty well ended, but Big Sandy Creek was still full of water.

Dad said there were probably a lot of big yellow catfish hiding in some of the deep holes of the creek, but it would really take a fisherman to get them out.

"The best way to get those old whiskered granddaddys," he said, "is to set out some trotlines and fish all night." I was excited and eager to do it. Mom was not too sure of the idea. "John, I'm not so sure he ought to be off down in those woods all night," she warned.

"Aw, Mom, R.C. and Wesley and Warren are going with me...and their mom doesn't care," I pleaded. R.C. Patterson and Wesley and Warren Cantrell were my friends. We had been secretly planning this trip for several weeks. Finally after much persuasion on my part and a little help from Dad, Mom agreed.

"Now, you boys stay together and don't be playing any tricks on each other," she admonished.

"We won't," I promised.

Around dusk R.C. and the Cantrell boys came by the house, "Hey, Johnnie, let's get going," they yelled. I was racing around the barn trying to finish my chores.

Dad saw how anxious I was to leave. "Go ahead, Johnnie. I'll finish up for you," he told me.

"Thanks, Dad!"

"And Johnnie," he grabbed my arm as I started to run for the house, "I want you to promise me two things."

"Yes sir?"

"Stay out of that water at night, and keep a good campfire going," he said.

"Okay, Dad, I promise."

"And be careful," he yelled as I ran for the house.

The sun set and it was already quite dark when we left. The Cantrells brought their dog, Blue. R.C. brought his big hound, Sam, so I decided to take my dog. Bigfoot was part hound and part Irish terrier. He was a big dog, weighed about 80 pounds. I had found him when he was just a little pup a couple of months old. Someone had dumped him at the edge of town. Bigfoot was a pretty good dog, except for a habit he had of running off from home every now and then. Although he tolerated the rest of the family, he was more or less a one man dog. The only other person he really

answered to was Dad.

Bigfoot and Blue sniffed each other and took off ahead of us. R.C. had his single-shot .22 rifle with him, so we felt pretty comfortable as we got to the big woods. We had three miles to walk to where we planned to set our fishing lines and camp for the night. I carried a small hand ax in my belt to be used to cut firewood. Wesley and Warren had brought the fishing lines. We didn't carry much other gear, because we planned to sit up all night with our fishing lines.

It was pitch dark when we got to "deep hole bend". The only light we had walking through the woods was the little two-cell flashlight I carried. It hardly gave enough light to see ten feet ahead. But it didn't make much difference. The woods were so thick you could only see the branches and brush right in front of you. After about an hour we finally came to the clearing on the banks of the creek. We were all quite relieved to get out of the woods.

After setting our fish lines for the night, we soon had a good fire going on a large sandbar. We made ourselves comfortable,

some of us sitting and some lying beside the fire. We could hear the dogs barking and carrying on back in the woods. "Must of treed a possum," said R.C.

"Old Blue'd never tree no possums," said Warren, Wesley's younger brother. "He's a coon dog!"

"That's right," said Wesley, "our dad trained him never to hunt anything but coons."

"Yeah," I said, "and if it is a coon, there's no telling how long they'll run him." The sound of dog barks were becoming more distant. "They'll be back when they get tired running whatever it is," I said.

I settled back into the soft sand and gazed into the dark water. The glow of fire sent shimmering golden contrast to the light ripples around the sandbar and the black water beyond. The air was heavy and still with the smell of damp earth and rotting leaves. We talked idly between long pauses in conversation.

"Warren, why don't you go check the lines?" Wesley finally asked.

"Naw, I don't want to," he replied, trying to conceal any fear he had.

The lines were set at intervals of 40 to 50 feet up the creek bank for about 100 yards. We could see the first two lines from where we sat on the sandbar, but because of the bend in the creek, the other lines were out of sight.

"Nothin's going to get you," his brother coaxed, "don't be scared." This was the first time Warren had ever spent the night away from home.

"Nothing but a big ole panther," R.C. joked loudly.

"I ain't goin'," Warren said. "I hurt my foot back up the trail."

"Aw, go on, Warren, nothin's going to get you," urged Wesley.

"What about them panthers?"

"There ain't been panthers around here in years," I ventured.

"I heard some hunters found some tracks back on the Johnson Ranch just last week," R.C. replied soberly.

R.C. was about six months older than me. We had been close friends since the first grade in school. I believed what R.C. said. He usually told the truth. The cougar, commonly called a panther in our part of



Texas, was periodically reported in some of the remote parts of our country. But it was rarely seen. Usually news of a panther in the vicinity came as a result of people confusing the tracks of the large bobtailed wildcat (which was very common) with a cougar.

"Aw, R.C., why do you want to say that," said Wesley. "You're just scaring Warren."

"I'll go check the lines myself," I volunteered.

I had checked the first three lines and nothing had bothered them. I was at the fourth line and both out of sight and hearing of the others when suddenly from up the creek I heard a sound piercing the eerie stillness of the night. It gave me goose pimples. I dropped the line. I froze. The hair raised on the back of my head.

"There ain't no panthers around here," I whispered to myself. Then I heard it again. It was a long, high pitched wail . . . almost like the cry of a small child. It was terrifying!

I shined my flashlight in the direction of the sound, but all I could see was the shadowy outlines of the trees. With all the courage I could muster, I slowly turned and

began to walk back toward the campfire. It took all of my willpower to keep from breaking into a wild run. When I got to the campfire, R.C. was on his knee with his .22 rifle in his hand, and Wesley menacingly held my ax. Warren was crouched between the two, his eyes wide with terror.

We looked at each other in stunned silence.

"Did you hear that?" R.C. asked.

I nodded. The animal screamed again. This time it sounded much closer. Warren whimpered, the rest of us were too frightened to make a sound. The seconds ticked away like eternity.

"I wish the dogs were here," said Wesley softly.

The big cat cried again. This time he was down the creek below us. He had silently passed us on the opposite side of the creek. We looked at each other, but no one spoke.

Finally I broke the silence. "He's going away," I said.

Warren was pale. "I wanna go home," he said.

"It's gone, Warren. It ain't gonna bother us," Wesley said.

"I wanna go home now," Warren insisted.

"Nothing will bother you around a campfire," R.C. said. "All wild animals are afraid of fire."

"I want to go home," he wailed. "I'm scared!"

"Shut up, Warren," Wesley commanded.

"Take me home, Wesley, please. I'll give you my big steelie and my two tiger eyes if you will."

Wesley looked at me. It was obvious that Warren was terrified. He was eight years old, but as far as he was concerned this was no place for him to be. "Well, the fish ain't biting anyway," said Wesley. "It's just a mile over the hill to our place. I guess I could take Warren home, then come back."

"I want Mama!" bawled Warren.

"Would you let me borrow your rifle?" asked Wesley.

R.C. paused. "Well, I dunno." It was apparent that he didn't want to be left out here without his rifle. All of us were ready to get out of here, but none of us except Warren was willing to admit that he might be afraid.

"Well, since it doesn't look like the fish are biting, why don't we just go home and come back in the morning to run the lines?" I suggested casually. Everyone agreed.

We put out the fire and headed straight over the hill to the Cantrell place. It was much farther for me to walk home this way, but I was in no mood to head out alone through the creek bottom woods. When we reached the road that led to Wesley and Warren's house, we all breathed a sigh of relief. R.C. lived right up the road from the Cantrells, so I had to walk three miles back home alone. With a simple "See you later, Johnnie," the others turned and left.

I was alone. The flashlight that I had been carrying was already dim from use. However, the starlight was bright enough for me to easily see the road, so I hurried my pace. "I wish ole Bigfoot had stayed around," I muttered. "What if the panther comes back this way?"

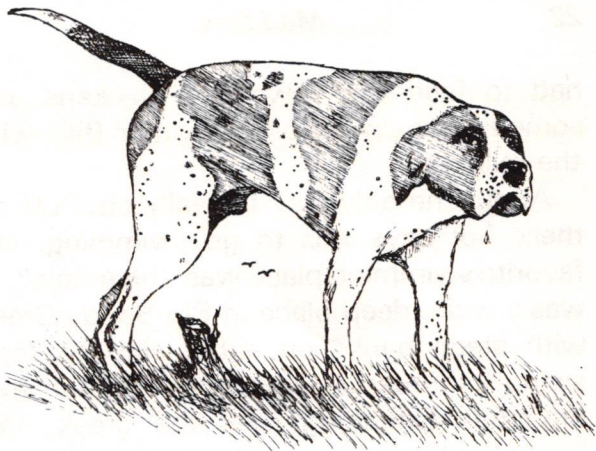
I had an irresistible urge to look back over my shoulder. I had walked about a mile and was in a particularly woody stretch of road. The tree branches had grown over the road, blocking out the starlight.

Suddenly I heard a rattle in the bushes. I quickly switched on my flashlight and shined it toward the noise. An icy knot lodged in the pit of my stomach. In the dim light of the bushes was the unmistakable outline of an animal. "Oh, God!" I gasped, and plunged headlong down the road as fast as I could run. Each time I looked back over my shoulder the animal was still effortlessly pacing me. Finally I reached the limit of my endurance. Backing up against a large oak tree beside the road, I gripped my ax in my sweating hand. "Come on, you dirty devil. If you want to kill me, you'll have to fight!" I gasped. As the animal approached, I heard a pleading whine, Then in the dim light I recognized him. "Bigfoot!" I exclaimed with a mixture of relief and anger. "I thought you were off chasing coons. You almost scared me to death!"

The next day R.C. came by with a five pound yellow catfish. He and Wesley had run the trotlines and had caught two catfish and a big carp. "There sure were some big cat tracks on the other side of the creek," he said. "It looked like he was heading down toward your place. You didn't happen to run

into him on your way home, did you?"

"Naw," I replied, "I made it home okay."



## CHAPTER TWO

### MAD DOG

**THE** days grew longer and hotter. Thank goodness, there wasn't too much work to do around the place in the heat of the summer. The crops were all planted, and the stock just mostly grazed during the morning and evening. In the middle of the day they too tried to find some shade and keep cool like everyone else. The temperature was 90 degrees or above for days at a time. It was not unusual for it to hit 100 degrees on a hot clear day. Each evening I

had to feed the cows and chickens and sometimes help my older brother Billy with the milking.

About the only way to really cool off on these hot days was to go swimming. My favorite swimming place was "blue hole". It was a wide, deep place in Big Sandy Creek with steep banks on either side. A rope swing had been strung on one of the tree branches extending over the creek. We could hold the rope, get back 40 or 50 feet, and with a running start swing cut high over the creek and let go to plunge into the middle of the swimming hole. It was exciting and fun! On a hot summer day you could find boys from as far away as Alvord, our closest town, at blue hole.

I usually took Bigfoot swimming with me. He loved water as much as I did and would swim for hours. He sort of assumed the role of unofficial "lifeguard" of the hole, because when someone would holler and splash around in the water, ole Bigfoot would swim out to them. He would allow you to hold onto him while he swam back to shore. The boys were always kidding and cutting up in the water, acting like they were



drowning when they weren't, but Bigfoot didn't care. He had a big protective instinct. However, one day this protective instinct almost cost him his life.

Several boys and myself had gathered at the swimming hole for an afternoon of fun. One of the boys had a big yellow part-terrier named Prince. He was usually a friendly dog, but that day he was acting kind of strange. He would lay around for awhile, then would get up and bark like he was after something and run off into the woods. After awhile he would come back and do the same thing again. It was strange because he didn't seem to be after anything real. Prince and Bigfoot had been on pretty good terms, but today Bigfoot kept his distance from Prince. In fact, every time Prince would come near me, Bigfoot would bristle up and get between me and the other dog. He would just stand there growling until Prince moved away. I scolded Bigfoot several times because I couldn't understand why he was acting so belligerent. The next day we heard that Prince went mad. To make matters worse, he had run off before anyone could do anything for him. Of

course, there wasn't much you could do for a suspected rabid dog, except pen him up until the disease was confirmed. "Well, about all the veterinarian can do is put him out of his misery," Dad had said. "There's no known cure once the dog starts acting strange and slobbering at the mouth."

"What will they do?" I asked.

"If they find him, they'll just have to shoot him," he replied. "And you had better keep Bigfoot locked up in the barn for a few days, because if Prince comes around our place your dog would most likely fight him. If he gets bit, he'll probably come down with rabies too."

For several days everyone was on the alert for the rabid dog. But no one saw him, so the excitement soon died down. We just assumed that Prince had probably run off somewhere and died. "Dogs have a sense of knowing when they are going to die," Dad said. "They'll usually go off alone as far away as they can, then just lay down and die." I felt kind of sad for poor old Prince, but I knew there was nothing anyone could do. I just hoped he would die peacefully--and not bite anyone before he

died.

The next day my father said, "Johnnie, get the wagon hitched up. I want to take some new salt blocks out to the pastures." Salt was essential to the diet of the livestock. We bought it in large yellow blocks about one foot square and we set it out around the stock tanks or the places where we put out hay. These salt blocks had to be replaced about twice a year. I got the two old work horses up to the corral and began to hitch them to the wagon. "Bring the wagon over here," Dad yelled from the barn. I got up into the seat, slapped old Bill (our lead horse) lightly on the rump, and drove the wagon over to the barn.

We loaded several blocks of salt into the wagon and took out for the back pastures. I was driving, with Dad sitting on the spring seat beside me. It was a beautiful Texas summer day. The wagon road was lined with wildflowers and the pastures were lush with green range grass and clover. Already high in the sky, the warm morning sun gave the air a dreamlike, liquid effect. Bigfoot was running along under the wagon making sure that he stayed in the shade.

Occasionally he would trot out to sniff the bushes along the way.

"Pull up here, Johnnie," Dad said. He got down from the wagon and walked around behind. I jumped over the seat into the wagon bed to help him scoot the block of salt off the back. Bigfoot had run off into a grove of small oaks while we were setting out the salt. He began to bark wildly. "Here, Bigfoot," I called as we prepared to leave. "Come on here, dog," I yelled. "Let's go!" Bigfoot kept up his barking.

"Better go see what he's treed," Dad instructed. I jumped down off the seat and raced over toward the oak grove. As I entered the grove Bigfoot came trotting out like nothing had happened. "Apparently whatever he was after has given him the slip," I thought. I turned and started back toward the wagon about a hundred yards away. Suddenly I stopped short and gasped. Between me and the wagon was a big yellow dog: Prince.

"Johnnie, stay where you are!" my father shouted. The snarling dog was approaching the wagon, his teeth bared. Foam dripped from one corner of his mouth.

Suddenly, Bigfoot barked a challenge and raced toward the dog. The rabid dog turned away from the wagon to face Bigfoot. With the dog distracted, Dad whipped up the team and circled in my direction. As I jumped on the wagon, I felt a sob catch in my throat. Bigfoot was slowly circling the other dog. He had no doubt saved both Dad and me from attack, but it seemed now that he himself was doomed. "Oh, God," I prayed from a cotton-dry mouth, "please do something!"

Suddenly a rifle shot rang out. The mad dog slumped to the ground. Standing a short distance from the fence that separated our place from the McDaniel place was Mr. McDaniel. He had a rifle in his hand. His horse stood nearby. "Stay back, boys. He may not be dead yet," he warned. Walking a few yards closer, he put a final bullet into the doomed animal.

"I spotted him back up in my pasture," he recalled as he and Dad stood talking over the fence. "I've been following him on horseback trying to corner him. I guess Bigfoot found him for me."

Dad's heart was no doubt full of feeling.

There was a brief nonverbal communication between the two rugged ranchers. Dad stood silently for a minute, then quietly said, "Thanks, Bill."

"Don't mention it, John," he responded. He looked at me. "That's a mighty fine dog you got there, son."

In my boyish, limited way I could not tell this man of the love, admiration, and gratitude I felt for this bigfooted hound. I looked down at the ground and kicked the dirt with my toe. "He's a pretty good ole dog," I said. Bigfoot walked over and licked me on the hand.

"Yep, pretty good ole dog," Dad repeated.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RANGE FIRE

**THAT** evening at the house, Dad and I checked Bigfoot over from head to tail for scratches or bites. He had none. But for the next few days Bigfoot stayed closer to me than usual. It was as if the incident with Prince had brought us closer together.

That weekend I decided to saddle up one of the horses and ride into town, five miles away. I hadn't seen Bubba Stevens, the owner of Prince, since that day at the swimming hole. I figured I would run into

him in town, and I felt he should at least know what had finally come of his dog. Besides, Saturday was an especially fun day because I loved to ride. In fact, one of my favorite activities was horseback riding. Sometimes some of the fellows from around our parts would get together on Saturday and ride out to the county fairgrounds or some place where some activity was going on like a church barbeque. Occasionally we would get together and race. Dad didn't mind us short-losing the horses, but he didn't approve of the idea of running the horses wide open. One gopher hole in the wrong place and the horse could have a broken leg, and the rider a broken skull. "You're better off not to race," he warned.

When I got to town a group of boys had already gathered. The Kerrs had a new horse, and Junior Kerr was showing him off. "He's the fastest horse in the county," he bragged. "Come on, Johnnie, let's see what that old lame mare of yours can do."

"Aw, I don't want to race now," I replied. "Some other time." I was riding the little paint mare that was the fastest horse we had on our place.



"Johnnie's afraid to race me," he mouthed off in front of the others.

"No, I'm not!"

He continued his badgering until finally I gave in. A guy can only take so much. And besides, the family pride was at stake. "Okay," I said, "I'll race you down to the turn in the road and back."

"I'll beat you by a city block," Junior boasted.

One of the boys agreed to start the race. The course was down a long, sloping clay road that made a sharp right turn at the bottom of the hill. We agreed to race to the turn in the road, then back to the starting point.

"Get ready...get set...GO!" shouted the starter.

We were off! Down the road we raced. About halfway to the turn my horse began moving ahead and soon was leading by half a length. We came to the turn and wheeled our horses around almost simultaneously. But I got a better turn than Junior because I dug my foot into the stirrups and leaned as far out in the opposite direction as I could.

My horse wheeled around and headed

back. As she did, I felt something give way with the saddle. But I quickly recovered my position on the horse and galloped my mare full out toward the finish line. I was now leading Junior by about a length and a half, but I didn't dare slow the pace because he was starting to gain on me. As we neared the finish, the boys began to crowd into the road. We flashed over the finish line with my horse in the lead by half a length. As I pulled up on the reins, suddenly my girth broke and the saddle and me went flying through the air. My head hit the hard clay ground, and I went out like a light. The dust was still swirling as the boys gathered around me trying to help me regain consciousness. After about two or three minutes I was able to sit up.

"Man, look at that goose egg on his noggin!" one of the boys exclaimed.

I felt the side of my head where a large lump was swelling. "Oh, my head," I moaned. I was dizzy and weak. Slowly I got to my feet and dusted the dirt off my clothes.

"Pretty fast horse, Johnnie," said Junior sullenly, "but if you weren't hurt I'd ask for

another race. I think you turned your horse before you got to the end of the road."

I was too sore to argue with him. I put the saddle back on my horse, used my belt to makeshift tie the girth to the saddle, and headed out for home.

"Well, I guess you learned your lesson," my father said. It was several weeks later when I finally told him what happened. We were repairing a fence out behind the barn. The air was hot and dry. The area we lived in is known as the Cross Timber Grasslands. Most of the terrain in this section of Texas is made up of rolling irregular grassland, occasionally criss-crossed with narrow stands of post oak and black-jack timber. The grass was mainly native needly and buffalo, and a few shallow creeks drained the land. What had been lush, knee-high grass in the spring had now turned brown and dry. "Sure is a likely time for a prairie fire," Dad remarked as he gazed at the looming thunderheads to the east.

Prairie fires were very infrequent, but when they did happen they were awful. They swept away everything in their path. In the ranch country where I lived, there was a

particular concern about range fires. Not only would a large fire destroy fences, and sometimes houses and barns, but the grass that the ranchers depended on to support the livestock during the summer and fall would be lost until the spring rains brought on a new growth. So there was never any hesitation about helping a neighbor when a fire started on his place.

As we continued to work, we kept noticing lightning flashes over toward the Taylor place. The air turned hot and static. "You know, Johnnie," Dad said, "I think we had better get out of these open spaces. We're liable to get struck by lightning." We quickly headed home. No sooner had we reached the barn than my sister Bertha came racing across the road from the house. "The Taylor place is on fire!" she screamed. "Mama can see it from the kitchen."

"I'd better climb up to the hayloft and have a look," my father said, his voice rising.

"I want to see too!" I exclaimed. We both headed for the ladder.

Dad got to the loft and flung open the hay

door. Sure enough, a column of smoke was clearly visible from the direction of the Taylor place. "I'll bet lightning started it," Dad said, scrambling back down the ladder. "They'll need some help. Grab some feedsacks and some buckets and get into the truck." He looked at my sister. "You can come too, Bertha, to help keep the sacks wet." Bertha and I jumped into the old Model T truck while Dad cranked the starter. The truck chattered to life, and we roared off down the road with the dry dust flying behind us.

People from all around began to arrive to help fight the fire. When we got there the fire had already burned out several acres and was nearing the fence line of the Bonner Ranch. Most of the folks had brought along gunnysacks and water buckets, and they were already beating at the flames. Mr. Taylor had pulled a wagon loaded with three large barrels of water up to the fire. Dad and I wet the sacks with water and began to beat the flames. But the fire continued to creep nearer the Bonner fence line.

"You think that fire gap will hold it?" Dad

shouted to Mr. Taylor.

"I think so, if the wind doesn't get up any more," he returned above the roar of the fire.

A fire gap is a narrow strip of plowed land, usually running along the fence line. Its purpose is to contain grass fires and keep them from spreading from one section of land to another. We were desperately trying to contain the fire along the fire gap. "If it jumps this gap we're in bad trouble," Dad shouted.

"Keep after it, boys!" Mr. Taylor encouraged.

I had beat the flames until my arms and shoulders felt like lead. I would beat until my sack got dry, then run to the water buckets, wet the sack, and return to the fire. Some of the men were trying to plow a new gap, but the flames were outracing them. The fire was so hot my face blistered. The smoke stung my eyes.

As we continued our frantic efforts, suddenly a gust of wind swept the sparks across the gap. Immediately flames ignited along the fence row, then leaped across into the tall grass on the Bonner ranch. The dry

grass across the fence was much taller, and now the flames were leaping several feet into the air. A groan went up from the firefighters. "Wet sacks can't stop those flames," one of the men said, shaking his head.

"What do you think, John?" Mr. Taylor asked Dad worriedly.

"Well, I don't know. It's for sure that we're not going to be able to stop it on this side of the hill," Dad replied, watching the fire race swiftly up the hill. Some of the fence posts were now also on fire. "What's the land like on the other side of the hill?"

"It's a lot rockier," he replied. "Grass is a lot thinner."

"If we can't stop it on the back side of the hill and it gets down into the flat land below, there's going to be a lot of range lost," Dad said.

"That's right, John."

"Then let's cut the fence and get around to the other side," Dad decided. "We've got to stop it there--or else." Mr. Taylor nodded his head vigorously in agreement.

"Cut the fence, boys," Mr. Taylor ordered. "We'll stop this fire on the other

side of the hill. Let's go!"

The firefighters cut the Bonner fence and began pulling equipment on the Bonner land. They had about 30 minutes to reach a position to hold the fire on the other side of the hill. We jumped into the truck with four or five of the men hanging on in the back. Dad took off around the hill. The old truck lurched and leaned as Dad steered around as many rocks and holes as he could. When we reached the back side of the hill, we heard the motor whine and cough as it strained to pull the steep incline. Dad swung the truck around and pointed it downhill.

"Now listen to me," Dad said, looking at Bertha and me wide-eyed in the front seat. "If it looks like we can't stop the fire here, you kids hightail it back to the truck, because we'll be getting out of here in a hurry!" We nodded our heads excitedly.

The men stretched out in a line just below the crest of the hill and waited. The smoke came boiling over the top of the hill and blackened the sky above us. Small fires broke out. These were quickly extinguished by the firefighters. We wet our sacks and anxiously waited for the main fire.



It wasn't long coming. Over the crest of the hill came a wall of flames. It was a terrifying sight! Smoke and waves of heat filled the air above the flames like a devouring dragon.

The fire blackened the hilltop and began to move down toward us. Soon it reached the short grass where we had set up our last desperate fire line. The fire immediately dropped in size. A cry went up from the men. "NOW!" As in one body we moved forward attacking the fire. Step in and strike. Step back. Move up and strike again, and again, and again. We lost count of time. Like mechanical men we drove at the fire, propelled by one great urge--stop the fire!

Suddenly it was over. The line of flames disappeared, leaving a smoking black landscape in its wake. We had stopped it! "Good work, boys," Mr. Taylor shouted happily.

A cheer went up from the crowd of men and boys. Our faces were so blackened by soot we were hardly recognizable. I looked down at my black clothes, suddenly feeling bone-tired, but happy.

"It looks like we beat it," Dad said as we

wearily headed for home. I had a good feeling inside. They might not have been able to beat the fire if I had not been there to help. "Who knows what it might have destroyed," I thought.

"That was quite a job you two did," Dad told us proudly. "You can bet your boots your help was appreciated." Bertha and I looked at each other and grinned. I felt like I had really done something worthwhile that day.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DANGER AT THE SWIMMING HOLE

**THE** next week was the Fourth of July, one of my favorite times of the year. This holiday was time for gay festivity for the town of Alvord, so most of the town turned out for the occasion. The ladies all prepared special dishes for the picnic that they set up on makeshift tables laid out under a grove of pecan trees along Big Sandy Creek. The men of the community all gathered early in the morning the day of the picnic with a large net seine to catch fish for the fish fry.

The method was to get a number of men and boys strung out holding the net along the bottom with their feet, then slowly move it out into the creek into the deep water. When it was moved through the deep water and back into shallow water, the net was pulled onto the shore, trapping fish. We kept the good fish like catfish, bass, and larger perch. The others we threw back into the creek.

I was having a great time splashing around and cutting up with the other boys, but we weren't coming out with a lot of fish. The creek was not running much now, but there were still deep pools of water, especially at the bends and around large rocks. A couple of the men were "grappling" for catfish. They would wade the water ahead of the net, and with their hands or bare feet would feel around up under bank ledges and rocks for fish. If they moved very slowly and deliberately they could sometimes grab the fish with their hands and fling them up onto the bank. I was too afraid of snapping turtles or water moccasin snakes to attempt such a feat. It was fascinating, however, to watch. One of

the men was quite accomplished at the art and had already caught three large catfish.

We had moved upstream into deeper water. I was absorbed watching the grapplers and wasn't paying much attention to the seining. Before I knew what was happening, I was being pulled into water over my head. I released my grip on the net and tried to step back. To my surprise, I discovered my foot was caught in the web of the netting. I tried to cry out, but when I opened my mouth, it filled with muddy water as I was dragged beneath the surface. Opening my eyes, I could see only yellowish water with sunlight streaming through it. It is hard to describe my feelings as I fought to free myself from the net. There was absolutely no panic. There were no flashing events of life before my eyes as I had heard said happened when you are about to drown. I just kept thinking how stupid I was not to be able to get my foot out of the net. "You've done it this time," I thought as I reached down to try to free my foot. When I did, my other foot became entangled in the net. The light began to turn darker before my eyes. My lungs felt like they were about

to pop. I seemed now to be drifting into a pool of gray nothingness. The thought flashed through my mind: "Why struggle any longer?" I had a vague sense of deep peace.

Suddenly I felt something like a suction at the top of my head. I was abruptly yanked to the surface. One of the men, noticing I was missing and seeing the bubbles rising to the surface, had reached down and grabbed me by the hair. I dimly remember being dragged to the bank amid the sounds of excited voices, then gagging and vomiting my way back to consciousness. The world slowly came back into focus.

A quilt was laid under a tree, and after I got into dry clothes, I was ordered to lie down and take it easy. For the rest of the day I was the center of attention and service, particularly from the girls. I enjoyed it so much that I was almost glad I had had such a close call. I had never been noticed so much in all my life!

That evening my feeling of royalty was shattered. "Johnnie, I've got some medicine I want you to take," Mother said. She was holding a huge spoonful of black

molasses and sulphur. I hated it.

"Aw, Mom, can't you see I'm okay?" I pleaded.

"Come on, John, I don't want you coming down with consumption," she told me. "This will do you good." I knew it was useless to argue with her further. I got a big dipper of water ready. Then, holding my nose, I gulped down the foul tasting liquid. "Auck..." I retched.

"Now, off to bed with you," she ordered. "Let's see how you feel in the morning."

"I'll feel perfect, Mama," I said, still tasting the awful medicine. "I know I will."



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DAD'S LIFE IS THREATENED

**THE** next day I slept late. Everyone but Bertha and Dorothy had left the house for one thing or another. Dad had gone to town to get a wagon part fixed. Frances, my older sister, had spent the night at her girlfriend's house. My older brother Billy was working in town at the feed store. J.B., my younger brother and the youngest one in the family, was playing on the front porch.

"Johnnie, will you go gather the eggs?" Mama asked.



"Yes, ma'am," I replied. I picked up the egg bucket and headed toward the hen house. We had very few chickens on the ranch, just enough for the family and an occasional fryer. I didn't particularly care for chickens. They seemed awfully dumb. Besides, I hated cleaning the hen house worse than any other chore. We had one big old Plymouth Rock rooster that was mean as the dickens--to me. He didn't bother anyone else. Just me. To tell the truth, I was sort of afraid of him because he had a nasty habit of sneaking up and jumping me from behind. We had a personal feud going between us that became the source of many family laughs. "If that old rooster comes after me, he'll be sorry," I yelled back toward the house.

"You just get the eggs and leave him alone. He's the only rooster I've got," Mother warned.

"Dumb ole rooster," I said under my breath.

I had gathered about half a dozen eggs, and the rooster didn't even seem to notice I was in the pen. He was off at the other end, pecking and scratching around with the

hens. I closed the hen house door and started toward the gate. Wham! The blow sent the egg bucket flying. All the eggs smashed to the ground.

"So, it's you again," I shouted furiously. I picked up the bucket and swung it with all my might right at him. The rim of the bucket caught him square in the head. He turned two or three flips in the air, fell on his back with his feet kicking in the air, his head contorted to one side. Then he lay still.

"Dear Lord," I thought, "I've killed him. Now I'll really catch it!"

I went back to the house and told Mother what had happened. "If he'd have just left me alone," I kept repeating. I could tell Mother was mad, but she didn't say anything else. When Dad came in from town a little while later, I told him what happened. He went outside to take a look at the rooster.

He came back laughing. "Son, looks like that old rooster got the best of you again." Puzzled, I looked at him. "He ain't dead. He's out there staggering around like a drunk man, but he'll be alright," he chuckled. Then he changed the subject.

"Go out and look in the truck. You'll see what I bought."

There were about fifty young turkey gobblers Dad had bought in town. I remembered he had remarked earlier that because of all the grasshoppers this year, he ought to get some turkeys to help keep them down.

"Those turkeys will get fat in no time with all these hoppers around the place," he explained. "We'll put them in with the chickens for a few days, then turn them out on the place."

When I put the turkeys in with the chickens, the old Plymouth Rock rooster was back on his feet. He eyed me warily but he never again attacked me.

The turkeys began to thrive. I soon turned them out from the chickens. They began to roam the ranch at will, feeding mostly on bugs and grasshoppers. Some returned at night to a regular roosting place with the chickens. Others just roosted in the trees around the place.

A week or so later J.B was playing down in the pasture by the windmill. He came running back to the house. "Daddy," he cried all out of breath, "somethin's been

eatin' our turkeys!"

"What are you talking about, J.B.?"

"They're dead, they're dead," he repeated breathlessly.

"What in the world are you talking about, boy?" Dad grabbed him by the shoulders and turned his face toward him. "Now, what's happened?"

"Four of 'em--dead."

"You found four dead turkeys?" Dad asked.

"Yessir," J.B. gulped.

Dad turned to me. "Go see what in the world J.B. is talking about." He paused. "No, on second thought, I'll go see for myself."

When we got to the windmill we saw J.B. was right. There they were, lying amid scattered feathers, the carcasses of four fine young turkey gobblers. Dad put his hands into his pockets and slowly walked around the site. "Well--looks like we got us a coyote or a bobcat after our turkeys," he said. "Whatever it is will probably be back."

"Are we going to try to catch it?" I asked.

"Yep, we'll just have to keep a sharp eye out for the varmint and keep a rifle handy.

He'll be back. you can bet on that."

The next day Dad took his rifle and followed the turkeys as the flock browsed in the brush around the windmill. Whatever had killed the other turkeys had probably come up from the woods below the road. Dad kept himself concealed in the bushes. At noon he was just about to come back to the house for lunch when he heard a loud commotion down along the fence. The turkeys were gobbling like crazy, jumping into the air flapping their wings. Dad ran toward the noise. The brush was thick but the unmistakable outline of a fairly large animal was visible. Dad fired three rapid shots at the animal. It dropped to the ground instantly. Dad lowered his rifle and slowly walked toward the animal. "Well, I'll be darn," he said to himself. "I've killed me a turkey stealing dog."

It is common knowledge among ranchers and farmers that once a dog begins to kill livestock of any kind he is automatically doomed. The dog will invariably continue to kill and maim until he himself is finally destroyed. Country people have no qualms about killing even their own dogs once this

is obvious.

A few days later Bill McDaniel came by the house. Dad began telling him about losing the turkeys to a stray dog. "What did the dog look like?" Mr. McDaniel asked.

"Well, he was a black and tan hound, far as I recollect."

"I hear that Carl Rivers is missing one of his hounds. Sounds like he's the one you shot, John."

"I sure hated it," Dad said, "but I couldn't let him keep killing my turkeys. You know that, Bill."

"I would've had to do the same thing," agreed Mr. McDaniel. "Rivers will have to learn to keep his dogs up. Ain't no need to let his dogs run all over the countryside anyway."

Carl Rivers worked for the railroad, when he worked. His favorite pastime was coon hunting. During the summer nights you could hear his hounds baying through the bottoms two or three times a week. About the only thing he took any pride in was his hounds. He often bragged that he had four or five of the best hounds in our part of the country. On Saturday and Sunday you

could always find him at the domino hall - usually at least half-drunk. He had been put in jail several times in the past for being drunk and fighting.

Rivers soon found out through the grapevine about losing his dog on our place. It was inevitable that trouble would develop over this incident. The confrontation finally took place on our weekly trip to Alvord. We were just getting into our truck and preparing to return home when Dad was stopped by Rivers' voice.

"Hey, Barnes," he said, his words slurred. "What's this about you shootin' my dog, man?" Carl had been drinking. There were several men with him.

"That's right, Carl, he was killing my turkeys," Dad answered calmly. He stood by the open door of the truck.

"You have any idea what the dog was worth?" Rivers asked threateningly. "You ready to pay me for him?"

"Are you ready to pay me for the turkeys he killed?" Dad asked in return.

"Them damn turkeys ain't worth one of my dogs, Barnes," the man snarled.

"I'm sorry he was one of your dogs, Carl,

but when anybody's dog starts killing my livestock, I'm going to get rid of it." Dad had a cold, hard tone to his voice.

"Listen, you red-necked cow puncher," Rivers continued drunkenly, "you ain't heard the last of me yet."

"John, let's go," Mother called from inside the truck. I sat terrified next to my mother.

"Yes, you can't talk to a man when he's in that kind of shape," Dad said softly. He reached under the front seat for the crank to start the truck. Rivers must have drunkenly misunderstood the action, because when Dad turned around Rivers had a knife in his hand.

"You don't scare me with that crank," he muttered stumbling toward the truck. "I'll cut your guts out!"

Slowly and deliberately Dad dropped the crank to the ground and reached for his own knife. There was a calculated coldness in his voice as he looked directly into Carl Rivers' bloodshot eyes. "Carl, if you come at me with that knife you had better be ready to use it because I am going to kill you," he said softly.



Rivers abruptly stopped. Bill McDaniel appeared from nowhere and stepped between Dad and Rivers. The men who had come with Rivers quickly grabbed him and began shoving him back toward the domino hall. "I'm gonna get you, Barnes," he shouted over his shoulder. "I'm gonna do to you what you did to my dog."

"If you do, Carl, I'll be waiting for you," Dad replied evenly.

Dad hardly spoke a word on the way home. I knew my father had a rough background, but I had never seen him like this. He had grown up in the Ozarks of Missouri. As a young man he'd been known for his fiery temper. On several occasions it had gotten him into barefisted, knockdown, dragout fights. On one such occasion he had stood off four other young men using only his fists and a two-foot piece of firewood. He had come to Texas when he was barely twenty and worked on the famous King Ranch. He became an expert rider and a crack pistol-shot. He later left the King Ranch over a dispute with some Mexican vaqueros which almost resulted in a full scale shootout. After he came to North

Texas to go into ranching for himself, he married my mother and began raising a family. He later became one of the most respected men in the county. However, he never backed down to anyone.

When we arrived home Dad went into the house, got his rifle, and walked out on the front porch. He leaned his gun against the wall and sat down in a cane bottom chair. He sat with his chair leaned against the wall, looking out across the countryside--waiting.

The afternoon wore on. I was terribly frightened. Mother made us stay in the house, so I sat on my bed thinking. "If Dad shoots Rivers, he might go to prison. Or even worse, Rivers might shoot him." The thought of these almost unbearable possibilities brought hot tears to my eyes. Mom and the girls stayed in the kitchen, where she quietly continued her usual routine of preparing supper. The whole family was tense and waiting. Finally, late in the afternoon when the sun began to sink in the sky, Dad got up and put the gun back in the house.

"Boys, I guess we'd better get on with our work," he suggested. The familiar

normal tone was back in his voice. I was almost skipping on the way to the barn to do the chores. The world had come back to life! Off down in the pasture I heard my favorite bird, the scissortail, call to his mate. How happy I was!

For several weeks the whole town buzzed with the talk of the encounter between Dad and Carl Rivers. There was some talk of another confrontation, but Rivers stayed more or less out of sight for the next week or so. He was clearly in the wrong and he realized it. When Dad came in from town a week or so later, I heard him talking to Mother. "Rivers apologized to me for what he had done," he said. "He said he'd been drinking that day, and was upset over losing one of his best dogs. But he said he didn't blame me for killing the dog after what he had started doing."

"I hope there's no more trouble," Mother said.

"I think he's learned his lesson," Dad replied.



## CHAPTER SIX

### OLD MAN BOYKIN

**AUGUST** was hot and stuffy. The days seemed to take on a character of endlessness, stretching into each other with hardly a break. The nights were almost as hot as the days, so J.B. and I started sleeping outside on the back porch. Mom had an old mattress she let us sleep on. One day R.C. came over to spend the night. He brought Sam, his favorite dog. Sam was really no hunting dog. He was just content to be R.C.'s protector and good friend. He

and Bigfoot had always been good friends, and since Sam was the older dog Bigfoot would follow his leadership.

After supper was over we all decided to play hide-and-seek out by the corral. Frances, Bertha, and J.B. followed us across the road to the corral.

"Not it," said I.

"Not it," echoed R.C.

"Not it," joined Frances and Bertha in unison.

"J.B., you're it!" It dawned too late on J.B. that he was IT. We would all go hide and it was up to J.B. to find us and get back to base before we could. "Aw, I'm always it," he wailed.

"That's okay, J.B. I'll let you catch me," said Frances. She was sixteen years old and J.B. was seven. He sort of looked to Frances as his protector when he felt that he was gotten the best of by me.

"One-two-three-four-five-six . . ." J.B. counted as we went flying in all directions.

I snuggled into my favorite hiding place. I looked out and lo and behold, there was Bigfoot standing no more than five feet away, his tongue hanging out, happily wag-

ging his tail. "Go on, Bigfoot," I commanded, "get out of here." He cocked his head to one side and looked at me, apparently trying to figure out why I suddenly did not want him around.

"Get out of here," I again commanded sternly. Bigfoot moved off about five feet and sat down on his haunches, still looking straight at me. "Oh no," I groaned softly, "that dumb dog is going to give me away, for sure." I was hiding among some loose boards stacked against the shed. As I tried to further conceal myself, a small animal suddenly darted from the pile of lumber. Bigfoot immediately gave chase. At the same time J.B. was just coming around the corral, and both of them came face-to-face with the animal. J.B. froze in his tracks.

"Wahhh . . ." he screeched, "it's a skunk." The animal had its tail raised and was dangerously close to J.B. I scooted out of my hiding place. J.B. by this time regained his composure and was heading in the opposite direction, but Bigfoot was carrying on like he'd treed a lion. Sam, R.C.'s dog, heard all the commotion and joined in the melee.

"Get back, Bigfoot," I screamed, but it was too late. Sam had rushed at the frightened animal. It whirled and sprayed both dogs with its smelly fluid. The dogs yelped and began to sneeze and rub their heads on the ground. Tears began to stream from my eyes. The smell was overwhelming. Frances was hollering for us to get away from the skunk, and Bertha began crying. "Bigfoot can't see," she sobbed.

Dad came out of the house and soon quieted the confusion. We took the dogs down to the stock tank and threw them into the water to try to get rid of as much of the skunk odor as possible. Although I had not been directly in the skunk's line of fire, some of the horrible stinking vapor had settled on my clothes.

Mother brought some clean clothes to the porch and handed them to R.C. "Tell Johnnie to go to the pump, strip off all his clothes, and wash himself from head to toe. He can't come back into the house until he does."

I was embarrassed, but did as I was told. I left my old clothes hanging on the corral to air out. It was several days before the smell of the skunk lifted around the house. How-

ever, it was at least a week before we could tolerate having Bigfoot near. I'm sure Bigfoot learned his lesson about skunks though, because he never again got close to one.

Billy came in from work one evening afterwards and announced that the Whitakers were going to have a fox hunt tonight. The fox hunt was a big event in the community. The two or three times a year they were held were considered big sporting events. There was a good deal of friendly bragging and wagering that went with the gathering. The men would meet with their hounds at a prearranged place and the hunt was started. The first hound to tree the fox was judged the winner. The hunters boasted that they were so attuned to the sound of their dogs they could tell whether or not the trail was hot or cold.

The fox is a very intelligent animal, and sometimes it would lead the hounds on a merry chase for hours, doubling back and forth on its trail, often thoroughly confusing the best of hounds. Usually the fox would lead the dogs across several miles of trail. If the trail sounded cold, the hunters would



simply build a fire and sit around swapping yarns until the trail got hot.

About a dozen hunters and boys gathered on the Whitaker place. There were about 30 hounds in the group. They were whining and barking, eager to get on with the hunt. The dogs were soon released, and the hunt was on.

We followed the dogs across miles of moonlit countryside, while listening to their pursuit. There was a constant dialog between the hunters on the progress of the dogs.

"Hey, did you hear the one about the city boy who went on a fox hunt?" one hunter asked.

"No, what happened?" another hunter coaxed.

It was a country joke about an old fox hunter who listening to the dogs run remarked, "Ain't that purty music?" The story went that the city fellow stopped and also listened intently, finally remarking, "I can't hear anything because of all those crazy hounds!" There were laughs and chuckles from the hunters about the naivete of city people. Everyone was in good

humor.

Suddenly the hunters stopped and listened. "I think they have it treed, by golly," said one excitedly.

"Sure sounds like it," another confirmed. By this time we were several miles away from the cars and trucks where we started. The men decided that three of the older boys would go back to the vehicles and drive the trucks to the road near where the dogs had treed. Billy was one of the older boys selected.

I tugged his sleeve in the darkness, "Can I go with you, Billy?" I asked.

"Yeah, you can come along. But you've got to be able to stay up with the rest of us," he warned.

The four of us started out across the country walking straight for the trucks. The first place we had to cross was the Boykin place. Old man Boykin was an eccentric old cuss who kept to himself. He was suspicious of anyone who came around his property, often accusing those who did of trying to steal from him. The folks around Alvord just accepted his odd ways and avoided him when possible. Our route took

us just back of his barn. We discussed the alternative of walking an extra three miles around his place, but decided that the extra miles were just too much. Especially since we had already walked about six miles on the hunt.

"I hear ole Boykin's got his peanut crop in. He'll be skittish as a young mare," Ben Carson warned.

"Yep, I 'magine he's sitting on it with a load of buckshot," Billy jokingly replied.

As we approached the back of the barn we could see a number of filled burlap sacks lying on racks in the barnyard. We moved as far away from the barn as possible. A small creek ran behind the barn, and old man Boykin had fenced it off for his pigs. No one wanted to climb over the fence with the pigs on a dark night. We would rather take our chances with Boykin. We were almost to the other side when Billy motioned to stop. There was a faint whiff of tobacco smoke in the air. "Quiet!" Billy ordered softly. For a few moments we stood motionless. It was too late. A hoarse voice rang out from the dark barn.

"Who's that out there?"

"Keep going!" Billy whispered. Quietly we moved farther away from the barn.

"Who's that, I say?" the voice again demanded. Then, "Answer me or I'll shoot!" We stopped dead in our tracks.

"We're fox hunters," Billy answered.

"What're you doing on my place?"

"We're just cuttin' across to get the trucks," Billy answered.

"You're lying," the old man retorted, his voice filled with emotion, "and I shoot boys who lie. You've got no business on my place. Get off my place or I'll fill your hides with buckshot."

The only two ways we could now get off his place were to go back the way we came, back past Boykin's barn, or just to keep going the way we were. We were almost to a fence that separated the barnyard from an open pasture and were about a hundred yards away from the barn.

"I'm not going back around the crazy old man," Ben said.

"Me neither," said Billy. "Let's head for the pasture!"

"Stop!" the old man shouted.

"Run!" Billy whispered loudly.

We took off as fast as we could toward the fence and the pasture. When we got to the fence, I dove under the bottom strand of wire. The other boys were hastily going over and through the fence. As I got up and headed for the pasture I looked back and could see Billy still in the fence. Suddenly a shot rang out. In the stillness of the late night the sound was deafening. I saw Billy fall sprawling to the ground. My heart leaped to my throat.

"Billy!" I screamed, running back toward him. I was still yelling for the others to help me when I got to his side. He was struggling to get to his feet. Short gasps came from his mouth. Finally he said, "Shut up, Johnnie. . . I'm okay . . . I just . . . fell . . . and it knocked . . . the wind out of me."

We helped Billy to his feet and took off as fast as we could across the pasture. We crossed a creek and started up Anderson Hill. It was not until we got to the top that we dared slow down. From the top of the hill we looked backed toward old Boykin's place. In the distance we saw tiny pinpoints of light converging on the place. It was not until we returned with the trucks that we

found out what the lights were.

The sounds had carried so well in the still night air that the hunters had heard the shouts and the shot. Knowing that this was the direction we had headed, the hunters quickly came to investigate.

"I jest fired a shot in the air to scare off them boys," the frightened old man insisted when confronted by a dozen angry hunters. "Wul, I wouldn't hurt them boys for anything."

But the hunters did not accept his excuse so easily. They severely warned him about any repetition of his actions.

When we returned to the rendezvous with the hunters we were the object of some good-natured kidding. "You boys sure made good time getting across old man Boykin's place," one of them ribbed. "Yeah, when we asked him if he'd seen four boys go by his place," another joked, "he said he hadn't seen any boys, but he did recall four little tornados heading across his pasture." Everyone had a good laugh, but I was the only one Billy ever told about what made him fall to the ground.

"When Boykin shot at us, I tried to jump

the fence," he explained. "But my britches got hung in the barb wire. My feet were still in the fence when I fell forward, and I hit the ground so hard it knocked the wind out of me." He winked at me. "And that's just between me and you.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CAMP MEETING

**SUMMER** was swiftly drawing to a close. Soon my carefree days would turn back to the classic reading, writing, and arithmetic of school. There was, however, one more event to take place. That was the Summer Revival.

We usually attended a small church called "Union Hill Church." Each summer one or the other of the local denominations would erect a brush arbor tabernacle on the grounds of the Nickelville School and con-



duct a community-wide revival. People from all churches and beliefs were invited to participate. This summer the preacher was coming all the way from Oklahoma City to conduct the meeting!

We hitched up the team and drove down into the bottoms. It took us about half a day to cut a wagon load of good long willow saplings. When we got to the Nickelville School it was buzzing with activity. Some of the men were erecting the wooden benches. Others were hauling in sawdust for floor covering. There was a curious electric feeling in the air.

On opening night people came from all over the community in cars, wagons, and on foot. A string of Coleman lanterns were strung down the center of the outdoor tabernacle and on either side of the platform. People were getting together in small groups, renewing old acquaintances, talking, and catching up on the latest gossip. The kids were chasing each other in and out of the cars and wagons. I was filled with excitement.

Finally the meeting began. John Whitaker handed a couple of us boys a stack of

songbooks to pass out when he came forward to lead the singing. He wasn't much on carrying a tune, but he sure had the volume. The folks didn't seem to mind, because almost everyone opened up and sang with heartfelt enthusiasm.

Everyone was fanning the hot summer night air with hand fans which the local undertaker had furnished. All the fans had a picture of Jesus on one side and various advertisements on the other.

When it came time for the preacher, each night it was the same. When Brother Carter stood up to preach, it was as though this was the first time he had ever stood before a pulpit. He seemed to have difficulty in expressing himself. He stammered his first few words, breaking off his thoughts in mid-sentence. But slowly he became more expressive. Within a few minutes he would "get the anointing." From that point on he spoke with such eloquence that you had difficulty believing it was the same man.

When he preached about hell, I could almost smell the brimstone. I was tempted to reach back to feel if my shirttail was on fire. When he spoke of heaven, I could

almost hear the rustle of angel wings. And when he preached on God's love for the sinner, I could actually hear audible weeping in the audience. Each night I sat on the edge of my seat and listened intently.

Then came the invitational songs. As I sat on the rugged wooden bench kicking the sawdust with my toe and hearing the singing of such songs as "Why Not Now?", "Coming Home", and "Jesus is Calling," I was deeply moved. When Brother Carter appealed for sinners to come forward, there were always two or three who responded.

The revival lasted for a week. On the final Sunday we had "dinner on the ground". Each family brought food that was placed on temporary tables. Then we all ate together. The fellowship and chance to sample all the delicious homecooked food made this a real community highlight.

After dinner we were invited to the baptismal service at Big Sandy Creek where all the new converts were received into the fellowship of the church. The preachers from the various denominations were on hand to instruct those of their faith.

"I baptize you in the name of the Father,

Son, and Holy Ghost," said Brother Carter as he completely immersed a new convert.

"Amen!" shouted the crowd. Brother Carter had a line of believers behind him waiting to be baptized. This was the final event of the revival.

"Hey, Johnnie, want to be baptized?" R.C. grinned mischievously.

I looked at him questioningly. "I ain't old enough yet," I answered.

"Not by the preacher, stupid."

"What do you mean? He's the only one doing the baptizing."

"I'll baptize you," he said, "then you can baptize me. That way we can both get baptized, and we don't have to wait until we're older!"

"Wel-I-I, I dunno," I hesitated.

"Oh, come on, Johnnie, don't be such a scaredy pants. I've been watching Brother Carter do it, and I can do it just as good as he can," he bragged.

"Well, okay. I don't guess it can hurt nothin'," I said.

We walked out into waist deep water.

"Now, here's the way you do it," R.C. instructed. "You stand here and I'll stand

here." He put his hand to my face and held my nose. With a sudden motion he quickly submerged me under the murky water. I came up sputtering, but otherwise none the worse. "You're baptized!" he proclaimed.

It was now my turn to baptize R.C. I held his nose with one hand, and with the other held his back. As I shoved backward I lost my balance and fell forward on top of the already submerged R.C. He began to struggle wildly, but was unable to get to the surface and get his breath because he was under me. I quickly regained my footing. As I did, R.C. came up choking and sputtering.

"You stupid idiot," he coughed, flailing me with his arms, "that ain't no way to baptize. You almost drowned me. You'll never be no preacher--that's for sure!"



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE FIGHTS

**THE** next week school started. Mother made us all dress in our new school clothes. It was a mile walk around the hill in back of the house to the schoolhouse, so Frances, Bertha, Dorothy, J.B., and I set out early. J.B. was just starting in the first grade. He was a little bewildered about having to leave home all day to go to school, but bravely managed to keep from crying.

When we arrived, we saw everyone milling around the school yard waiting for

the bell to ring. R.C. was still a little mad at me over the "baptizing" I had given him the Sunday before. I didn't pay much attention to that because he had gotten mad at me before, but we always made up soon.

Junior Kerr was acting smart and carrying on as usual. "Hey, Johnnie," he taunted, "heard you almost drowned R.C. last week."

"It was an accident," I replied.

"Not the way I heard it," he continued. "I heard you did it on purpose."

"Ain't so," I denied. Junior loved to start trouble.

"R.C. said so," he refused to quit. I was getting angry. Junior and I never had got along very much. Just then the bell rang for school to start. I forgot all about the incident until recess when Junior came back around and started picking at me again. He sidled up to me. "You know what R.C. said?" he asked. I should have known better than to play into Junior's little game, but I took the bait.

"What'd he say?"

"He said you were a dirty, yellow-bellied liar."

"I ain't either," I retorted hotly.

"Well, that's what he said," Junior continued gleefully. "You gonna do anything about it?"

I really didn't believe Junior, but the words stung me. "If he said that, how come he told you and not me?" I asked angrily. Now I had played squarely into Junior's trap.

"He told me because he said he was going to give you the lickin' of your life," he ominously replied. The conversation was again cut short by the bell to return to class.

One of the things you expected from time to time in our country school was a fight. Our teacher had strict rules against fighting on the schoolground, so the fights were usually held away from school. When two fellows decided to have it out, they arranged a place and time to meet on the way home from school. Other boys who wanted to watch the fight would leave school, pretending to go home, but once away from school would double back to see the fight. I didn't particularly care for fights and avoided them whenever possible. However, no self-respecting country boy would sit still



for the names that R.C. had supposedly called me.

But I was puzzled by R.C.'s actions. Somehow, things just didn't seem right. However, news of the fight had already spread among the boys. To back out now would be to admit being a coward. So with many misgivings, I approached the place we were to fight.

After a number of delays we finally started the fight by slowly circling each other. R.C. seemed as reluctant as I was to actually come to blows. We had been such good friends for so long it seemed a little pointless that we were now out here trying to hurt each other. Finally we drew in close and grabbed each other around the neck, trying to throw each other to the ground. Because we were so evenly matched, we sweated and struggled for several minutes without success. We were both still on our feet and no blows had been landed.

"Use your fists, use your fists," Junior kept taunting.

"Get it on!" the other boys shouted.

Finally, through gritted teeth I said, "R.C., how come we're fighting?"

"Because you called me a liar."

"That's what Junior said *you* called me!"

"I never said no such thing."

"Then who told you I said you were a liar?"

"Junior."

We immediately dropped our arms and stood looking at each other. Suddenly we realized we had been duped and badgered into the fight.

"What's the matter with you guys?" Junior continued. "Looks like you're both yellow!"

We both angrily turned toward him. "You dirty dog, you started this!" R.C. yelled, advancing toward Junior.

"Let's teach him a good lesson--let's kick his tail," I suggested. "Hey," Junior said, and with a look of utter amazement he began to back away. Suddenly he turned and ran from the group.

"Well, it looks like Junior's little game backfired," said one of the older boys. Snickers went up from the others. "Why don't you guys shake hands and forget this little deal?" said another.

I sheepishly stuck out my hand. R.C.

grabbed it and pumped it up and down. We looked into each other's eyes, and I knew we would never distrust each other again.

It seemed like my problems with fighting came in pairs. It wasn't but a few days later when Robert Howard came over and spent the day with us while his dad did some work on our windmill. The Howards lived on the other side of town. About the only time I ever saw Robert was at school. We weren't even in the same grade. He was a little older than I but for some reason he was a grade behind. He was known for his violent temper. When he got mad, he reacted by picking up anything he could get his hands on, blindly swinging it or throwing it at whatever had upset him.

We had a croquet set in the front yard, so Robert and I decided to pass the time by playing a game. The game was going along quite smoothly until I knocked Robert's ball outside the court. His temper suddenly siezed him again, and he reacted by swinging his club at me. He hit me on the knee with such force that I fell to the ground, doubled up in pain.

"You're not gonna get away with this,

Robert," I said as I finally got to my feet. Robert's temper had quickly cooled, but I determined that this was one time I would take no excuses for his action. "You're gonna be sorry for this," I told him, picking up my mallet and starting toward him.

"Hold it, you guys," Billy called. He had seen it all from the porch. "Someone is going to get hurt like that. Why don't you two get the boxing gloves on and go down to the barn and settle this like gentlemen?" Billy went to get the boxing gloves, and the three of us headed for the barn. We selected a fairly soft area where hay and feed had been scattered on the ground. We donned the gloves.

Billy was referee. "Alright, fellows, you're going to fight three rounds of two minutes each." He took out his watch. "And, I want a good clean fight. No hitting below the belt and no holding onto each other when I say 'break'. Now, let's have a good clean fight. Go to it!"

Robert suddenly was out for blood. His first movement was to charge toward me swinging his arms like a windmill, slugging with all his might. I had learned a little about

boxing from Billy, so I simply raised my gloves, warding off the wild blows and dancing out of reach. When Robert's frustration drove him to wildly charge again, I waited until he had lost his momentum, then waded into him with a hard left jab to the nose. The blow momentarily stunned Robert. With a surprised look he dropped his gloves. This time I connected with a right upper cut, and Robert landed on the ground.

"Time!" called Billy.

The next two rounds were the same. Robert would charge in blindly flailing his arms. I would step back waiting for an opening, then connect with sharp jabs and punches. He would try to hold me, but Billy would order a "break". By the end of the third round Robert was sobbing from fury and frustration.

"Okay, enough," Billy said, "take the gloves off."

I was relieved that the fight was ending. I was no longer angry at Robert, and I felt he had learned a lesson. "Good fight, Robert," I told him as I slipped off my gloves. I stuck out my hand in friendship. Robert

responded by slapping away my hand in sullen anger. Disgusted, I turned my back and began to walk back toward the house. Suddenly there was a quick commotion behind me.

"Look out, Johnnie!" Billy yelled.

I turned just as a stinging blow landed across my shoulder and back. In Robert's hand was a five foot piece of hemp rope which he was swinging at me in a rage of temper. I threw up my hands in surprise, trying to ward off the stinging blows. So unexpected was the attack that I was struck several times before I reacted.

In fury I grabbed for the rope. A final blow struck me across my ear and head. The pain and ringing in my head caused me to lose all sense of restraint. In blind rage I sprang at Robert. Grabbing the rope, I jerked him forward, raining vicious blows to his head, nose, and mouth. He tumbled headlong to the ground. I dove on top of him and continued my furious assault. Robert rolled out from under me and jumped to his feet in panic. His face was covered with sweat, blood, and dirt. He unconsciously began to back toward the water trough. Shortly he

could retreat no further.

"Hey, Robert," I ridiculed, "you need a bath." With that remark I quickly shoved the unsuspecting boy backward. The edge of the water trough caught him right at the knees, sending him splashing seat-first into the trough. He sat there for a long moment, dejected looking, then slowly got to his feet. He was completely defeated.

"I quit," he said. "I gotta go home."

My anger quickly melted. Although I was aware of the pain in my body, the swelling knuckles, and the stinging welts from the rope, I was more conscious of the pain that showed in Robert's face. I suddenly felt sorry for Robert. I doubted that anyone had ever thrashed him like I had. Yet there was no feeling of triumph. I was only surprised and saddened at the overwhelming display of anger I had encountered from within myself. I wanted to be alone.

"I'm sorry, Robert," I said. As I turned and walked away, hot tears began streaming down my face.



## CHAPTER NINE

### DON'T CRY, SISTER

**HISTORY** was one subject in school that I never tired of. When my teacher began to explain one day about the historical location of the Nickelville School, my interest quickened.

"The Old Chisholm Trail ran right in front of the school," she explained as she pointed to a map on the wall. "And right here the original Butterfield Stage Line ran right beside the school in an east and west direction. So you see, students, our school



almost sits on this important location!" She went on to explain that during the Civil War the Indian trouble became so bad in our area that the Butterfield Line was moved to a more southern route.

"Wow! Indians, stagecoaches!" I did some quick thinking. "This must mean the old original stagecoach line had run right through our ranch!" I thought excitedly.

That evening I told my dad about this great discovery. He listened closely, then said, "You know, there must have been an old road that ran through the west pasture. You can still see what looks like wagon ruts where it came around the hill. Come on, I'll show you."

We walked out to the side of the hill. Sure enough, there was a slight depression in the ground. It was now no more than a few inches deep and about the width of a wagon. It stretched around the hill and headed south toward the creek. "Looks to me like the trail forded Big Sandy down there where the old bridge is now," Dad said. "But I'll tell you who'll know more about it than anyone else around here, and that's old man Rainey."

Old man Rainey was an old-timer who had lived in these parts all his life. He must have been close to ninety years old and was known to have fought in several Indian wars. His long, white hair and beard gave him a Wild Bill Cody look. When I went to see him the next day, he was sitting on his porch, basking in the sun.

"Howdy, Mr. Rainey," I greeted him.

"Howdy-do," he replied.

"My name is Johnnie Barnes."

"Yep, I reckon 'tis. What can I do fer ya?" he asked.

"Well," I began, "I came over to ask you about the old Butterfield Stagecoach Line." Then I told him what Dad had said about the trail running over our place. He stroked his beard and looked off into the distance.

"Wal, I guess that would be 'bout right. As I recollect, the old trail crossed Big Sandy at Whitaker's Ford. Then it ran up along the creek to what we used to call 'Big Springs'." He stopped to think, then continued. "And if memory serves me right, there used to be some names carved in the sandstones...but it's been years since I've been up there . . ." His voice trailed

off. "Then I believe it ran right over Anderson Hill. Yep, I reckon it did," he said absently.

I thanked Mr. Rainey for his information. I was really excited now because I knew exactly where all of these places were.

The next Saturday R.C., Wesley, Warren, and I traced the old trail to the iron bridge. Up the creek a few yards was Whitakers' Ford. We could tell by the eroded bank that a road had once crossed here. We found other evidences of an old road at various points along the creek. No explorer was ever more excited over a new discovery than I was.

At the springs Wesley found what looked like an old rusted wagon wheel hub. "Man, oh man," he exclaimed, "I'll bet a stagecoach was robbed here."

"Yeah, they probably shouldn't have stopped for water," R.C. speculated. "I'll bet the Indians caught 'em here while they was gettin' water."

Warren, as usual, was taking in everything in wide-eyed amazement. He took every word we said as gospel truth.

"Let's climb up on the rocks and look for

names," I suggested. We began to scrape away the moss and soil. Soon we found the letter "B" etched in the stone. We continued to scrape and quickly uncovered the name "B. ALFRED". Then the date: 1863. We were electrified!

"Maybe there's a lost treasure map carved on here somewhere," I ventured excitedly. We fairly tore at the surface of the rock. After about an hour of frantic scraping, we gave up on the treasure map. Our efforts were not in vain, however. We did find several other names and dates.

"Let's call this place 'Autograph Springs'," I suggested. We all agreed, and we referred to it by that name from then on.

The next week Miss Ray asked me to give a report of my discovery. The entire class sat with rapt attention as I described the route taken by the early stagecoach riders. After I had finished, she smiled and said, "Very good, Johnnie. That deserves an 'A'."

A few days later Miss Ray was not so kind.

I can't remember when I came to realize that my sister Dorothy was different, but the

full realization hit me this year in school. To me, Dorothy had always been just a sweet, shy little sister. However, a short time after Dorothy began school, I overheard a conversation between Miss Ray and Mrs. Schutz. Our school was a typical country school with two large rooms and two teachers for the entire school. Mrs. Schutz had the room with the older students while Miss Ray taught the younger groups. Miss Ray was a spinster, no doubt dedicated to her profession, but quite short on patience and compassion. This time she was obviously upset over Dorothy.

"That mentally retarded child has no business in school," I heard her say. Retarded! My sister? This remark had such an emotional effect upon me that from that moment on I became ashamed of Dorothy. As school wore on, I avoided identifying or relating to her as much as possible. That is, until the day of the doll incident.

I'm sure Miss Ray tried to subdue her exasperation toward Dorothy, but as time went on it became more apparent that she was irritated with my sister's presence in the classroom. As Dorothy's difficulties in-

creased, she became even more shy and withdrawn. Miss Ray's hostility reached a climax one day during recess.

Dorothy carried a particular doll around with her all the time. She was so attached to that doll she treated it with human affection. The doll went with her everywhere. This special day two of the more mischievous boys in the class decided to have some fun at her expense. Snatching the doll away from her, they began tossing it back and forth between them.

"We're going to kill your baby," they teased.

Dorothy became wide-eyed with fear. She began to cry and scream, "Don't hurt my dolly, oh, please don't hurt my dolly!" As the boys continued their play Dorothy screamed even louder.

Miss Ray soon heard the noise and came rushing out on the playground. Instead of stopping and scolding the boys, she rushed over to Dorothy and began to shout at her. "Stop that racket this minute," she ordered loudly. But Dorothy only screamed louder.

Dorothy was unable to stop crying, so

Miss Ray grabbed her by the shoulders and began to shake her. This only made matters worse and Dorothy screamed still louder. Finally, as if in desperation, Miss Ray slapped Dorothy across the face.

I had come running when I heard Dorothy's screams, and I saw Miss Ray slap her. Suddenly an uncontrollable rage boiled up inside me. I snatched the doll away from the astonished boys and seized Dorothy, jerking her away from the teacher. "Come on, Sister," I told her, "we're going home."

"Just a minute, young man," Miss Ray's sharp voice protested, "where do you think you're going?"

I turned and glared at her. My eyes were blazing with fury and defiance. She took a step toward me, then stopped. Perhaps it was the look in my eyes--or perhaps she suddenly realized what she had done, but she made no further move to stop us.

Almost running, I pulled the sobbing child away from the schoolyard. When we were on the trail toward home, my anger began to turn to compassion for this little sister I had chosen to ignore. I put my arm around her and looked into her beautiful,

tear-stained face. "Don't worry, Dorothy, everything will be alright," I said. "You won't have to go back to that school ever again." Then I suddenly remembered I was still holding her doll. "Here's your doll," I said, handing it to her. "She's okay."

Immediately Dorothy calmed down. We walked in silence for many minutes. Then Dorothy pulled her hand out of mine and ran a few yards down the trail. After picking a small wild flower from the ground, she rushed back and held up the blossom. "Here, Johnnie," she said happily.

My parents never let Dorothy return to school again. Later the word of the incident spread around the community. Miss Ray left at the end of the term and never returned.





## CHAPTER TEN

### HEARTACHES AND HAPPINESS

IT was early November now, and the weather had turned cold and wet. For several days straight we walked to school in the rain. Although Mother made us wear raincoats, there was no way we could keep completely dry walking a mile to school and back each day. To make matters worse, chicken pox and whooping cough were going around in school.

It was still raining the evening we came in from school when J.B. complained of

feeling bad. Mother put him straight to bed, but by nightfall he was running a high fever and began having convulsions. When Dad came in from milking, Mother called him to J.B.'s room. "John, please come look at J.B.," she asked.

My father came out of the room with a worried look on his face. "We had better get the doctor," he said gravely.

Billy had taken the truck to town and wasn't expected back until late. Dad and Mother discussed hitching up the wagon to drive over to the Whitakers, but the horses were still out in the pasture. The Whitakers lived a mile away from us as the crow flies, but about three miles by road. They had the closest telephone.

Dad looked at me. "Johnnie, your brother is bad sick and needs a doctor. I want you to run across the pasture to Whitakers and have them call Doc Raleigh." He looked at me and said seriously, "Tell him to hurry."

"Yessir!" I said. I put on my rain slicker and headed out. It was raining only lightly, but the night was pitch black. I remembered as I walked that I would have to go through the Whitaker pasture where lived the

meanest bull I had ever seen. In fact, he had chased J.B. and me up a tree only the week before, and we weren't even wearing red. In my mind I could see the image of this bull hiding beside the trail waiting to avenge his thwarted attack of last week. "Well, this is no time to worry about that," I told myself as I entered the pasture.

The lightning flashed briefly overhead. The countryside was momentarily bathed in a soft blue-white light. I caught the glimpse of a large, dark object looming beside the trail ahead of me. "Oh no, that's him," I whispered. "Now what will I do?" It took all the courage I could muster to keep from bolting back toward home. As I stood there alone, my thoughts went back to the assignment given me by Dad: "Go get the doctor. Tell him to hurry!"

My little brother was depending on me. My mom and dad were depending on me. I pushed back my fear and plunged down the trail as fast as I could run. Whatever the dark object was beside the trail, I never knew. I was running so fast when I passed it I doubt if it ever knew what I was.

I arrived at the creek, slid down the bank,

and started across the rocks we used to ford the water. About halfway across, suddenly a screech owl screamed over my head. Anyone who's ever heard a screech owl screaming on a dark night knows what a terrifying experience it is. Cold chills ran up my back. I was scared out of my wits.

"What am I doing here?" I asked myself. Then I remembered, and I rushed on my way.

Finally I started up the long hill to the Whitaker house. By this time I had run so hard I was out of breath. My lungs felt like fire and my legs like lead. It took all the determination I could muster to keep from dropping to the ground to rest. But I kept remembering that my family was counting on me. I stumbled up to the Whitaker front porch at last, but I was so out of breath I could hardly explain my mission.

When Josh Whitaker understood what was wrong, he instructed, "You sit on the porch and rest awhile, Johnnie. I'll call the doctor for you. He'll have to come by my place before he gets to yours. So I'll have him stop here and take you on home with him."

A short time later Doc Raleigh picked me up and we sped to my house. He went quickly into the bedroom to minister to my little brother. After what seemed a long time, Doc Raleigh and Dad came into the front room where I was sitting. "He's going to be alright now, but it's good that you called me when you did."

Dad walked over to Doc Raleigh and shook his hand. "Thank you," he said. Then Dad turned to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and squeezed lightly. He didn't say a word, but suddenly I was ten feet tall! The life of my little brother had depended on me and I had not failed. My feeling of triumph was wonderful!

Little did I realize that the doctor would soon pay us another visit. This time the ending would not be so happy.

It was a cold day late in November, right after Thanksgiving. Bertha and I had gone out to the woodshed to bring in a load of wood. Bertha reached down, then straightened up with three or four logs in her arms.

"Look out, Bertha!" I yelled. "There's a spider on your neck!"

She froze. Then, "Get him off, Johnnie, get him off!" she screamed.

I dropped my wood and slapped at the spider. Too late. Bertha's eyes shut tight as she grimaced, "Ouch!"

"Oh no, Bertha," I cried, "he bit you!"

Bertha was my favorite sister. She was four years older than me and was the best-natured of all the children. In our family she was the gentle quiet one. Most of us turned to her for understanding when we had suffered disappointment or hurt. She had a vivid imagination and would often think up some new game for all of us children.

She was frailer than the rest of us and more prone to sickness. The spider had bitten her on the shoulder near the neck. She was weak and trembly for a while. She must have suffered mild shock, but by the time Dad got her to the doctor she seemed to be much better. In fact, Doc Raleigh examined her and decided she would be alright. We were so relieved.

The next morning Bertha had a slight spasm in her neck. Toward the middle of the day she again became weak and began to

run a fever. The doctor came by in the late evening and gave her some medication, and said to call him if she continued to get worse. Just before supper the next day she seemed very cheerful when I stopped by her room for a minute. Mother looked in on her right after supper and saw that she was sound asleep.

About that time the McDaniels dropped by. They had heard that Bertha was sick from a spider bite and stopped to see if we needed anything. Mrs. McDaniel and Mother went back into Bertha's room. They discovered that instead of being asleep, Bertha was in a coma and could not be roused. A strange rattling noise came from her throat. Rushing over to my father, Mother cried, "John, get the doctor -- quick!"

"What's wrong," he asked sharply. "I thought she was asleep!"

"Bertha's dying," Mother sobbed. She stood there wringing her hands together.

"I'll go!" volunteered Mr. McDaniel. "My car's faster than your truck, John." Looking at Billy and me, he commanded, "You two boys come with me."

We ran and jumped in the shiny black Model A sitting in the yard. As we roared toward town I kept thinking, "This can't be happening!" It was like a terrible nightmare. When we reached the doctor's house, we found he was making another call. But he quickly finished and agreed to follow us out from town. He was right behind us as we came racing back into the yard. When we came to the front door, the sounds inside caused fear to knot my stomach. I heard sobbing.

My mother was sitting in a chair weeping. The tears rained down her cheeks. Through the bedroom door we could see Bertha lying completely still. Mrs. McDaniel was placing coins on her eyelids.

"Boys, your sister is gone," Dad said in a husky voice.

I stood rooted to the floor, unbelieving. My mind would not accept it. "No. It's not true. *It can't be true!*" The walls of the room seemed to close in around me. It was suddenly hot and unbearable. I turned and rushed outside into the darkness, running away from the terrible house that held my dead sister. Hot, salty tears streamed down



my face and from my throat came choked, anguished sobs. I lashed out at the world--a cruel world that had robbed me of my sister. I ran to the top of my favorite hill and slumped down on the rock, crying until there were no more tears. Finally I turned over on my back and gazed up at the stars.

I remembered how only about a week before Frances and I were playing a game of imagination with Bertha. Bertha had suggested that we try to imagine what heaven was like. We stretched our imagination to the limit trying to think how it must be. Finally we laughed and said, "I'll bet it's just like right here."

As I looked into the sky, I whispered, "Bertha, I guess you really know now."

That night I dreamed about my sister. She came to me in a shining garment and said, "Don't be sad, Johnnie, for I'm very happy."

It took a while for things to settle into a routine after Bertha's death. But now Christmas was right around the corner. The Nickelville School was presenting a

Christmas program for the community.

J.B. had been selected to memorize and recite a poem about the Christchild. He was thrilled with such an honor, and did very well during rehearsal.

Finally the big night arrived. The schoolhouse was packed with proud parents. A tingling feeling of expectancy ran through the crowd. At last it was curtain time. The curtain was a piece of canvas that was pulled up and down with a rope. An amateur artist had painted a crude mural of the nativity scene on the canvas.

After hauling up the curtain, the younger children performed first. A little ringlet-headed girl came out and gave a welcome speech. Next a chorus of second graders sang "Away in a Manger". After they finished, it was time for J.B. to come on.

He walked proudly out onto the stage. Then he turned toward the audience--and froze in his tracks. For a long moment he stared blankly at the crowd. Then he stuck his hands into his pockets and lowered his eyes. Someone in the crowd tittered. J.B. continued to stare at his feet.

Finally the teacher decided something

had to be done. She reached out from behind the curtain to pull J.B. off the stage. When she started to pull, J.B. collapsed to the floor and curled up like a sullen possum. The audience broke into merry laughter. As she dragged J.B. from the stage, the crowd continued to howl and applaud wildly. J.B. never could quite understand all the congratulations he received after the program.

The next Saturday Dad drove us all to town to select Christmas presents. I was walking down the sidewalk with Billy and J.B., looking in all the different shop windows. All at once I realized that J.B. was missing. We looked back down the street and saw him standing in front of one certain window. His nose was pressed against the glass, and he was enraptured by a gleaming, red wagon. Looking up at us with a dreamy, wistful expression, he explained, "That's what I want for Christmas."

We were still in the Great Depression, and money was very scarce and hard to come by. We only had enough for a few very inexpensive gifts. "You might as well wish for the moon," we told J.B. jokingly.

But sometimes dreams are not so easily

shattered. For days afterward J.B. insisted he was going to get the red wagon for Christmas. He had his heart set on it. Little by little a fantastic plan began to form in my mind. I shared it with Billy. "Let's get J.B. that red wagon for Christmas," I said. "It would mean all the world to him."

Billy agreed. We counted all the money we had left. There was exactly half enough for the wagon. So after school and on Saturdays we worked at anything we could find to make extra money. Christmas was rapidly approaching. Our sore backs and tired hands were quickly forgotten, because this was for J.B.'s red wagon.

It was two days before Christmas. We had run out of odd jobs, and we still didn't have quite enough money to buy the wagon. What were we going to do? Then Dad happened to ask us how we were coming along on our goal. "We're still fifty cents short," we told him. "We're so *close*! Just fifty cents."

Then Dad did something that really surprised us and made us love him even more. He reached into his pocket and removed a battered coin purse. Fumbling

around in an almost empty interior, he picked out an assortment of small coins that added to fifty cents. As I looked into Dad's face, I saw an ache in his eyes which I didn't understand at the time. As he turned away, his eyes were misty.

On Christmas Eve we triumphantly marched into the store, piled an assortment of coins and bills on the counter, and informed the storekeeper that we had come to buy the red wagon. We took our prize home and carefully hid it until J.B. fell asleep that night. Then we placed it under our Christmas tree beside the old stone fireplace. The shiny wagon stood out in conspicuous contrast against the simple cedar tree with its popcorn streamers, paper chains, and other homemade decorations.

We were so excited we could hardly sleep that night. We got up early the next morning to open our presents before J.B. woke up. My biggest gift was a dime store toy, plus some homemade items from Billy and my sisters. But I didn't care. I was waiting for something else.

Then the big moment came! J.B. came out of the bedroom rubbing his sleepy eyes.

We were all waiting. Suddenly he saw it! His eyes opened wide, and he exploded in an expression of unrestrained joy. "I got it! I got it! I told you I would get it and I did!" he shouted.

As I watched little J.B. dance around the wagon with such joy, I couldn't contain myself any longer. I bolted through the door out into the front yard. The frost-covered grass sparkled like diamonds. The first rays of morning looked like shafts of gold. All nature seemed to shout with joy with me. I was so full of happiness I felt I would burst. Happy tears began to flow down my cheeks, and I cried with joy.

I was caught up in the joy of unlimited giving. Ahead of me was the experience of accepting Jesus Christ which would supercede any joy I would ever know. He would lead me to develop the dreams I had until I had become involved in a boy's program that would reach and touch the lives of thousands of boys around the world. Ahead of me were adventures I never dreamed possible—but for the moment I was very happy—I had learned that loving was giving.



**JOHNNIE BARNES**  
**FOUNDER OF THE**  
**ROYAL RANGERS**

## ABOUT ROYAL RANGERS

Royal Rangers is a program for boys which is in many ways similar to the Boy Scouts. It was founded in 1962, and as of this printing has a nationwide membership of approximately 120,000 boys. Thirty-six other countries outside the United States are utilizing the program, and the worldwide membership is about 150,000.

The program has as its goal the development of the total boy—spiritually, mentally, physically, and socially. Currently around 17,000 boys each year are making decisions to live for Christ.





A Royal Rangers Outpost

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Magazine



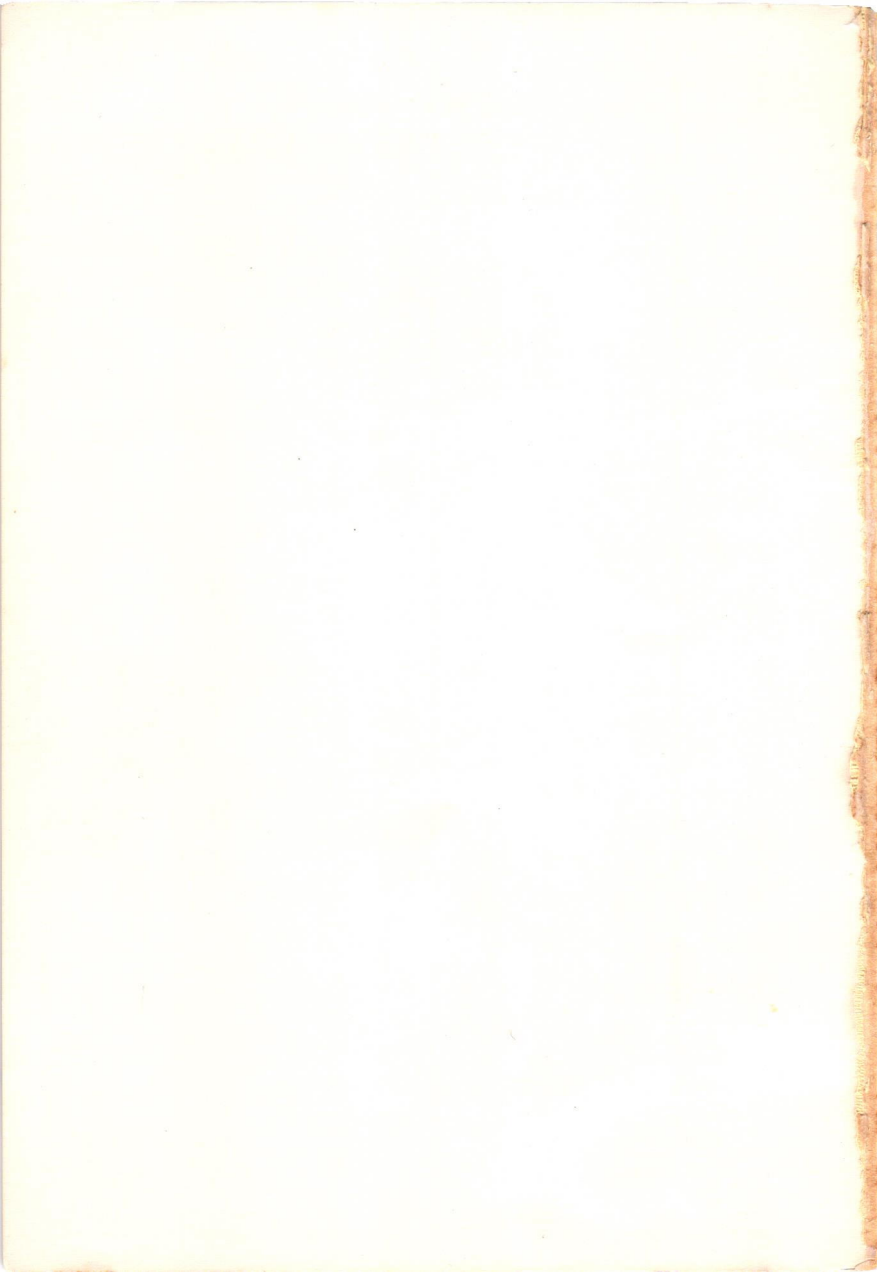
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Armstrong Roberts photo

Whistle me back a memory! Tell me a tale of the good ol' days, of boyhood experiences in rural Texas. Such is the stuff described in this book, **JOHN-NIE, THE BAREFOOT DREAMER**. It represents a step back into childhood dreams, into a paradise lost where little boys were heroes. And life was simple and good and sometimes wildly funny.

**Wisdom House Publishers**