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CORA AND THE LANE CAKE

by S. Ray Granade

1/27/2010

Though a Baptist preacher, Daddy never saw any conflict between his calling and the pleasures of field and stream. He loved to fish in the summer, but I think that hunting exerted the stronger pull on his affections. He quail hunted with those who had a dog, and shot deer when the opportunity arose. He had access to prime hunting land in Conecuh County, particularly the Horton Plantation. Later in life, after they moved to Montgomery, he would make shooting blinds from overseas shipping crates and put them up on the Plantation for deer hunting. He even bought a deer rifle with a scope. And he loved to hunt squirrel, either with a dog or by slipping through the woods. He'd shoot 'possum and raccoon, particularly 'possum, when he had the chance and give them to the colored women (as we called them in those days) who cleaned his squirrels when he didn't do it himself. But his favorite hunting was dove and especially turkey.

A story-teller from long experience and practice, Daddy had many hunting and fishing stories, some of which found their way into his sermons in abbreviated form as illustrations. He told of the game warden coming onto the dove field one Saturday where he was shooting with a group that included some of his deacons. The officer checked shotguns to be sure that they all held no more than three shells (two in the magazine and one in the chamber) by emptying the guns, then putting in shells one by one. Mr. Clarence Miller, a gentle soul who was one of the most law-abiding men I knew, had a new shotgun. As the warden put one shell, then another, then another, then another into Mr. Miller's new shotgun, and he realized that the manufacturer hadn't put in the customary plug, his face got ashen. Mr. Miller would never have thought to check, because he never put more shells into his gun than the law allowed, but his ignorance and adherence to the law didn't save him.

Daddy's favorite fishing story involved a trip with Mr. Dallas Pugh, who at the time owned Evergreen's junk (we'd now say salvage) yard right off the courthouse square and was always ready to fish when the chance presented itself. They headed for the Alabama River early one fall day and

were fishing by first light. Late in the morning, they heard a deer crash through the woods and go into the river above them. They fired up the motor and headed in that direction, only to see the deer floating toward them. Approaching gingerly, they discovered the animal dead but still warm. Rather than let it go to waste, they decided to gut it and get it home.

The two men had no sooner pulled the deer into the boat than a game warden rounded the bend and motored up. Since taking deer from a boat was illegal, the warden started writing them up. Mr. Pugh protested that they didn't even have a gun in the boat, and that the deer had clearly been shot. The officer never looked up from his writing or responded in any way. After a few seconds, Mr. Pugh looked at Daddy in the back of the boat and said "Well, Preacher, looks like we're really in trouble."

The officer stopped writing, put his pen down, looked up, and started a brief exchange: "You're a preacher?" "Yes sir," Daddy replied. "Can you prove it?" asked the warden. "I'm not sure how I can do that," Daddy responded. "Well try!" said Mr. Pugh.

Daddy pulled out his billfold and went through everything in it, thinking all the while that there wasn't any way in the world that he could prove to that warden that he was a preacher. Finally he pulled out one item made out to "Rev. Sam Granade" and offered it to the officer. The warden studied it for what seemed an eternity. Then he consented to look for a gun. Finally he put away his pen and book, cranked up, and headed off. Daddy and Mr. Pugh cranked up and motored back to the landing.

They left the deer in the boat and drove back to Evergreen, where they pulled off the highway into the bus station. The bus station resembled a filling station (which it later became) with a pull-off outside just large enough to accommodate the small buses of that era. Inside, a desk, one arcade shooter game that attracted would-be hunters, and a waiting area with an unobstructed picture-window view of the pull-off filled the space. The waiting area featured mostly chairs at tables. Since the station offered coffee and pie and, on occasion, something from a small grill, it was a popular gathering spot for those with time on their hands, particularly males. They could sit and sip while they idly watched traffic on "31," the US highway that doubled as the main drag through town and connected Montgomery to the north with Mobile to the south.

If they waited long enough, they could watch hundred-car trains ease past on the tracks just beyond “31.” And the bus station was where hunters and fishermen pulled in to show off the results of their luck (which they invariably described as skill).

Daddy and Mr. Pugh pulled into the bus station with the boat trailing the car and went inside for a coke. They correctly calculated that the loafers inside would drift out to investigate. In due time, a few got up, went out, and then beckoned the others. Soon all the men were gathered around the boat. After an appropriate amount of time, the two fishermen sauntered out.

As the two neared the boat, all heads swiveled in their direction. One man broke the silence: “You’ve got a deer in your boat.” “Yep,” replied Mr. Pugh. “How’d you get it?” the interrogator asked. “Brother Sam was using a Sally with pork rind, cast across this treetop in the water, and you should have seen that deer come up out from under that log after it!”

Adroit tellers of tall tales, fishermen come by their skepticism of other fishermen’s tales naturally. But this scene was different from most, for one of the fishermen—who’d not yet spoken—pastored the town’s only white Baptist church and the town’s largest congregation. While good-natured kidding was certainly permissible, overt disbelief would have been bad form. After a few seconds, the group’s boldest member asked, “So, Preacher, is that how it happened?”

Only a confirmed outdoorsman can know the internal conflict between the desire to play out the story and the need to tell the truth. But the truth won out and, after telling the full story, including the part about the game warden, the two re-entered the car to take the deer to the Conecuh Quick Freeze and have Henry Sessions process it.

What I always considered Daddy’s best hunting story had very little to do with hunting and everything to do with family and Southern manners. The key players were all Daddy’s in-laws, but it could just as well have been almost any Southern family.

Daddy’s family was essentially a frontier one from western Alabama, people who a generation before had cleared land for the first time. Mother’s family was one of much name and little money in southeastern Alabama. They lived on the glory of being the Laws of Law’s Brigade of

Gettysburg fame. That being true, they cared much more for social niceties than did the Granades, even though both families were, at the time, small entrepreneurs. Daddy's family kept a store, loaned a little money, and farmed, doing what was required to get a little ahead. Mother's family kept a drugstore, loaned a little money, farmed, and did what was required to get a little ahead—but considered themselves “people of quality.”

Daddy's father-in-law, the man I knew as Papa Ray, or Pop, loved field and stream as much as did Daddy. Consequently, they enjoyed those activities together. Since Mama Ray's family had some land in Pike County, they went down there one fall to hunt dove. The rules were that one didn't go into the field and start hunting until noon, but one could shoot from then until it was too dark to see. So one Saturday, Daddy and Pop went to Pike County to hunt on some Law land. Specifically, they were going to shoot on Uncle Auburn's land.

Uncle Auburn was Mama Ray's brother, and married to Aunt Cora. They lived in Goshen, the family seat, where they ran the family drugstore and occupied the rooms behind it. They were part of what passed for society in town, part of the professional class. In a land where the ability to cook was important enough to be widespread, Cora was known as an excellent cook.

Chief among Cora's accomplishments as a cook was her ability to make a mean Lane cake. Lane cakes reputedly are, like my family, native to Alabama but, unlike them, originated in the late 19th century. These white layer cakes' claim to fame lies in their icing, which contains raisins, pecans, and coconut and separates at least three layers made with the usual eggs, sugar, butter, and vanilla extract. Great cooks usually concoct the beginnings of the icing a week before the cake, letting it marinate in a liberal amount of bourbon. Once the cake's made and iced, great cooks cover it and let it “set” for a while. Periodically they'll wander by and pour a little more bourbon over the cake. In between times, their husbands often add a little more if they think that they can do it undetected. By the time Lane cake is served, it's very, very moist. Cora was a great cook.

The story goes that Daddy and Pop left early in the morning, so that they could visit Uncle Auburn and Aunt Cora, as propriety and kinship demanded, before going out to the field. They probably went in one of the Oldsmobiles that Pop always drove. The trip from 25 East South

Street in Montgomery to the Goshen drugstore probably took just over an hour, and they probably timed it to arrive mid-morning—just in time for a cup of coffee and a visit before the short trip to the field, where they would enjoy cheese, sardines, crackers, and a Coke before heading into the field.

Cora was not content to merely offer a cup of coffee; she had to offer something to munch on as they talked. That would have particularly been true since Mama Ray's family believed that she'd married beneath her when she'd married Pop. Cora would have been determined to show him how polite society behaved. She would have been determined, as we used to say, to "put on the dog." As it happened, Cora had a well-seasoned Lane cake that she could offer company.

There they sat, visiting in the keeping room. Cora had brought out the china, coffee, cream, and sugar. She'd poured everyone a cup. Then she made to fetch a bite to eat, and announced that she was bringing out the Lane cake. Everyone knew what that meant. "Cora," Uncle Auburn said, "now remember, Sam's a preacher."

"I know that he's a preacher," she retorted. "But I'm going to bring out my Lane cake and he's going to eat it. And he's going to like it!"

Daddy's last words summed up the story: "She was right. I did!"