

Bob's Huckleberry Jam

Dear friends at UVa's Cardiac Rehab;

I have been writing open letters to you on my birthdays. This will be my fifth such letter, written for my 94th. We are all in this program together, working out on these lovely machines, to give ourselves more years of healthy life. But the time will inevitably come when we must turn over the treadmills and the cycles to succeeding Rehabilers. So it is well to make some plans and leave nothing to chance. My story this time is about a man who liked to leave nothing to chance. Judge for yourself whether it was a good idea.

His name was Bob Bennett, my uncle, and he lived in Meadville, Mississippi with his wife, Miss Gussie, and seven-year-old daughter, Sarah. In case you have forgotten, Meadville (pop. 575) is on the Mississippi Central Railroad about halfway between Brookhaven and Natchez. And, oh yes, it is the county seat of Franklin County. Surely you will remember that. At that time, some 85 years ago, the railroad was the gift of modern technology to Mississippians, whose principal occupation was visiting relatives. On the railroad you could reach many more than you could by horse and buggy.

Bob started out in not leaving the hereafter to chance by attending church every Sunday. That is obviously the first step in planning. The trouble was that he would go to sleep; and he snored. Sarah would shake his arm and say: "Wake up, Bobby, people are looking." This left him with the problem of what to say to the minister as he shook hands at the door on the way out after church. He solved this, saying: "That was a mighty fine sermon, Reverend. I may have nodded a time or two but that just shows my confidence in you. I could see that you had everything under control." And if the minister thought: "May have nodded? Hell, you snored so loud that I couldn't even hear myself," he didn't say it. Ministers are not supposed to say things like that. He could only smile and say: "Thank you." So Bob got off Scot free.

And Bob did not leave his last resting place to chance either. He picked the spot and planted a shade tree over it. That was necessary because south Mississippi is so hot in summer that the decedent might think he had wound up in the wrong place. Bob's favorite tree was not the elm; it was the pecan. But on consideration Bob gave up on the idea of planting a pecan tree. In the first place he would have had to select the variety. At home he planted all three varieties. The Stuart bore reliably and had a paper shell that was easy to crack; but the nut inside was dry and often shriveled. The Schly had a fat tasty nut but its small shell was so hard that you had to crack it with a hammer; and that often squashed it. The Mahan was large, paper shelled, and had rich-tasting nuts; but it seldom bore any nuts at all. Bob would explain these things to me each summer as we made a tour of his pecan orchard. But how could he choose the variety to be the one tree for his last resting place with Miss Gussie? Moreover, if you planted a pecan tree, the squirrels would climb up on your tombstone to crack the nuts and spit out the shells down on you. You wouldn't want that. So it had to be an elm.

And, speaking of that headstone, Bob couldn't trust just anybody to say the right things about him on it, after the "Here lies ---." So he composed it himself, bought the headstone with his inscription carved on it, and had it erected under the young elm tree. Only the final date was left blank to be carved in later. Bob's epitaph was a masterpiece.

It was stated in formal, conventionally modest, language with a biblical tone. Yet it left no room whatever to doubt that the bones resting here were those of a pretty important fellow.

But I promised to tell you about Bob's huckleberry jam. Actually that was not planned; it just came about late one summer when the huckleberries were bearing. And Miss Gussie was away visiting relatives on the Mississippi Central. A pair of poor-and-needy-looking youngsters showed up with a bucket of huckleberries to sell. Bob gave them a nickel from the Mason jar of change that he and Miss Gussie kept for such purposes, and dumped their berries on the kitchen table. In almost no time here came another pair; and they looked even more poor-and-needy than the first pair. So Bob took out another nickel and added their berries to the pile. Then the word seemed to have gotten out that there was a man down there who would actually give you a nickel for a bucket of huckleberries. The little boys and their huckleberries began to come thick and fast. The pile of huckleberries overflowed the top of the kitchen table and began to stack up on the floor. Still they came. The first pair came back with another bucketful. The Mason jar ran out of nickels; and Bob had to use dimes, and then quarters; but that did not stop them. I don't know whether the Mason jar ran out of change, or Franklin county ran out of huckleberries; but it finally stopped.

Bob confronted his kitchen full of huckleberries. He decided that the only thing to do was to make huckleberry jam out of them. He wasn't quite sure how Miss Gussie made huckleberry jam, but he thought she boiled them with sugar and Certo. And he remembered that paraffin wax came into it somehow. So he hitched up the mare and drove down to the Meadville Mercantile Company and cleaned them out of sugar, Certo, and paraffin wax.. Back home he fired up the kitchen stove with a big wash tub of huckleberries, sugar, Certo, and some water covering the top of it. He found out later that, when you use Certo, you get twice as much jam from your huckleberries. That didn't help in his situation. He wasn't worried about any germs from the kitchen floor in his jam. Boiling would kill them, and the residual taste of boiled germs would only enhance the flavor. When Bob finished cooking his huckleberry jam, it smelled awfully good; and most of it was still in the wash pot. The rest of it somehow found its way onto the stove top, the kitchen table, and Bob. He tasted some of this overflow and concluded that Miss Gussie could not have made it any better.

But now he had another problem. He filled up all of Miss Gussie's jam jars, jelly glasses, and Mason jars, including the one emptied of change; and it hardly made a dent in the tub of huckleberry jam. At this point he found out what the paraffin wax was for. You could melt it and pour it over the huckleberry jam to seal a vessel such as a soup plate, a tea cup, drinking glass, or vegetable serving dish, or water or cream pitcher that did not have a regular top. So with the aid of the paraffin wax, and all of Miss Gussie's china that would hold huckleberry jam, he got his jam stowed away.

But he still had a problem. What was he going to tell Miss Gussie when she came home to find that all of her china except the plates and saucers was full of huckleberry jam? He was still stewing over this problem when Miss Gussie came home, and solved it for him. She was delighted. She had been wanting to buy a new set of china, but couldn't justify replacing the perfectly good set of china she had. Now she could give the huckleberry jam in the old china to the Women's Missionary Society to be sent to the

starving heathen Koreans, who didn't have any huckleberry jam. And Bob would have to buy her that new set of china. That solved the last of the problems, but it left Bob a little confused. For all the money he had paid for the huckleberries, the Certo, sugar, and paraffin wax, and all the labor he had put into it, he didn't have any huckleberry jam. And he had to pay for a new set of china for Miss Gussie. Somehow that did not seem to him to be a solution. However time heals everything; and they had lots of that in Meadville.

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So now we come to a time about forty years later. Sarah and I were standing beside the graves of Bob and Gussie under the elm tree, which had grown to provide a welcome shade. For it was a hot August day. So hot that even the mocking birds were silent. Out there somewhere a cicada was making his statement, but this sound only seemed to emphasize the silence. He began with a confident crescendo that trailed off as he apparently felt it wasn't really worth while.

Things had worked out just as Bob had planned them. At least things on this earth. I read again the inscription on the headstone. I still thought it a masterpiece of epitaphic literature. Only the fresh carving of the final date gave any hint as to who might be the author of the well aged main message.

I said: "Sarah, there is something I have been meaning to ask you. That story about huckleberry jam. We know that he was never one to let awkward facts get in the way of a good story. Was that one really true?"

Sarah's answer was obviously careful.

"Well, Bill, if you put it that way.....

"I'll have to tell the truth.....

"I guess I would have to say: No.....

"It isn't true.....

"It was blackberries."