

GRANDPA'S PONIES

By Robert William Maddox

It seemed so surreal, dad tugging on my shoulder. “ Now listen good son, get up right now and get dressed! I am going out there to crank my truck”. Dazed, I thought dad's presence was a dream. What reason did I need to get out of my warm bed at 1:00 am in freezing cold weather. Trying to get my thinking on track, Pa must be getting me up for a house fire. Well, that would have to be nearby but I could not make out the crackling sounds of a fire or the fire trucks rumble.

Frosted over window panes helped to shield me from a six inch snow that had been falling for several hours. Running to the kitchen in my sock feet, I could hear the frigid drifting sleet blowing sideways, tapping our 1955 Chevy Biscayne as I cracked the door. This snow fall was predicted for later in the week. Yet, earlier in the day, I overheard some of the older folks at my dad's Amaco saying it would be here sooner than Channel 6 TV of Birmingham predicted. By nightfall, with two inches on the ground the only merchants still open in downtown were the City Curb Market, owned by Mr. Christopher and the A&P Grocery, managed by Mr. Scott. I liked both of those men. I serviced and washed their vehicles regularly at my dad's station across from the Chevrolet dealership on Columbus Street. The radio station gave updates on the winter storm damages, mostly burst galvanized water pipe connections and downed power lines countywide. Some folks would describe the heavily blanched landscape a winter wonderland. The only kind of heat for our house was a large natural gas heater in the hall and plenty of handmade quilts my maternal grandmother Bobo had made years earlier. I remember my mother adding an extra quilt on my bed as I dozed off to sleep. My thinking was simple, I was warm and tomorrow was another day to ponder.

Dad walked back in my room after finally cranking the old 1952 Chevrolet pickup. I could hear the old truck groan, trying to come alive as I was dressing. We were one of the lucky families in the area since we had not yet lost our electric power nor our phone line. Dad said, “boy, we've got a mess going on downtown. Your grandpa's ponies have got out of the barn, six of them are downtown galloping all over the place and some have broke down some store doors”. He said,“ the ponies are granpa's. He is sleeping, unable to go now, so it is our job, that is it”. I said, “who told you this was going on right now.” Pa said, “Well, Chief Howard has called and that is all we know son, so lets get to the barn and get the rope”. I was still not a happy camper with what was outside, ponies or no ponies.

After several slips on the icy surface we got in the truck, drove up to granpa's barn. I

could see from the pickup headlights the opened gate, so I carefully ran to get the rope and a small bridle. I knew where these were kept since I rode almost anything that grandpa brought home, always bareback. It was not uncommon for me to pick out a good mule and ride it to town in most any kind of weather. The rope and bridle felt heavier and more like stiff house wire in its frozen condition. Anyway, I threw it in the step side truck bed. As we began to pull out of grandpa's driveway, I said, "lets knock on the door and see if we can get him up". Dad said," listen here boy, you know as well as I that grandpa aint getting up and you know why we are not bothering either of them in that house". Well, knowing his answer meant he was frustrated with me, it also meant granpa stayed in bed on the worst night of the year.

With our gear in the truck bed we headed West, then turned left off Pinion Street to Temple Avenue. I could see that the lights were on at Mr. Wiggilins home straight away. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the double wooden locks on the ponies shed appeared to be in a locked position but on the wrong side of the stud with only one of the locks set correctly. This means that Grandpa was not very careful when he penned up the ponies. We became more concerned that the truck was misfiring and losing power which was all we needed in this weather to be stranded by the roadside. Daddy had one of his service station workers put on snow chains before he came home from work . There was no doubt the chains helped as we slowly made our way in the heavier snow drifts on the shoulders of the road. Our truck was not a four wheel drive which would have made a big difference in these conditions.

From what I had been told by my father and my uncles, Grandpa's fondness for strong liquid delight usually started at the cattle auctions in Tuscaloosa and Eutaw. Fortunately, it never interfered with his ability to be a good provider for his family. I do remember hearing my grandmother scolding him after he came home from the cattle auctions in a very happy mood. She saw to it that he got his union suit on and put him to bed so he could sleep off the "devils drink". That is what she called grandpa's liquid delight. Since they lived close by I spent many happy nights at their house. I remember his laughter as grandpa jumped in bed and drifted off to sleep. Many nights by their coal fire I would watch him as he got into his union suit. What was so funny to me was he occasionally put it on backwards revealing the opening in the seat. One of my jobs at their house in the winter was bringing in lumps of coal from the coal pile by the barn. With granpa in bed we would sing old hymns by the light of the coal fire. Maybe that is what helped him go to sleep so easily. Her favorite hymn was the Old Rugged Cross and we knew all the verses.

The next home on the way to town that we noticed was Mayor Smithson. A patrol car was there we assumed to get him downtown. That was my first sign things were not good in town. Crunching, grinding sounds of the chains tearing into the snow with the engine power loss gave us concern if the old truck would make it to town. We did have something in our favor and that was extra light that a snow storm provides at night.

As we drew closer to Fayette Elementary School we started to notice the police patrol cars moving around in the darkness with their blue flashing lights. We passed the First

Baptist and Methodist Church . Looking a block ahead I could make out two large buildings, the home of Dr. Young on the left and WWWF Radio Station on the right. The radio station, with iced over Christmas wreaths brought me back to an earlier time when it was Short Funeral Home. My father, years earlier was the county Coroner and the manager/embalmer at the funeral home . Dr. Young's home, two stories had extra wide porches with snow covered ornate railings across the front. His son, Mr. Scotty Young owned Scotty's Cafe, located next to the A&P Grocery. This Cafe was the big hang out for teenagers at the time. Diagonally to Scotty's Cafe was a barber shop and the Bus Station Cafe. In the Cafe a french door led to a cavernous opening where the MissAla Bus Line picked up and discharged riders with their luggage. Suffice it to say, there were not any travelers at the bus stop, only a few ponies.

Chief Howard pulled up beside our truck and hastily gave a list of damages to downtown stores. He said that unless the ponies are caught soon he has no other choice but give the order to shoot the animals. The damage report I overheard said the Yellow Front Store had been broke into by three of the ponies, two of them black and the other a pinto color. Now from what I knew about ponies is they do not behave like sheep or lambs. It appeared they were following an alpha type pony and in this case the pinto was the lead pony.

The Yellow Front Store had fragile double doors that were smashed with merchandise trampled from the front to the back with glass counters destroyed. This was the most heavily damaged store. However the movie house, The Roxie, nearby was entered with minimal loss, They got no further than the lobby and candy/popcorn area, not entering the seated area of the theatre. Fortunately, the ponies had not gone down the side streets of Temple Avenue yet, a very good thing.

All of a sudden, like a bolt of lightning, the pinto and two blacks raced by our stepside, hoofs digging into the ice, discharging frozen spray as I stood by the truck. Dad said, “ I hope they keep going all the way to Five Points”. If they did then we could round them up after daylight, avoiding more property damages. Well, that hope lasted less than five minutes when the pinto and his pals pranced by us again and halted South, near Hodges Department Store. I could see them against the white snow, simply waiting to start their next merry move. I was praying they would not go into Hodges Department Store, which was the largest inventoried store in town with wide isles for shopping. That would be awful if they entered Hodges Store.

Things were really getting exciting now as the other three ponies bolted out of the Bus Station where they had been holed up briefly. The wailing of the police sirens and flashing lights on the patrol cars seemed to me a problem because it frightened and distracted the ponies. The ponies that were in the bus station headed toward the county courthouse and I followed them by Gulletts and the First National Bank. When I turned the corner by the bank they were looking back at me from lawyer Nolan's Office. Instead of heading West towards the county jail, they turned towards me, across Temple Avenue and turning North by Western Auto, turning the corner and stopping again in the street

by the pool hall. I hoped or sensed as they turned their heads slowly, that they were tired of all this foolish chasing but knew we had to have a plan to get them back where they belonged. We were not getting anywhere except getting colder by the minute. However, they took off again and headed back towards the Courthouse. I slipped on the sidewalk near the Alley, Dad nearby amused at my misery and cold wet britches.

Dad and I agreed that if the cops turned off their flashes and sirens we might corral the animals in Allen's Alley. This approach would be like a old western movie where the bad guys would be captured in a box canyon. Dad talked with Walt Sears, a senior police officer, then Chief Howard ordered the wailing and whining of the sirens to stop. The Fire Chief, Mr. Fremer, then brought around two of the Fire Department Pumper trucks and placed those across the street in barricade style between the Pool Hall and Crutcher Real Estate building. This blocked the ponies from escaping at that spot near the north end of Allen's Alley. Our goal was to drive all six ponies to that area and into the Alley.

Remembering , there was no street lighting except for the vehicles and the two fire department trucks. We then set another barricade between the Post Office and Scotty's Cafe and also a blockade between the Bus Station Cafe and the Post Office. We did this very quickly because four ponies were now on the Courthouse Lawn and across the street near Loftis Cafe and Western Auto was the pinto and a black. Since they were not moving now, the Chief quickly set another long barricade from Richards Theatre across the street to Central Drug Store. Now, now at last we had them where we could drive them north, then turn them East into Allen's Alley.

We knew that if they got by the barricade near the Pool Hall the ponies would probably be shot. By this time there were other town folks who brought their vehicles to help with a few of the holes in the barricades and to witness this rare small town event. Allen's Alley ran a complete city block north to South. Dad told me to go to the South end of the Alley and rope the first pony flushed my way, hopefully it would be the pinto. I placed myself at the spot between Burnette Shoe Shop and Fowler Hardware with a police officer, the last name I think was Holliman. Years later, I would see him in town and he would always say that he would never forget the night with the ponies.

The pony drive plan was set. Then, several residents with police began to drive the ponies from the middle of town and East to the Pool Hall barricade. It was working, yes! All of us began hearing the whooping and hollering going on as the drive moved the ponies towards us in the alley! As I suspected with the patrol car light beam behind me, the lead pinto pony was bearing down on me and officer Holliman. The other ponies were also galloping behind the pinto at a good clip also. When the pinto got about thirty feet in front of us I believe he knew that the merry chase for the night was over. By this time the folks that were driving the ponies into the alley were within 20 yards of the animals who had all but stopped their galloping. Allens Alley protected all of us, even the ponies from the bitter wind. I was surprised that they seemed rather tame but maybe they were just plain tired.

I then tied the rope around each ponies neck with the help of the officers. Dad then told me to lead the ponies on foot all the way back to granpa's barn, which was about a mile and a half in the frozen white stuff. The police followed us until we got to the Methodist Church. Dad then continued to trail me and the ponies to make sure the ponies did not bolt or escape. I was surprised that under my yoke that they were gentle enough to allow me to walk them back to where they escaped from several hours ago. After a couple of slides on concrete potholes, I finally got to the barn with the ponies about 45 minutes later. I opened the wire gate by the barn, closed the wooden gate and got them back into the covered shed. Dad said to get some feed from the barn and see if I could find some water. I had to go to our house for water, came back to the barn , poured it in the trough for them. They were thirsty and they were hungry. I then locked the unbroken wooden lock behind the stud as well as the wire gate. Granpa was still asleep.

Well, the next morning, I awoke to hear dad and my grandparents sitting around our kitchen table with my mothers fine breakfast of scratch biscuits, white gravy, a huge platter of scrambled eggs, bacon with fried white meat. Of course a Fayette breakfast would not be complete without Golden Eagle Table Syrup and listening to the local radio show, “ out of the night” with Douglas Barboro. The final tally of damages in downtown I learned later would be in the neighborhood of \$7500 which today, I'll let you guess. This was not the only escapade attributed to granpa that cost a considerable sum of money. I don't remember grandpa buying another set of ponies, but I still continued to ride the mules bareback.

As a footnote, my granpa and grandma Maddox were faithful members of the Temple Avenue Church of Christ and were extremely well thought of in the community. This story is about a man who thrived on his knowledge of farming and especially large farm animals. William Walter Maddox, born in 1887 and at the young age of 11 found himself on his own due to the death of his mother and his fathers remarriage. By 1902 he had managed to find regular farm work for Levi Woodruff South and Mart South in the Davis Creek Community of Fayette County. Due to grandfathers terrific work ethic and knowledge of farm animals, Levi W. South gave his daughter's hand to him in marriage, nee Josephine South in 1909. Levi W. South himself was a large landowner and a Confederate veteran of three major Civil War battles. Grandfather Maddox sired six children, all of whom became outstanding citizens. I loved the man dearly and named my son after him, the Honorable Walter Thomas Maddox, the present Mayor of Tuscaloosa.