

GRANDMA'S SHAWL AT ROCKY GAP SCHOOL

By Robert "Bob" Rogers Chaffin
(As told by my father, Robert F. Chaffin)
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On one particularly cold morning, the little puddles of water which dotted the brown river gravel road were frozen and gleamed like mirrors reflecting the winter sun as Bob, along with his sisters, Thelma and Gene, rode Old Ned past Bill West's General Store. The usual group of farmers, now too old to perform manual labor in inclement weather, had gathered to talk about politics and the depression. The big question on Roaring River, and all over the country for that matter, was whether this new president Mr. Herbert Hoover would be able to pull the country out of the accelerating economic slowdown. Granddaddy had said to Bob that the store was a place to share your common ignorance of any given subject. Bob wasn't sure what that meant, but it didn't sound like a compliment to him. He hated cold weather every year; but this year Bob hated it more than ever. He had outgrown his winter coat from the previous year and Gene was wearing it this year. Thelma was not larger than him so there were no hand me downs from her. Mamma, being a widow, did not have money to order a new coat from Sears Roebuck every year, and much to Bob's horror Grandma Young thoughtfully volunteered her old beaded shawl for Bob to wear instead of a coat. Now no one at Rocky Gap School was able to dress fashionably, but there was little way to disguise wearing your grandma's shawl. To add insult to injury, not only did the other boys make fun of the shawl, but since the beads from the shawl made excellent ammunition for their "pear shooters" they also took delight in picking them off while Bob was wearing the shawl. Eventually, the other kids made a game out of seeing who could collect the most beads. Daddy said it was a very long winter.

"Books" at Rocky Gap always opened with the first grade (there was no kindergarten at that time in rural Tennessee schools) and the teacher worked his or her way up through the upper grades. The morning generally opened with writing or spelling, then progressed through reading or English, and ended with numbers. In the afternoon came Geography and History or Civics. In the middle of the afternoon the teacher would read to them from a classic such as Tom Sawyer or something by Mr. Charles Dickens.

Fighting was a popular pass time for the big boys and they often divided themselves into two or more groups, each with a champion famous for his combative abilities. At recess, the warring camps gathered on opposite sides of the school grounds and each cheered their champion on by assuring him that his opponent would wilt before the very reputation of his power. At lunch the two camps again gathered in small groups to eat what lunch they had brought and plot strategy.

Many kids carried only a baked sweet potato and a biscuit in their pocket for lunch, but Ethel always made sure that Bob, Thelma, and Gene each had a syrup bucket filled with sausage, biscuits, molasses in a small glass jar, and tea cakes or cookies for desert. Some children were so poor and in such desperate circumstances that their mothers made patties like pancakes from field peas and fried them to be carried for lunch. This was called “pore do” or pea cakes by the locals, and having to bring such to school was an embarrassment to the children in that predicament. All of the girls always ate inside at their desk and talked to their teacher, whom each of them wanted to be just like. The older girls brought needle work to occupy them at lunch time but the little girls went outside and played Blind Man’s Bluff, Red Rover, Red Light, Hop Scotch, Hully Gully and like games with the smaller boys. The bigger boys usually played “Town Ball”; A game very much like baseball or softball, using a sock tightly wrapped in twine and black tape for a ball. No one had ever seen a store-brought baseball. The team who was “in town” was the team batting with a sawmill slab or similar instrument for a bat while the other team was in the country. Four foul balls or three strikes and you are out. It was only a strike if you swung at the ball but the pressure was great to swing if the “ball” was anywhere within reasonable reach of the batter. The outfielders moved in or out, based on who was batting, and would sometime be closer than the pitcher was to the batter. It was also an embarrassment if the outfielder moved in when you were the batter the closer they came the redder the batter’s face became.

Today, my grandsons play organized baseball with their own jerseys, duffle bag for gear, special shoes, sliding pants, and pretty much every thing the Detroit Tigers and New York Yankees had the first time I saw them play in 1958. Everyone is a winner and everyone gets to play, regardless of ability or desire. Everyone gets a trophy (the first one I ever saw was in High School) but I seriously doubt that they have any more fun than those Rocky Gap Scholars who had climbed the hill behind Aunt Eva’s house.

In a few years, several schools would be built which would replace Rocky Gap and eliminate the challenging climb the aspiring scholars made to the top of the ridge each day. Among these, soon-to-be-built, hallowed halls of learning were Pacific School, and Woodrow School, all of which were attended with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the aspired Gentry, Loftis, Maberry, Young and Chaffin relatives. They were, for the most part, one room school houses but neither I nor my sister ever attended any one of them, since our parents sent Donnieta to live with Aunt Ada in Gainesboro and she attended the town elementary school there and I was still too young for school when we moved to Carthage in 1948.

Mores the pity, I suppose. Have a blessed day and remember your realizations seldom exceed your expectations.

Author of the books: *Pioneers, Preachers and Patriots: The Chaffins of Roaring River, Jackson Co., TN* and *Ridin' the Blinds*.

*Read more about Robert Rogers Chaffin in the Chaffin files and read more Writer’s corner stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>