

THE DAY THE SCHOOL CAUGHT ON FIRE

By G. W. Brown

'Writer's Corner'

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While watching the Oklahoma tornado news coverage on how the community pulled together to save the children when the school was hit, a memory resurfaced when someone mentioned it was the right thing to do because of Christian charity. Ma Haney always talked about how people needed to show Christian charity, and I remembered how it was shown the morning the grammar school caught on fire in Bloomington Springs.

The first bell had rung and we had all gotten into the classroom. On the way in, someone noticed smoke coming out of the roof. The principal called her superiors, who advised to get the kids out and away from the school property. That was when she made a decision that would leave me an outcast and butt of jokes for years to come.

The principal ordered kids to line up in two groups. Those who rode the bus and those who walked to school. She then pointed at a child who walked and paired them with a bus rider and said, "Take them home with you."

The problem was I didn't technically walk from home to school. I had grandparents who lived across the graveyard from the school house where I stayed before and after school. For some reason, my grandfather didn't want me there and it was a constant argument between my parents and them, with me always catching the abusive comments as they vented their rage. My dad seemed to think that since my cousins were allowed there with no complaint, then my grandpa should not play favorites and love me as much as the others. This he pointed out to me every morning on the ride there.

As I grew older, I realized the problem was that we lived up a remote hollow that the bus couldn't reach without an expensive upgrade to the road.

The factor I didn't realize was that the grandpa that didn't love me was actually not my grandpa. Ma Haney had a secret that she guarded until I was a senior citizen, when my real biological grandfather passed away and left a note as to the secret for his daughters. The secret was that my Bible-thumping grandmother who condemned everyone else's sins has been a wild girl in her youth and had children out of wedlock.

As soon as I showed up at her door with the other boy, she started yelling that I had no right to bring other kids to her house. She said I was lucky she let me stay there and it was not her fault that my father had built back in that hollow after the old house burned. She was fast to point out, "Hewey don't want you here so much!"

I was so embarrassed by how she treated him, and he still talks about how he wishes he hadn't been sent to the old witch's house that day. He said the bus ride was just two

miles, and we would have been better off walking to his house than going there. We hid out in the graveyard, with her watching the whole time and yelling at us when she saw us get some cherries off her tree next to the graveyard. Even when the school was saved and we left, she complained for a month that I had not right to bring other kids to her house for her to watch. That was what those high-paid teachers got money to do.

At school, everyone told how their day was spent. He quickly told everyone what a terrible old witch of a grandmother that I had, and everyone began to agree. A lot of the girls held resentful from the time she showed up at the school to condemn square dancing during recess on those bad days. Ironically, no one knew she had been a flapper before getting knocked up. I guess she did know dancing was the way of sin.

Most of the kids made out better than we did. The woman on the other side of the school had several children and was blessed with lots of extra kids to watch. She decided everyone might be hungry and made a big pan of chocolate gravy and homemade biscuits. Since the kids across the road from her had parents at work, she had them come over and fed them too. As we sat in the graveyard, eyeing those cherries, chocolate gravy would have tasted so good. The kids who got to go there said it was great. I wish that day I could have rode a bus.

Ironically, the woman who extended Christian charity to make chocolate gravy for all the kids attended the same church as the Haney clan. Her husband was an elder. I guess there were some with Christian values. She would have made a good grandma.

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