History & Folklore



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Mowing grasses for hay along the right-of-way of the Wolf Island Road west of Dayton last week brought a tremendous yield.

We have been told the two hayseeds pictured are identified as Ricky Skarpa with Charlie (Sonny) Vyoral riding shotgun. Further information tells us that the tractor is a Farmall Super M with a haybine taking down the grass. Ricky's father, Leroy Skarpa, had a knack for taking old tractors, pieces and parts and rebuilding them to put to use.

Temptation Brown

A Story by Kevin Ladd (July 1978)

The air in the tight room was filled with the smell of hair tonic and aftershave lotion, a mildly hypnotic odor it has always seemed to me. Mr. Holloway popped his striped sheet and sent hair flying in all directions. "Next," he shouted, brushing the chair clean with his hand.

"I'm actually next," said the old man seated next to me, "but it looks like the Sheriff's hair is in more need of a clipping than mine. Let him go 'head."

The Sheriff, who actually was no longer the sheriff, but still bore the title wherever he went in Lafayette County, looked back and forth at all of us seated in the barbershop, his dark eyes focusing first on me and my stack of comic books and then at the others. "Well, boys," he said, "I guess I'll seize the initiative." He arose from his seat, a tall and lanky man of a once immense physical strength. His huge, large-knuckled hands gripped the arms of the chair as he hefted himself into it.

"What'll it be, Sheriff?" asked Mr. Holloway, speaking to the back of his customer's head. The barber was a short man, seemingly constructed by the Almighty to stand no taller than his seated customers. His hair shone brightly from the grease he applied to it religiously.

"Aw, I ain't particular, Holloway, just cut out any gray hairs you find up there and leave the rest."

"Good Lawd, Sheriff, I ain't got the whole day to work on your head."

The old man seated next to me piped up. "Hell, if you wuz to go and cut out all the gray hairs, he might have one or two good ones left over." The men in the barbershop all laughed uproariously.

"All right, Caswell," laughed the Sheriff, "I owe you one, and I'll get you back when you least expect it."

Mr. Caswell reached into one of the upper pockets of his overalls, produced a pouch of Sir Walter Raleigh, and scooped his pipe into it. "Sheriff, I got a question for you, and I know you're just the man to set me straight on it." The Sheriff grew serious as he listened. "The old lady was talking the other day and mentioned ol' Temptation Brown – you know we used to call him that because we always had the temptation to knock him upside the head if he was in our presence for anything longer than 15 minutes. Anyway, she said she heard something about him getting tied up in some kind of trouble when you wuz sheriff. She asked me about it, and I ain't never heard nothing about it."

The Sheriff nodded. "Yep, he did," he answered. "Temptation Brown – what wuz his real name, Holloway?"

"Name was Orville Brown, it seems to me, but nobody called him anything but Brown to his face and Temptation Brown behind his back." Mr. Holloway began combing the Sheriff's hair forward, beginning at the back of his head and moving to the front.

"Well, anyway," said the Sheriff, "Brown went slap-ass crazy for awhile, must've been around 1938, and he holed up in his house with a shotgun. He claimed that he was gonna shoot anyone that messed with him"

Mr. Caswell placed the pipe in his mouth, lit it, and produced one huge cloud of smoke. "Yep, I was working over in Beaumont 'long 'bout then, but I sure missed hearing 'bout it. Beings I'm just naturally nosy, I'd sure like to hear you tell me the straight and narrow on it."

Mr. Holloway grinned and stopped working on the Sheriff's hair for a moment. "That Brown was a cantankerous fellow – didn't get along with anyone."

"Well, I can tell you all about it," the Sheriff said. "Holloway was there, too, but in just what capacity I don't know."

"Jest a curious onlooker was all I was," stated Mr. Holloway, clipping hair around the Sheriff's ears. "Even closed the barbershop down to go see it."

Another man seated at the far end of the shop exclaimed, "Had to be something then for Holloway to shut up the shop and go see it."

Mr. Holloway grinned and stopped working on the Sheriff's hair for a moment. "That Brown was a cantankerous fellow – didn't get along with anyone. He'd come in here sometimes and cuss the President and cuss his old lady and the judge and the Sheriff here, and just about everybody that had something Brown didn't (which was just about everybody). But he weren't a mean fellow and wouldn't touch a fly to kill it, if you know what I mean. He was just like that old dog of mine – all bark and no bite. I s'pose he had reason to be mad and mean all the time. His old lady had a face that would stop a stampeding herd of cattle dead in their tracks, if you know what I mean."

The Sheriff grew excited and threw his arms outward, tossing the sheet up with them and sending bits of hair to the floor. "Brown had a couple of ornery boys that were always up to some kind of mischief.

"One time, ol' Brown decided that the thing to do was to put latches on both the inside and outside of his screen doors, so's he could latch them from either way. Well, he was right proud of that idea – came right in here in the barbershop one time and told all of us how we ought to go and do that, said it was the wave of the future. Those boys caught ol' Brown inside the house one time when they wuz outside and locked the screen doors from the outside. Lawd, you should have heard that man bellow and shout. He shouted for nigh on half an hour before anyone figured out just where it was coming from and what sort of varmint was making that noise." The Sheriff laughed loudly, throwing his head back and showing us his perfectly white teeth. Mr. Holloway and the other men laughed with him.

"Well, now," asked Mr. Caswell, "what wuz it that caused Brown to lose his mind?"

"No one knows to this day," replied the Sheriff. "I reckon it was just a bunch of things combined together – like that wife of his and them boys. All of those things just hit him, and his mind snapped." The Sheriff looked all of us in the face, his eyes darting from one face to the next.

"It all started," he said, "one day when Sam Fall McCullum was driving from Barlow over here to Lafayette – rather he was sitting on the passenger side and his n***er servant was driving the car – and old black Ford, but it shown like a new one.

"Temptation Brown lived right outside of Lafayette on the road to Barlow, and his house probably sat off the road no more than six feet. I never saw a house so close to the road in my life…

"The missus said it was so Mrs. Brown could be sure and see whoever it was "a-passing on the road," said Mr. Holloway. "That was the most gossiping one woman I ever saw."

The Sheriff returned to his story. "Well, here comes Sam Fall McCullum and that n***er driving every bit

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