

Chapter One

I never did like spinach. That was one of the things Mama always said was good for me, but nothing that tastes that bad could be all that good. Come to think of it, a lot of what Mama said was good for me didn't taste all that good. On the other hand, the things I liked best were all bad for my health.

“Just a few bites, Henry. Try it, and you'll get used to it. You want to be big and strong like Papa, don't you?”

Pop was a farmer, a throwback to the old days. His skin looked like old leather, and underneath the leather was solid muscle. Even though there were machines that did everything more quickly and efficiently than he ever could, he still did most of his work by hand. Instead of tractors, he used horses. At school, everyone laughed about him, and called him a hayseed, or, worse, a retard. I didn't particularly want to grow up to be like him

I didn't say that to Mama, of course, not then anyway. I just said, “Yes, Mama,” and picked at my spinach without enthusiasm. I discovered early in life that if I moved my food around on my plate, after taking a few nibbles, she thought I was really making an effort. It's a wonder I absorbed enough nourishment to stay alive, much less to grow. Fortunately, we had pinto beans and cornbread often enough to make up the difference.

Mama LuAnn, as everyone called her outside the family, was a paragon of household efficiency. She never sought or wanted any job other than the one she had, raising her family and caring for her husband. She was as much a dinosaur as he was; both of them would have fit in two hundred years before, but not in the modern world. The Camps were a conservative lot anyway, but most of them at least embraced the technological enhancements of the modern world. We never even owned a TV, and if the electricity wasn't already there we probably would have used kerosene lamps and candles. One of our few concessions to modern convenience was the telephone, which we rarely used.

Mama and Pop – I stop calling him “Papa” when I got old enough to stand up for myself – were as different from each other as they were different from the outside world. Pop was tall, muscular, and quiet. He never spoke unless he had something to say, as Mama never tired of saying. He said God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we talk. He was as steady and solid as bedrock, and whatever he started, he finished. He had an iron will, and once he was convinced he was right, he never relented.

Mama was short, plump (I never dared to say “fat”), and never stopped talking. She was a perpetual motion machine, always doing something in her kitchen or elsewhere around the house. I never could quite understand how she managed to find so much to do in around the kitchen sinks and the cabinet tops. She sat with us for a few moments to eat, after being sure everyone else had what they needed, but other than that she seldom sat down.

She came to the Camps from Ansted, about eight miles away. Her own family, the Crookshanks, were few in number. Her parents died young, and her only sister died when she was fifty. She met Pop at a church social, one of the few Pop ever attended outside his own church, and fell in love literally on first sight. Pop chased her until she caught him, as the saying goes, and she never looked back. The Camps were her only family, and the only family she ever wanted.

Pop worked hard from daylight till dark, but when he came into the house, he rested. After supper he always sought out his recliner, and no one else had better even dream of sitting there. The springs in the ratty old thing collapsed after years of service, but he refused to give it up. Only after a major battle with Mama did he finally agree to get rid of it, and replace it with a nearly identical one. He personally took it out and

burned it, and we had to stand and watch. It was like attending a funeral; I was sure I saw him brush away a tear from the corner of his eye.

As a rule, and we had lots of rules, Camps had big families. In a day when couples had one or two children or none at all, they frequently raised five or ten kids, or more. Uncle Milo, up the hill from us, had thirteen; several of his kids had large broods, too. By contrast, along with all of the other contrasts, my parents had only one – me. That was a source of shame to both Mama and Pop; they were sure something must be wrong with them. Both of them went to the altar of the church frequently, crying like babies because they had no crying babies at home. They racked their brains trying to think of some past sin that might have closed up Mama's womb after I came along. Eventually they did have more children, but I was already grown by then.

Because I was the only natural-born field hand Pop had, he started me off in the family business at an early age. I can remember pulling weeds in the garden when I was four, terrified all the while that I might pull up some of the vegetable plants by mistake. By the age of seven I was using a hoe. I had to shorten my grip on the handle, which was taller than I was. I hated moving down the endless rows of corn in the hot sun, chopping away at weeds that were often stronger than I was. Lunchtime under the big shade tree in the middle of the field was a touch of paradise. Every day I prayed for rain, which didn't come very often in July and August.

Then there was chicken detail. We had dozens of the nasty critters, and every evening Pop would turn them loose for a while so they could forage for bugs and worms. The prime spot for pecking and digging, of course, was the vegetable garden, the one place they couldn't go. I was assigned to make sure they stayed off the forbidden ground, which meant I had to be near the garden at all times. During the hour or two between the time they were released until dusk, when they went to roost, I sat on a stump to stand guard, so to speak. If I had homework to do, I did it on my lap, always with one eye cocked toward the garden.

My work wasn't finished when darkness fell. Inevitably, a few of the stupid birds would decide to roost in the lower branches of a big tree in the yard, instead of going where they belonged. I had to remove the strays, one or two at a time, sometimes chasing them down in the darkness. Chickens were good for laying eggs, and for eating, but not much else. Cleaning out the hen house from time to time was even worse than garden duty. I probably had histoplasmosis and never knew it, and I wouldn't have known what to call it if I did.

Life wasn't all work, though, and Pop was no slave driver. Mama wouldn't hear of it. She thought I was far too delicate to do hard physical work all day long, and Pop's argument that I would never grow strong without it didn't convince her. My workload increased as I got older, but there was still plenty of time to enjoy my childhood. One advantage to being a Camp was that there was never a lack of playmates.

Milo's house was a few hundred feet above ours, on the other side of a grove of trees. Four of his kids were around my age, and there were others nearby. It wasn't unusual for a mob of twenty or thirty of us to gather for fun and games, especially after school and on weekends. Every one of us was a Camp, or came from one of the in-laws in the area. We formed up into teams often times, and played everything from baseball to cowboys and Indians. A pasture field above Milo's house often served as our sports arena, but we had to watch out for the cows and an occasional prize bull. Cow patties were another hazard, and I had my share of slips and falls in manure. Pop said it was a waste of good fertilizer.

Much of the time we split up into smaller groups. I liked to pal around with Mikey, one of Milo's brood, and Kermit (we called him "The Frog," but since I rarely watched TV the allusion escaped me). One our favorite pastimes was exploring the rock cliffs that dotted the hills around the home place. It was a small miracle that none of us was ever hurt or killed swinging on grape vines off of twenty or thirty foot cliffs. The worst we ever got were cuts and scrapes, and scratches from the nasty green briars that filled the woods. Usually when I came into the house in warm weather Mama sent me back outside to pick off the multitude of little green stickers that I accumulated from a type of thorn bush.

We had a fishpond that dated back for generations. I'm not sure how many fish were there, but it was a great place for skinny-dipping on a hot summer's day. You did have to watch though, for slime and cow manure that floated around on top of the water. Passing girls were another hazard.

Every July, on the last Sunday of the month, we had a family reunion. It was held at Pop's birthplace, about two miles away. His parents were dead before I got a chance to know them well, but I do remember seeing them. Grandpa was an older version of Pop, but Grandma was nothing like Mama. She spoke as seldom as Pop or Grandpa did.

It was impressive seeing the whole clan of Camps gathered in one place. We always had at least a couple of hundred people there, and some years there were considerably more. Most of the Camps lived within a few miles of each other, but some came from as far away as Texas and New York. No matter where you lived, you were still a Camp, even if your last name changed. The ties that bind were very strong.

Our family ties extended into the school grounds as well. Fully thirty of us from the Camp clan attended the same elementary school, with more spread out through junior high and high school. Bullies left us alone, no matter how weak and defenseless we were as individuals. We rarely walked around alone, but when we did no one was brave enough to pick on us. Occasionally new kids would show up in school, and it sometimes took them a while to learn how things were.

Bobby Matlock moved to Ansted from Gauley Bridge. I was eleven at the time, in the fifth grade, and still as skinny as always. Bobby was thirteen, also in the fifth grade, and he was big as a proverbial ox. He wasn't especially bright, and his teachers basically promoted him to get rid of him. He enjoyed his status as the big man on campus, and did his best to make sure everyone else knew their place. The very first day of school he decided I would make the perfect object lesson.

At first recess, he followed me into the boys' restroom, and locked the door behind him. I didn't notice anything I was wrong until I felt, more than heard, someone come up behind me just as I finished my business of the moment. He spun me around, and pinned me against the urinal.

"What's your name, kid?"

"H-h-henry."

"H-h-henry? What kind of a stupid name is that. Listen, H-h-henry, I don't like you. I don't like you at all. You're the kind of skinny little wimp that makes me puke. From now on, you show some respect around me. You answer, 'Yes, Sir Robert,' when I speak to you, and bow when you see me. Got that, creep?"

By then, there was a lot of pounding on the door, as other boys tried to get in to do their own thing. I meekly agreed, aughing to myself at the same time. Sir Robert was in for a rude awakening, not to mention a thrashing. After banging my head against the wall, Bobby finally let me go, and swaggered out of the bathroom. The first boy in the bathroom after he left was Kermit.

At lunchtime, after gulping down our food, the entire student population poured onto the playground. I was surrounded by eight other Camps, all of them considerably bigger than me though none quite the size of Bobby. Still not knowing the score, and thinking he could humiliate me in front of my friends, Sir Robert walked over to where we were.

He started to grab hold of me, but several bodies blocked his way. As we stood there, and Bobby started to push his way through, five other Camps showed up. In seconds, Bobby was surrounded. My older cousin, Larry, was the first to speak.

“Listen, Matlock, you’re new here, so we’ll give you a chance to back off. Check around; nobody messes with any of the Camps, no matter how big you are. If you bother one of us, you deal with all of us. Walk away, and if you *ever* lay a finger on Henry, or any of the rest of us, we’ll catch you after school and beat you to a pulp. Understand?”

Matlock’s face turned so red I thought it would burst. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down rapidly several times. He finally managed to blurt out, “Yeah.” When the circle around him parted, he all but ran back inside the schoolhouse. A chorus of laughter of jeers, none of it from us, followed him inside the building.

For a while, he was a model citizen, and when he spoke to me at all, it was to mumble something that sounded like our fiftieth state. A few weeks later, though, he had second thoughts, and evidently decided the threats were idle. He could never catch me alone, but he did find little Matthew off by himself one day. The poor kid was only eight, but the fact he was a Camp was the important thing for Matlock. He terrorized the boy for a full ten minutes, but didn’t really hurt him physically.

That evening, as he was walking down the street after school, Bobby was surrounded again. This time there were no more warnings. He showed up next day with two black eyes, and assorted bruises. He told the teachers he had fallen down, which was true as far as it went. He never spoke a cross word or lifted a finger against anyone in school again. It didn’t matter what a kid’s last name was; you just never knew who might be related to the Camps. Matlock moved away the next year, and I never saw or heard from him again.

Other than the extracurricular activities like bully bashing, school was deadly dull. I did as little as I had to do; Mama made sure I did my homework, and she knew when I was faking. The family grapevine was quite efficient, and if I missed an assignment or flunked a test, she knew about it before I got home. It was easier to do what was expected of me than face her tongue lashings. If I had been motivated, I could have made all A’s, easily, but I felt no real need to do that. The idea of going to college didn’t appeal to me at all; I sure didn’t need a bachelor’s degree to do what Walter did. It was generally assumed and expected I would follow his example and take over the family farm after he died. For years, I resigned myself to just that idea.

I did like history, of all things. It excited my imagination to think about what life was like in the old days, and to imagine myself as some war hero or a king or a president. In those rare times when I was alone, like in my bed at night, I would construct elaborate worlds where I was the hero. I might be a general in the Revolutionary War, or the leader of the Mongol hordes. I was always living in luxury, and surrounded by beautiful women.

I read every history book I could find. I never liked novels, and I read literary masterpieces only if I was forced to in an English class. I couldn’t tell you who wrote *The Christmas Carol*, but give me the name of a Civil War book and I could spout the author back at you every time. My parents, and my teachers, could never understand how I could make all A’s in history, while I brought home C’s and D’s in everything else.

I read history books because I enjoyed them; I read the Bible because I was forced to. Church and Christianity were central to my parent’s life, so I couldn’t avoid talk about Jesus and the Scriptures when I was a child. One thing they couldn’t make me do, though, was enjoy it. By the time I was a teenager, the most dreaded day of my week was not Monday, but Sunday.