

DUST

SUMMER

Dad was devoted to family, neighbors, and friends, in an extroverted way, and at the same time he had two inherent interests that he embraced with such enthusiasm that everything else for the moment was subordinate to his thought and actualization.

Coon hunting with a close and trusted friend and renting the hottest most humid patch of ground he could find so he could raise the best tomatoes the land could produce. Both of these consuming passions were inherited from his Father, Enos Hooper (my Pa).

In the coldest part of the winter, a time that was often referred to as the little nights, because you ran down the little path, to that little house, and stayed only a little while, before you ran back up the little path, to the little house, where there was a warm fire. It was on those little nights that Dad would bring out the new seed catalogs he had received from Fields, Ford, or Shumway seed companies, then he and Mother would spend hours counting the egg and cream money they had to purchase seed with making sure that every penny would count for the best seeds first and the best quantity second. They would agree on the purchase then Mother would fill out the order to make sure the seed company didn't misunderstand Dad's handwriting or spelling. After she sealed the order in an envelope, affixed the three cent stamp, she would hand the envelope to R.E. with instructions.

Take this order to the mailbox, be sure to raise the flag so Mr. Horton will stop to pick up the letter, and DON'T let Gary touch it!

Saturday morning. "Gary go up to the mailbox and bring the mail back, AND GARY! If Mr. Horton brought your Daddy's tomato seeds, DON'T open them!"

(Nobody is ever going to trust me again. It isn't my fault that someone made a salt shaker with a lid that screws off and the mashed potatoes were too salty. I'm not the cook for this chicken outfit you know. Mother doesn't like it when I say chicken outfit. I don't know why. I didn't say all of it like Ab does. Hey, it's a long way back to the house.) CHICKEN SHIT OUTFIT. (There, that'll show them.)

When Dad saw his sack of precious tomato seeds you could see in his sky blue eyes the anticipation of a hot, humid creek bottom overflowing with tomatoes, each one a first grade slicer. Carefully he would open the package holding it close to his nose to smell the seeds checking to see if there might be the slightest hint of moisture, if he thought there might be some moisture he would spread the seeds out on a newspaper near the stove to dry them completely, then carefully he would count out fifty seeds planting them into a pie pan to check the germination count. If at least forty of them came up he would be satisfied that he had a germination of at least eighty percent, proof that his seeds were what he had purchased. The rest of the seeds would be placed in his green property box next to the North wall where they would stay cool and dry until time to plant them in the hot bed.

DUST

When the days began to grow longer and warmer and the old sow raccoon stayed ever closer to the den tree waiting for her litter of kittens to arrive, it was time to give the hunting trails a rest. A time for nature to replenish the game of the field. The trail hounds were allowed to rest their tired bodies from the long winter hunt, lick their sore feet so stone bruised from the long hard runs chasing the elusive chicken thief and crop bandit, only then after the hunt were the hounds given meat to eat instead of corn bread, a reward for a hunt well done. Now that there was new life coming to the din trees there was new life being prepared for the field in the form of tender young tomato plants, but before the warm humid tomato picking days arrived there was much preparation to be done.

When I saw Dad pull the wagon out to the South front of the long chicken house I knew it was time to dig the old soil out of the tomato hotbed to be replaced by new blow sand soil in which to plant the tomato seeds.

Dad had built the hotbed into the ground about two foot deep, four foot wide, and twenty four foot long, lined the sides with old sheet iron and two-by-twelve boards which stuck out of the ground about twelve inches at the back and about four inches in the front. In the bottom he would place about twelve inches of fresh cow manure, covered with about four inches of straw, then topped off with about four inches of blow sand from a fence row or sand drift. With all that tromped down, then wet to saturation, the organic material would begin to deteriorate causing a natural reaction that generated a lot of heat and humidity inside the hotbed with cellu-glass doors placed on top to allow the sunlight in during the day and tarps over the doors on the cold nights to retain the heat and humidity. The hotbed was ready for planting after about two weeks of mellowing out. Dad would take a length of angle iron about three foot long, press it into the sand making straight rows about two inches apart, and one forth inch deep, into which he spread the certified seeds he had received from his trusted supplier. This was adequate space to raise about twelve thousand good tomato plants after selective thinning.

There were many chores to do around the farm, but the one I always enjoyed was when the morning sun warmed the air to about sixty degrees, Mother would send me out to lift the hotbed cover and prop them up with a stick about four inches high to ventilate the tender young tomato plants. I would get down on my hands and knees, hold my nose close to the frame opening, then smell long and deep of the acid sweet aroma of the damp blow sand with its precious trust of tomato plants.

Oklahoma has a good climate for raising tomatoes, however because of the high winds and flat dry land only a few places down in the river bottoms or creek bottom lands have enough natural sub-moisture, wind protection, and plenty of sunshine, to raise the best tomatoes.

Because blight resistant strains of tomatoes were not available at that time it was necessary for us to plant our fields in a different location every year. One year we had our tomato field on some Deer Creek bottom land owned by Mr. Grimes. It was a good place, there was a fishing hole right next to the tomato patch with a lot of catfish, snails, mussels, minnows, and crawdads (crayfish). The farm we lived on was hi-and-dry with only a dry canyon, so this was an all new world to explore which R.E. and I did every time we could get away from the tomato patch for a

DUST

little while. Water, trees, shade, rocks, poke salad, and a thousand things you never see just a few hundred foot from the creek.

That year when the plants were about four inches high, a gopher dug into the hotbed causing a lot of damage, but try as he did, Dad couldn't eradicate the gopher.

One morning when it was quite warm I went with Dad to ventilate the hotbed, standing behind him when he opened the frame, a bull snake stuck his head out near Dad's hand causing him to jump backward right on top of me, then stumbling, he fell onto the ground, with both of us tangled up on the ground, the snake just kept coming out towards us.

Ddddddddaaad, kill it!

No, I think he is a friend of ours.

A snake? A friend? Are you scared crazy?

Yes, he's a friend, Gary. Do you see that big lump in the middle of his belly?

Yes, so what, kill him!

Well he just took care of our gopher problem. I should have thought of that.

Dad took an old gunny sack and lath and put the snake into the sack and started walking across the yard with sack in hand.

What are you going to do with the snake?

I have a mouse problem in the grain bin. He can take care of them for me and put on a lot of summer fat in there. And it will keep him farther away from the chicken house and your Mother's shotgun. If he doesn't wander out where the hounds can catch him, he'll be good and fat when it's time for him to hibernate next fall.

The bull snake must have found more mice than he could eat, or he went to the stock tank for water and a hawk or hound caught him out in the open, because the mice seemed to be more every day until R.E. read a real money making idea in a book at school.

Gary, I read something in a book at school that if we can solve the problem, we can get rich!

Solve what problem?

A better way to trap mice.

Trap mice? Are you nuts? A big old possum hide only brings fifty cents, a mouse hide wouldn't be worth more than a penny!

DUST

No! Gary we're not going to skin mice, they are much too small!

Well I thought that would be dumb, the stretch boards would only be about two inches long.

Will you shut up and listen to my idea?

OK, tell me how we are going to make money murdering poor defenseless little mice.

Well we were reading this book at school and it said, "Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door."

R.E. they already been there.

Who?

The world!

What are you talking about now?

There is already a path to our outhouse door.

"Gary!!" R.E. said, with a look of disgust on his face. "I sometimes wonder if you are walking around without a brain."

I'm not the one that is saying he is going to get rich skinning mice.

I'm not either! I'm just going to figure out a better way to trap them, then sell the traps to other people so they can trap mice!

You can already buy a trap to catch mice. We have one at the house. Do you want me to go get it?

By now R.E. was becoming real exasperated trying to explain his plan to make us rich and I was thoroughly enjoying his frustration.

Gary you know what I mean, you are just doing this to me again, now come on, let's start thinking about a better way to trap mice.

OK, but if we don't get rich, I'm sure going to be mad at you for all of this thinking work for nothing.

We set on the grain board in the granary for a long time, watching the mice in the storage bin scurrying back and forth across the floor.

Gary do you have any ideas yet?

DUST

How about a real small bow and arrow?

No! Darn it Gary, be serious or this will take all day.

After about a week of tin cans, pointed sticks, pieces of inner tube cut into strips, strings tied to heavy bricks, variations of bird traps, wooden cheese boxes with a trap door, a bucket of water with a collapsible diving board, we finally decided that our best effort was a fruit jar and a cracker box.

Leaving Mother with a lot of loose crackers in the cupboard without a box, we were ready to build a better mouse trap.

Is she asleep?

Yes.

OK, go get her scissors, but be careful that sewing machine drawer squeaks and you will wake her up.

Armed with Mothers best scissors, her cracker box, one of her fruit jars, and her roll of tape, we went to work.

Now Gary, this is what we do. Cut this cracker box and make a spiral like a funnel, then tape it together, put it into the mouth of the fruit jar with a piece of cheese inside the jar. When the mouse smells the cheese he will climb up into the funnel squeezing through the small end of the funnel. Once he is inside, he won't be able to climb up to the funnel opening to get out.

Why don't we put a little piece of cheese inside the funnel to lead him up into the trap?

Good idea.

After building the better mouse trap, we set it in the granary, closed the door, then we quietly returned the dulled scissors to Mother's sewing machine without notice.

Let's go to the canyon.

What for?

While you was putting the scissors back, I lifted us a cigarette.

Very dizzily R.E. and I walked back up the cow trail out of the canyon to check our mouse trap.

Carefully R.E. opened the granary door.

"We got him!" He shouted in triumph as he swung the door wide open.

DUST

R.E. grabbed the trap lifting it high so we could see our prize catch. Inside was one very frightened little mouse running around the bottom of the fruit jar. (I cannot imagine the fear that would be generated by being trapped and in the hands of two boys eight and six years old, but I am sure that mouse's little heart was pumping pure adrenalin.)

This mouse is going to make us RICH!

We sat on the grain boards talking about how rich we were going to be, we could buy some real store bought toys or even a BB gun like Uncle J.E.'s, maybe two BB's, but that would be a lot of money, even Red Rider only has one and he's a movie star.

"Shhhh. R.E. look!" I pointed at a mouse's tail just sticking out from behind an old tire leaning in the corner of the bin.

Gary I have this one, you see if you can catch that one.

Creeping quietly across the bin floor then slowly reaching down I grabbed the end of the tail lifting him high to show R.E. that I too had caught a prize.

Look!

Just then the mouse curled up biting right through my thumb, nail and all. When I turned loose of his tail, he just hung there by his teeth.

Drop him! Drop him!

I can't, he's stuck!

I slung my hand to one side, the frightened mouse went sailing across the granary slamming against the wall. In the excitement our trap was broken and R.E.'s prize mouse ran away.

A glass mouse trap is obviously not the better way.

It has been almost fifty years since two small boys and two small mice experienced the exasperation of the better mouse trap and to this day I am allergic to all types of rodents, rabbits, squirrels, rats, and especially mice. Any time I am around where they are I become choked down with asthma and break out in itchy red rash all over. I always keep a house cat around so the mice will stay away. That's the best and most vigilant mouse catcher I have been able to come up with.

Thanks R.E., but my riches aren't in dollars and cents! They are of a brother, a mouse trap, and a granary, somewhere in the corner of my memories in the dust.