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about 2,400 words

Sammy Holbrook and the Half-Mile Mosey

By Jason A. Adams

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that you don't cross the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Upper Bear Wallow Freewill Baptist Church.

Sammy Holbrook learned that lesson July the Fourth, 1952, the day of the biggest ruckus ever seen in the sleepy little town of Dante, Virginia.

Dante—it's "daint," like paint—is the old Clinchfield coal town up on top of the mountain. It's mostly dried up and blowed away now, not more'n six or maybe seven hunnerd folks left. Young'uns say it's called Dante on account of d'ain't nothin' up there. But back when cars were rounder and brassieres pointier, we was the biggest town southwest of Roanoke, and had families from all over the world. Hungarians, Slavs, Irish, Germans...all the ones brung down from Ellis Island to work the camps.

Dante wasn't more'n just a little farming settlement, couple dozen families in the early years. It stayed that way until the coal and timber speculators found us, back in the year Benjie Harrison got the White House or thereabouts. After that, why then Dante, St. Paul, Clintwood, and all the other mountain towns took off.

But after the big war—dubya-dubya-two, I mean—most of the coal up Dante way had been dug out and drug off. As for the lumber, all the ridges and hillsides looked like God took a straight razor to 'em. Our booming almost-city started to die.

But we loved Dante and wouldn't leave. It's home, and we'd not leave it. Some folks still had work on the railroad, or down in one of the newer coal pits over in Dickenson County, so mostly we stayed out of the poor house. But the company bosses were gone. The ones who built new buildings, kept gravel on the roads, made sure the kiddies had a school to go to. They didn't see no need of putting their names on things in a town they didn't live in anymore.

Now, we knew folks might not appreciate the tax man knocking around, but we had to pay for what the town needed. It was Preacher Price and Marlene Kovacs who had the idea for a big summer fund raiser.

So three years after we dropped the Bomb, the folks of Dante threw the first ever Bear Waller Holler Chicken Eatin' Meetin'. A dollar a plate, and a blue ribbon for the best food.

The gals of the Ladies Auxiliary holed up down in the church basement, which wasn't much other than a kitchen fit to feed every lost soul for three counties around, and cooked up every poor ol' hen that couldn't lay no more.

Come the day, the main street had tables and trestles lined up both sides. There was fried chicken, baked chicken, poached chicken. Chicken salad, chicken soup, chicken stew. Chicken and dumplings, naturally. Clina Jane's famous pullet pie.

All the ladies with names we couldn't half pronounce chipped in too. Chicken paprikash, chicken schnitzel, creamed chicken, and who-knows-but-lordy-I-love-it chicken. This last was baked by a tiny little gal named Agatka Ruzicka. Aggie she was to most people. Aggie wasn't but a year older than me, and she ran the Black Diamond Café right alongside her mamma. She got twenty dollars and three marriage proposals that first shindig. Her daddy Bela—everybody called him Billy—worked with my daddy on the Clinchfield rail line. Good family. Good people. Even if ol' Billy never learned more'n two licks of English.

Well, with all that eatin', we had to come up with some way to work it all off. That's when the idea for a foot race came up. Couldn't do a three-legged race or any of the usual county fair stuff. There weren't any guard rails back then, and most roads had shoulders made of straight up or straight down.

Plus, the Appalachians go from icebox to steam bath, and July is about the swampiest part of the year. With all the trees gone, noontime had about as much shade as one of those new-fangled suntan coffins. Hard to run a race when you're breathing more water than air, and the sweat don't even think of drying up until the leaves turn in the fall.

But Preacher Price had the answer. The Gutierrez family had come from somewhere in Spain back in the Twenties, and their habit of *paseo*, a nice amble up and down the road after dinner, had sorta caught on with everybody.

So the eatin' meetin' traditional race got born. The Half-Mile Mosey, we called it. The rules were pretty simple. No running, just strolling. Last man across the finish line won.

But you had to keep on a-movin'. No stopping. And, since a feller who's motivated can walk slower'n molasses in a deep freeze, you had to wear a little brass bell on your belt, and that bell had to ding every time you took a step. If the designated race listeners didn't hear that bell ding at every step, that moseyer got disqualified.

Part of the whole deal was making it fun for folks, both walkers and watchers, so Marlene come up with the penalty for not dingin' your bell. Marlene stood close to six foot and had a body like a cast iron hourglass. She kneaded bread six days a week, and spent Sunday in her vegetable garden. Which is to say she had arms any college coach would've paid a pretty penny for.

Her and the rest of the Auxiliary got hold of enough wire flyswats to outfit all the ladies. If a contestant didn't ding like he ought, they chased him all the way down to the company store, whappin' him raw with those swatters. I promise you, he sounded like a whole platoon of dingers then.

Most years, everybody made sure they walked fast enough to ding their bell.

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This all started in nineteen and forty-eight, and the story I'm fixin' to tell happened in '52, like I said before. By then, word had spread all through the coalfields about the Bear Waller Holler Chicken Eatin' Meetin', and the Half-Mile Mosey. Folks come from all up and down the railroad, and the town filled up fit to bust. It got even

bigger over the next many years, up until the last one we done, right before Jack got shot down in Dallas.

I was ten years old, and looking forward to the next year, when I'd be eleven and old enough to mosey. Hard to believe it now, but when I talk about those days, my liver stains fade, my knuckles shrink, and I feel about four feet tall. But that was a fair few days ago, and I'm just rattlin' on.

Anyways, we'd done et all the chicken we could hold, and the ice tea jugs were on their umpteenth refill. The sun had dropped behind Sandy Ridge, and the cool was coming down Bear Wallow. Folks started easing their way over to Silas Fleming's dry goods, where a big tarp had been drawn across between the telegraph and power poles.

"FOURTH ANNUAL HALF-MILE MOSEY," it read in big block letters, all spiky like those old-west saloon signs in the Gene Autry flickers.

Most all the men and boys of the town were standing in a bunch, chatting, spittin' chaw juice, and tying those little brass bells to their belts.

Sammy Holbrook stood up near the start line, jawin' with old Ezra Phipps, who nodded along even though he was deaf as a post. Sammy's shirt stuck to his back, and his oversize postman's britches flapped around his legs in the breeze.

Sammy didn't work the mines or the rails. He was assistant postmaster, and spent his time either in the company store's post office, or else riding the mail wagon up and down the hollers and ridges. Couldn't get cars or trucks up half the roads back then, so Sammy kept a brace of mules.

Those mules must've cussed the Good Lord every time Sammy hitched 'em up to the wagon. Sammy didn't like to move more than need be, and was about as wide as he

was tall, with a belly that hung down like a half-full tater sack. I bet it took a clipper's mainsail to make his clothes. Moseying came as natural to him as breathing, and he'd won the last three years in a row, moving like a snail wrapped in black tape. None of us could figure how his little bell dinged, but it did. At every long, slow pace.

Most said it was the way his barn-sized butt rolled back and forth when he walked.

They all stopped beatin' their gums when Preacher Price clumb up on the little stand he'd made out of sawhorses and planks. He didn't have a microphone or anything, but his Sunday voice rang out like the judgment trump and everyone heard him just fine.

I'll not try and put down all his words, but he welcomed all the out of town guests, thanked the Ladies' Auxiliary for all the fine food and drink. They didn't pay him much mind, though. Marlene and the rest of the ladies had shucked their aprons, lined up along the edges of the road, and were busy testing the flex in their flyswats.

Finally, Preacher Price wound down. He called out to get ready to mosey.

Belts were pushed down and bellies lopped over. Hats were tipped back. Hands went in pockets.

"Brothers of Dante!" hollered the preacher. "It's time to mosey!"

Instead of a pistol, Preacher Price raised up a rubber duck and squeaked it fit to bust.

And they were off. Idling up the street, chatting with the bystanders, kicking up enough dust to maybe make an ant sneeze. Maybe. The sound of dinging bells was like a Santa sleigh in a Christmas parade.

Sammy took the rear almost right off the bat. Couldn't nobody drag his feet like Sammy, and the rest of the crowd had sped up when Tim Powers missed a ding and got chased up the road by a gaggle of cackling Christian women wearin' him out with those wire flyswats.

The crowd cheered and laughed as the rest of the bells dinged faster, but Sammy just oozed up the road suckin' chicken out of his teeth, now almost two yards behind the pack. It was starting to look like the race wouldn't be over before the roosters crowed.

Ding!...Ding!...Ding!

Sammy's bell sounded maybe twicet a minute. He moved so slow I reckon you could've set your tea on top of his head without worryin' about a spill, but that bell dinged right on.

I was workin' up to ask Aggie if she mightn't like a milkshake from the dry goods soda fountain, even though I'd sick up all that chicken if she said yes, I was that fretful and worried she'd say no. I'd just turned and caught her eye when Silas's store dog Chuckie jumped out the door and darted out in the road.

Aggie's pet squirrel had ducked out of a Rose of Sharon bush and was headed over to the tables to see what all we'd left. It was mostly tame, and didn't mind the crowd a bit.

But old Chuckie knew something that ought to be up a tree when he seen it, and here he come. He ran right in front of Sammy and give him quite a start.

Sammy reared back, yankin' his hand out from his pockets to shove at Chuckie.

And everybody on both sides went quiet.

So quiet you could hear Sammy's bell, even though he'd stopped moseying.

Ding!...Ding-a-ling-a-ding!

I saw the twine that Sammy had strung from his right thumb, and saw how it ran through his belt loops to his dinger.

Marlene screeched like nails on a slate, and I knew she'd seen it too.

“*CHEATER!!*” she yelled, her hair, freshly blacked and set, not moving at all.

“Samuel Holbrook, you ain't nothin' but a big, fat cheater!”

Sammy squirmed and squeed, hoping to get out of it, but everybody'd seen that twine and heard his bell, which was still dingin' away as he waved his hands, tryin' to shush Marlene.

“Get 'im, girls!” she hollered, and just like that, the Ladies' Auxiliary swarmed poor Sammy like ants on a gumdrop.

Well, they taught Sammy—and the rest of us—what it means to try and cheat the Auxiliary. Lickety-split, they'd done snatched him nekkid. I've never seen the like, not before nor since.

Turns out ol' Sammy had some giddy-up in him, at least when a dozen or more wire flyswats smacked him all up and down his bare skin. By the time he made it to the post office and bolted the door behind him, he was redder'n a sunburnt fire engine, and the only thing keepin' the girls innocent was that belly of his, slappin' against his bare thighs.

Ezra Phipps won the Mosey that year. He couldn't hear all the dust-up, and was the only one who finished. He walked off with the ribbon, even though nobody could decide if he was first or last.

Now I don't know as it's true the evening shift up to the mine heard Sammy squallin' all the way under the mountain, but I do know my ears rang and felt stuffed fulla cotton until lunchtime next day.

Some good come of it all, though. From then on until the next Bear Waller Holler Chicken Eatin' Meetin', every time Marlene caught sight of Sammy, she'd take after him with that flyswat of hers, chasin' him all over town and even down the creek once, him runnin' like the Devil himself was on his heels.

Before the next Half-Mile Mosey, Sammy's postman's uniform looked like clothes on a broomstick. The tongue of his belt hung plumb down to his knees. He stayed a beanpole from then on until he died sixty years later, and probably owed the last twenty to the Marlene Flyswat Weight Loss Program.

As for Marlene, her arms just kept gettin' bigger.

Of course all sorts of tales sprung up after that. Some folks say on a quiet night, you can still hear Sammy's squalls echoin' all through Dante, and the smackin' of Marlene's flyswat. I don't know that any of it's true.

But I *do* know you'd be wise not to cross the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Upper Bear Wallow Freewill Baptist Church.

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