

My Vita

An Almost True Story about the Life and Times of Bluegrass Storyteller, Chuck Larkin

The problem is when you tell people these kinds of stories they always want to know are these stories true, where did you learned them and where did you grow up. I say, yes! The stories are true, I was there.

I grew up on a farm during the great depression of the 1930s. We used to receive Care packages from Alabama. On Thanksgiving our family would share a roasted sparrow or a meatball with a feather stuck in. I was three years old before I found out that Alpo was dog food. Some mornings when I'm out of cereal, I still fight my dog over breakfast. Momma made our pant's pockets out of rubber so we could bring home soup from the Salvation Army. Our credit was so bad the store would not take our cash money. I was sixteen before I knew how many dimes there were in a nickel. I was nineteen and in the U.S. Navy before I found out grits weren't meat. I had to leave Pocomoke in order to get a high school education. For Christmas we would decorate a tree stump. I remember once throwing an old, worn out, soup bone out of the door to our dogs. One of the dogs called for a fair catch. My mother used to take in washing and keep it. Mom also would make soup out of the butcher's apron. I remember one Sunday some relatives dropped in after church for dinner. Momma could only find one long string bean which she boiled until cooked. Then Momma tied a string on one end. All of the relatives and family sat down to dinner and passed the string bean. We took turns swallowing the string bean, pulled it back up with the string and passing it on. I remember that day because my cousin Elton bit the string and I missed lunch. We were so poor we couldn't pay attention. My dad had a chance to buy fifteen pounds of hamburger for a nickel and all he could afford to do was to run around a say how cheep that was. My brother broke his arm eating breakfast in a persimmon tree one day. We would eat so many turnip greens, collard greens and spinach, day after day that Momma would tie kerosene rags around our ankles when we went out doors to play to keep the cut worms from eating us down. Sometimes we would eat dried apples for breakfast, drink some water for lunch and by supper we would be so swelled up we would not be able to eat until breakfast again. When we wanted an after school snack, we would suck the lint off the carpet. I did not have any clothes to wear until I went to the first grade. I had a baseball hat and I would put it on and stand in the window and all of our neighbors thought I had clothes on like everybody else. We put on fig leaves to go out and play. We had no shoes, just painted our feet and laced up our toes.

Our farm was poorly. Our house was so small and narrow that the dogs had to wag their tails up and down. The corn in 1934 was so poor the sparrows would stand on the ground and eat off the stalk. We put a fence around our

farm so the neighbors cows wouldn't wander in and starve. Rabbits had to pack a lunch to cross the farm. It was so dry that when you cut a watermelon it was full of powder. You had to mix the powder with water to eat the watermelon. It was so dry that our pigs were clean. The ground had such huge cracks and our pigs were so thin we had to tie knots in the pigs' tails to keep them from falling through the cracks.

The farm was so far out in the country the sun set between the house and the road. We would drive to town to hunt. We were so far out in the woods the sun rose at twelve fifteen in the afternoon. In the winter we had to haul barrels of light out from town. Grand old Opera used to be on the radio Saturday night but the program never got out to our farm until Wednesday afternoon.

We finely moved into town a small town named Pocomoke right on the Pocomoke River. Pocomoke is an old Indian word, it means industrial park. Pocomoke was so small when I was a child that our local power plant was a Sears Roebuck Die Hard Battery. I remember the first automobiles, the old Model T made by Henry Ford. They would come whizzing down Main Street through town at fifteen miles per hour. The mayor put up a speed zone sign but Pocomoke was so small the Resume Speed sign was on the same pole. The last digit in our zip code was a fraction. The town drunk died in 1937, after that we were too small to have a town drunk so the adults had to take turns and the two Irish families were on call for backup. If you stood on a hill that overlooked Pocomoke you could overlook Pocomoke. I remember the year we had a beauty contest, no one won. In those days to use the telephone you had to fertilize the telephone pole and call long distance for local information. My Dad was mayor once, he was the fifth person to dial in. Our Hospital was a First Aide kit tacked up on a pole. When you drove down main street one wheel was out of town. Pocomoke did not have enough members of the same religion to hire a minister so everybody got together and hired an interdenominational preacher who went door to door to sermonize. The town never grew because every time a baby was born somebody moved. I remember at first Pocomoke did not even have any firefighters. We had a Great Dane dog and his partner was a Chihuahua with kidney problems. Next, Pocomoke moved up to a water pic. I remember when we organized our first volunteer fire boys. The town bought firefighter's hats but no equipment. In order to be prepared the volunteers had to take turns drinking lots of water. In 1938 the town bought their first fire truck and fire hydrant. In those days the fire trucks used to have Dalmatian dogs riding on the fire trucks. Pocomoke was so poor our Dalmatian only had one spot. The reason the fire trucks had Dalmatians riding along was to find the fire

This is a traditional story collected and adapted for telling by Bluegrass Storyteller, Chuck Larkin. Permission to use, revise and tell these stories is granted to the storytelling public.

hydrants. I never will forget Pocomoke. Our mail was addressed to the next town. Even the monthly newspaper had to be rolled up and soaked in water to be heavy enough to throw on the yard.

They say you can't go back but I did after 40 years. The only change was they had cleaned up the river bank and built a small park. Dumpster diving is big now in rural America. Pocomoke, down by the river in the edge of the park had a beautiful polished mahogany dumpster with window panes on the side so you could window shop before diving. They also had a small sign and a red diving flag. The sign said that one of the neighbors had been hit and hurt by a 30 pound bag of garbage so please hoist the red diving flag when you dive.

That time I was visiting Lee Shilling, the catfish farmer, and told him a couple of these stories I was working for the Federal government. When Lee stopped laughing he said, "Chuck how did you ever get a job in the Federal Government?" Well it was like this. In 1967 I was interviewed for a position in the Employment and Training Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor. The fellow who was interviewing me was at retirement age and was planning to depart to civilian life. I remember the interview. The first question he wanted to know was Gandhi's first name. I

said, "Goose, Goose Gander?" He asked me where the Andes were I said, "on the end of my wrists-es." He looked at me somewhat strangely and then smiled and said, "you may have a future with this agency Chuck. Tell me what is a Hindu?" I said, "they lay eggs." "Where is Uganda?" "In St. Petersburg, Florida with my Grandma." "What do you know about Red China?" "It looks good on a blue table cloth." "Name two days of the week that start with a T." "Today and tomorrow." "Yes, Chuck you are the kind of man we are looking for in the U. S. Government. What is an Alabama pigeon?" Is that a bird with a banjo on his knee?" "Can you spell paint?" I said, "what color." For some reason he laughed and said, "what does William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain have in common?" "They are all dead." "Two more questions Chuck. What is the difference between ignorance and apathy?" Well, that one had me baffled, I figured he wasn't serious about the job so I said, "I don't know and I don't care." "Yes! You are the man to replace me if you can answer one last question. What is a jumbo jet?" "That is a hard one, Is it an elephant with a leg up on a wall?" He said, "Chuck, you're hired" and here I am today a retired federal bureaucrat who used to go around helping people. Government work to me was just another kind of storytelling but not as interesting.

AND THOSE WERE TRUE STORIES