Natural-Born Proud

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Published by Utah State University Press

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Everyone burst out talking at once. “Whooee,” Unca Billy shouted. “Man, did you see this thing? I mean it ate that Hudson up! I tell ya, Rev, I thought my new Chrysler was fast, but now I don’t know. I ’spect this 98’d outrun it.”

Willis hollered into the Old Man’s eyes in the rear view mirror, “Why, Ref, even after the needle went outta sight, this car kep on pickin up speed.”

Bub and I laughed, and he said, “Boy, is this car fast!”

“Fastest one I ever had, I expect,” the Old Man announced proudly to all of us. I figured winning the race would have been worth the ticket if a speed cop had nabbed us, and the Old Man seemed to feel that way too.

We eased through Corning and made for the next town.

“We gonna get gas in Redding?” Bub asked. “I got to go to the bathroom.”

“What you gotta do?”

“Everything,” was Bub’s answer.

“Me, too,” I chimed in, hoping my agreement with my brother would be enough to make the Old Man stop, since he always complained about stopping on long drives. He grumbled a little bit, but agreed to a quick potty stop.

An hour later, after the short toilet break and more fast driving, we turned off the highway at the Tip-Top Truck Stop in Redding. Its neon sign imitated a spinning top and its door opened through the round front of a building shaped like one. It was one of my dad’s favorite eating places when he drove through that part of northern California. We ate fat, juicy hamburgers and hot french fries, and we drank thick milkshakes—Bub’s a chocolate malt and
mine a pineapple. The men told hunting stories and had a second cup of coffee each.

As we got back into the car, Bub and I got into an argument about who would sit in the middle of the back seat.

“You’re the smallest,” I told him under my breath.

“But I’m tired of straddling that hump in the floor, and I don’t have any place to rest my arms,” he argued loudly. That was one of his favorite tricks: loud-talking me to get Mom’s or the Old Man’s attention.

It worked. Willis volunteered to do it, but the Old Man intervened.

“Naw, Brother Willis. Let one of these boys ride in the middle. They’re a whole lot younger an more limber than you.”

“That’s fer shore,” Willis agreed.

I saw it was a losing proposition, so I slid resentfully into the middle of the seat. Bub got in on my right, Willis on my left.

When we left Redding and turned northeast onto Highway 299, we had about three hours to go to reach Lookout, in Modoc County, our jumping off place into the mountains where we would hunt. Almost immediately, we put the flatlands behind us and climbed out of the Sacramento Valley into rolling hills spotted with scrub oaks; terrain and vegetation very different from that on the sandy, salty Monterey Peninsula with its stunted oaks and pines, its stands of jutting Cypress, its groves of Eucalyptus. It was also different from the lush vegetation in the flat San Joaquin. The sun-dried field grass looked like a brown carpet broken by rocky gullies covering the low hills.

Fall was taking over, but the early afternoon sun was still hot, so we coastal dwellers simmered and sweated. We rolled all the car windows down, allowing the wind to cool us off a little, but it also blew the sounds around, making conversation between the front and back seats next to impossible. Willis slouched down in the seat and began to snore. Excited by the race and the prospect of hunting, Bub and I were wide awake, so we looked out the windows, lost in our private fantasies.
Having to shout, the Old Man and Unca Billy talked and talked—about desegregation, about Joe McCarthy, about the war in Korea, about communism, about the atomic bomb.

“You reckon it’d be any better for cullud folks if the communists ran things, Rev?” Unca Billy asked.

“Well, I don’t b’lieve we got a whole lot of ’em in this country like some folks say, but I ’spect things would be about the same for us if they was in charge long as they white,” the Old Man replied. He went on, “The main thing is I don’t know sometimes if these crazy folks gon kill us all with these atomic bombs or what.”

“White folks’ll do jes about anything, Rev. You cain’t never tell about them,” Unca Billy said.

“It ain’t just white folks. Black ones jes don’t have no bombs yet,” was my dad’s counter.

I wondered if Willis heard any of their talk, so I glanced over at him. He was still asleep. About white people, Unca Billy felt more like Mom than like the Old Man—feared and disliked them. The Old Man seemed to think they were just like everybody else—good, bad, rich, poor and all the rest of it. He wasn’t afraid of them and didn’t like them any more or less than he did anyone else.

“What folks do is what counts,” he said.

“Maybe so, but it sho is worrisome,” Unca Billy ended the topic.

Under their talk, I could hear Gene Autry and Kitty Wells and the Sons of the Pioneers on the radio, so I knew we were getting farther away from the cities and closer to Modoc.

The road got steeper and more crooked, so the Old Man had to drive slower, and we started seeing more big conifers than scrub oaks. We also saw apple orchards rowed up and down the soft hills. By the time we passed Round Mountain, where the Old Man promised we’d buy a box of apples when we went home, we were in logging country. We passed big trucks going to and from the sawmills in the centers of all the little towns we went through, and the air smelled piney. Everyone was wide awake and looking around curiously. For practice, I concentrated on looking under trees and in little clearings in the manzanita on the off chance I’d
see a deer or some other wild animal out taking some afternoon sun. I didn’t see any.

At Fall River Mills, we broke out onto a high plateau. I’d looked at a map before we left home, so I knew our turn off to Lookout was thirty-five miles away, at the end of Big Valley. I could see a few fertile-looking farms stretching out to the big hills where the timber began. But the land looked as if some giant hand had scraped off most of the trees, leaving only small clumps of pines that hadn’t been logged off. The towns got smaller and more desolate, and when we reached our turn off for Lookout, I felt that at last I would actually go deer hunting in Modoc.

I guess you could call Lookout a town, though it didn’t look like much of one. The sign at the city limits said the population was twenty-seven, but we didn’t see any of them on the street. The place had only one paved street a couple of blocks long with a short row of two or three buildings on each side. Behind one of the rows of buildings, there was a line of bluffs with four or five family homes scattered around on top of them. It was like all those little bitty northern California towns we went in and out of on later hunting trips. It had a post office, which also served as the bus station. I couldn’t imagine anyone going hunting on the bus, but hunting was the only reason I could see for anyone going to Lookout at all. One of those signs with a picture of a greyhound on it and the word “bus” underneath hung from the front of the square, basalt block building.

Across the street was a Department of Highways maintenance yard with a snow plow parked against the fence and a few piles of gravel, sand and asphalt lying on the ground. A sign on the gate said “Trespassing By Permission Only.” A little farther down stood the nondenominational church where the Old Man always claimed he was going to go offer to preach someday. Swaybacked and no longer white, its faded, gray sides leaned into the red dust the wind swirled up and down the street. There were just a few buildings including a deserted grammar school and a dingy café. All of them looked tired, and they gave me a sad, lonely feeling.

The only way into or out of Lookout was by the White Horse road. One direction would take us out to camp, the other toward
the main highway and Nubieber, seven miles away out on the broad, high plateau that stretched a long way in every direction, then merged with the brushy hills. The big, timbered mountains loomed in the distance and formed a jagged, purple boundary dominated by the two giant volcanoes, Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta, where the earth met the sky. As I later learned, Lookout was situated on the spot where the white settlers had stood to fight the Indians who were there when they arrived. I wondered why they hadn’t called it something like Battleground, or Last Stand, instead of Lookout. Afterwards, the whites sheared the forests off the volcanoes and other mountains and sank mine shafts into their flanks. They set up towns, ranches and farms all through that country. They stuck the Indians off on a reservation up near Klamath Falls and left them with only legends and a few places where their ancestors were buried, instead of a whole region to roam and hunt. Even as a kid, I felt that that arrangement wasn’t right.

The only store in town was run by the area’s game warden, Jack Heater, and his wife. The men said Heater was the meanest warden in the area. His wife usually did the work in the store since he was out in the hills most of the day. The store was in a building set back off the street. In front were two gas pumps—the old-timey kind with a handle that you worked to bring the gas up into the glass cylinder at the top. A telephone booth stood off to one side.

A once-white building like the church, the store had a high roof line that sloped from front to back into the bluff so it appeared to be sitting back against the hill, the way a cat sits back on its haunches. Its front was jacked up on concrete blocks and 4x4’s, ready for a flood that hadn’t yet come. The store’s front looked a little like a sad face, with the two windows for eyes, its porch for a rectangular nose, and its steps on each end a mouth that turned down at the corners. Near the top was a sign, like a scar on the forehead. It read “Store,” in rough, black letters a third-grader might paint. All of the letters faced in the right direction, but they were crooked and headed uphill toward the right-hand corner as if trying to climb off the sign.
The Old Man pulled up beside the pumps to gas up the Olds, and we crawled out to stretch and move around. Mrs. Heater came out onto the porch.

“Howdy, Reverend,” she called down. “A coupla your fellas stopped by here earlier today, so I knew you’d be here pretty soon. You gonna camp at the Baker place again?”

“Oh, yes,” he answered. “ Wouldn’t stay anywhere else.” She was a slender, round-shouldered woman with light brown hair and a friendly face.

“Been seein any deer much?” the Old Man called up to her.

“Jack says the herds are big this year and stayin together more than usual. Season don’t open until next Monday, but I wouldn’t doubt that you’ll see him somewhere out there.” He paid her for the gas, and we got back into the car for the last leg of our trip.

I’d never been to Modoc County before, but I liked it at once. I couldn’t have put words to it, but the high, steep mountains covered with big stands of pines, the lava beds like huge, delapidated buildings we drove through and among, the dry, narrow road that spun up a cloud of red dust behind us, all had the feel of being ancient. Brooding. Even now, the most I can say about it is that the country felt mysterious, spiritual, even a little spooky, like it was part of the earth but different from any part I’d ever been in before.

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We got into camp about three in the afternoon. The old Baker place was the site of an abandoned mine, gold I think. Any structures that had been there were gone, and the shaft had long since been closed. The only remaining signs of human presence were sawed-off stumps of trees and the barest hint of what had been a road. There was a large, flat, circular clearing, much bigger than we’d need for our camp. It was on top of a knoll that stuck out like a toe from the mountain behind it, and it was bordered on the back by big trees and on one side by a spring-fed creek that ran down and under the road through a culvert. It was a grassy, hillside perch that gave us a good view of the dirt road creeping up the hill and bending sharply to the left, and it was up out of the dust boiled up by passing cars and trucks. It was beautiful.
The Old Man pulled the Olds off to one side of the camp’s entrance, its ample body aimed at the mountain and forming a partial wall that shielded us from the traffic on the road below. The air smelled sweet, and the pine needles on the ground were soft and springy under foot. The afternoon sunlight sprayed down between and through the trees, dappling the whole place with spots of light. Deke and Smitty had taken the tarpaulin cover and its steel braces off the back of the truck and had already put the three tents up. They were working on the tarp covering for the cooking area.

When we got out of the car, there was lots of shouting and hollering, back slapping and hand shaking. Smitty and Bub sparred around in a mock fight until the Old Man made them stop.

“Y’all didn’t have no trouble, hunh?” Deke asked down from the bed of the truck, where he was standing to tie off the tarp.

“Naw,” said the Old Man. “We made good time.”

“We outran a Hudson Hornet down in the valley,” Bub offered laughing.

“I mean we ate it up,” Willis piped up, using Unca Billy’s expression from earlier.

“Sho did,” Unca Billy agreed.

The Old Man just beamed.

Everyone worked fast and hard for the next hour and a half. Smitty and Willis dug a latrine down below the spring to keep from contaminating the water. Bub and I put the bedding, guns and personal belongings into the tents—Bub’s, Smitty’s and mine together in the back tent, Willis’s and Unca Billy’s in the uphill one and Deke’s and the Old Man’s in the downhill one. All the tents faced inward, toward the center of the camp. Smitty and Willis diverted water from the spring twenty yards away by placing one end of a long, two-inch pipe in it and digging a big hole and a trench at the other end of it to trap the water and guide it back to the creek bed. That brought cold, sweet water within 15 feet of the center of our camp. Then they grabbed a chain saw and axe to go gather firewood. Since Deke and Unca Billy were to be the camp cooks, they set up the stoves, lanterns and cooking gear after Deke built a long table out of eight-foot 1x6’s he’d brought from home and belt-high poles he cut for legs. As usual, and as if by divine right, the Old Man
supervised, making suggestions and offering advice and encouragement when and where he felt it necessary.

With camp all set up, we lounged around in comfortable folding chairs, breathing in the crisp, piney air, smelling the pig’s feet boiling in their sauce and feeling pleased with our condition. We were tired, but we were there in Modoc. We had our camp drill down pat—Bub and I and Smitty and Willis would cover wood, water and K.P., Deke and Unca Billy would cook, the Old Man would fill in, and we were on the hunt. We were on the hunt.

Munching on roasted peanuts he kept pulling out of his pocket and shelling, the Old Man turned to me and said, “If you hike up onto that ridge behind the camp, you’ll be able to get a good look off toward Egg Lake an the lava beds an all, if the light’s still good enough.” I looked at Bub, who had started to move, and we leaped up almost in unison.

I hesitated, then asked, “Can we take our guns?”

The Old Man seemed a bit uncertain, not wanting to risk our shooting something before the season opened, but then he said, “I guess so. Season ain’t open yet, so if you see a buck, you can’t shoot him. An we don’t wanna disturb the hills too much. Why don’t you jes put a coupla shells in the chamber an leave the barrel empty?” That was fine with us.

Almost running, we flung ourselves at the hillside, but the incline quickly forced us back into a more patient pace. In a few minutes, we were out of the sight of camp, moving through the lengthening late afternoon shadows and the tall evergreens. In half an hour we came out onto a clearing on one of the mountain’s shoulders. From perches up on stumps we could see for miles off to the west, just like our dad had said.

“I can see McArthur, and there’s Pittville,” Bub hollered, gesturing.

“How do you know?”

“Cause I can see the road we came to Lookout on. See? Just look back towards the sun a ways and you’ll see ’em.” He was right. Partly not to be outdone, and partly judging by the smoke hanging in the air, I shouted,

“There’s Fall River Mills.”
“Yeah. Can you see the volcanoes?”
“I can’t make ’em out for all the haze.”
“Me neither.”

The light was failing, but we decided that some of what we took for shadows were really the giant mountains. Closer to us were White Horse, the egg lakes and the lava beds we had driven through a few hours earlier.

I didn’t have the words for it then, but the feeling I remember was of being small and inconsequential as I sat high on a great big stump and surveyed the panorama before me. It was as if I were privileged to see things forbidden to most humans, as if the mountains and rocks and trees had permitted me an entrance reserved for the few. I thought back to that day that the Old Man had hollered off Chews’ Ridge and figured I knew something about how he had felt. I didn’t holler then, but I have a few times since. It was something like being in church. I sighed and said to my brother, “Well, here we are.”

“Yep,” was his answer.
“Think we’ll see any deer?”
“Sure. The Old Man has killed ’em here before, and that lady in Lookout today said there are lots of ’em this year.”
“You scared?”
“Yeah, I guess so,” he came back after a pause. “You?”
“A little.”
“What of?”
“I’m scared I’ll miss one if I see him.”
“All you gotta do is aim and shoot like Dad showed us,” he replied, parroting what I had said to him earlier. He sighted down his gun barrel and said, “Pow—got ’im!”

Instead of answering, I stood up and peed off the stump onto the ground six feet below.

“If you shake it more than twice, you’re playing with it, and I’m gonna tell Dad,” he teased. The play brought my horniness out from the recesses of my mind and I resolved to take care of it when I got the chance. I shook it twice more to spite him, and to please myself. Then I climbed down off the stump for the walk back to camp.