Natural-Born Proud

Martin Jr., S.R.

Published by Utah State University Press

Martin Jr., S.R.
Natural-Born Proud: A Revery.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/1274.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1274

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=253696
Camp was tense that night, the gloominess of our mood matching the darkness in the sky. Smitty’s getting lost had upset everyone, him and me more than anyone else. He was angry at the Old Man and embarrassed for himself. He had also been scared. I was pissed at him and at my dad. I had been scared too. Smitty’s racing off into the brush had struck me as childish, the Old Man’s stubbornness about the guns as needlessly rigid.

Another factor in our feeling bad was fatigue. In fact, one of my most powerful memories of that trip was the tiredness at the end of each day. I had begun to learn how physically exhausting deer hunting could be. I don’t think I’d ever felt so drained before. My shoulders and neck felt strained, my lower back and legs burned and ached. As I looked around camp at the others, I could tell that they were at least as bad off as I was, except, of course, the Old Man.

Deke hummed snatches of some nameless church song as he moved around fixing dinner, and Willis made himself as busy as possible, though not necessarily as useful, trying to help Deke but mainly getting in his way. Smitty was glum and silently stacked up more firewood than we’d use in a week. As if impervious to it all, the Old Man, sitting near one of the lanterns, read his Bible while the meal was prepared. Bub and I sat around the fire watching the men.

Unca Billy’s return of thanks for the food seemed to drag on for hours. Not only did he call down God’s blessings on all of the less fortunate of the world, but he prayed for the Lord to give his servants guidance and peace, which I took to be about the row between the Old Man and Smitty. I doubted that God paid much
attention to little beefs like that. He had other, more important, things on His mind, if anything. No one told stories as we ate, and as soon as Bub and I finished up the dishes and helped Deke and Unca Billy stow the food, we all staggered off to bed.

We slept in the next morning, which is to say that we got up around seven. The pall from the night before was still over us, but the night’s rest made us feel a little better. Everyone was stiff and sore. We would spend that day resting our sore muscles since we had worked our bodies harder than usual and weren’t used to sleeping on the ground. We would also spend some time rearranging our gear for the trip down to the Pit River and taking short hikes on Baker Mountain to loosen up our stiff joints. No one mentioned taking guns on those walks. Smitty joined Bub and me on a walk back up to our viewpoint. He was still mad at the Old Man, but because of his own silly mistake the afternoon before, he was pretty subdued.

“I tell ya, Satch,” he said to me as we looked out toward Big Valley, our next day’s destination, “the Rev is a great big pain in my ass sometimes. Reminds me of the first-sergeant I had in Korea—didn’t nobody know nothin but him. He useta ride new guys in the company jus to show off what a big deal he was. He didn’t bother my ass though ’cause he knew I’d lay a left hook on him.”

“Remember how the Rev bugged me about that speeding ticket I got up by San Jose? Just nagged and nagged at me.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“But hell with it. I’m gonna hunt my ass off an git me a nice buck. You watch.”

“It won’t do you any good if you get lost again,” Bub put in.

“Shut up!” I snapped at him. “You take care of your own bananas.”

“Don’t worry ’bout that. I’m gonna show all a y’all,” Smitty came back. We scouted around the side of the hill, watching for signs of deer, then hiked up over the top and back down to camp.

Since we planned to camp on the Pit River for only a couple or three days, the next morning we gathered up just enough things to get by on. The Old Man told us, “If ya put everything away an tie down the tent flaps, nobody’ll bother it. Hunters won’t steal your
stuff like a lot of folks will. Huntin an stealin don’t usually seem to mix.” I didn’t share his faith in the virtue of outdoors people, but I took his advice and helped tidy up the camp so we could go. I was anxious to shoot my new rifle some more. I didn’t care that it would be only at targets.

We threw our gear into the back of the truck, and by nine o’clock, we were on our way. At White Horse Reservoir, we turned right toward Lookout instead of left into the lava beds, and I noticed right away that more hunting parties were arriving. Wispy layers of campfire smoke hung over the trees around the junction. The dust raised by cars and trucks moving over the road formed a reddish-brown tunnel that we drove through. Every time a vehicle passed us headed into the woods, some of us would wave at its passengers. I felt smug and good knowing that our main camp was all set up and our scouting done while the newcomers still had work to do and trouble to go through. In fact, all of us seemed easier together than we had been at the end of the day before, so we sprawled around on the truck, trying to get comfortable for the ride down into the valley.

About halfway to Lookout, a slick, new Jeep loaded down with stuff passed us going toward White Horse. Its driver was a burly young white guy, and a young blonde woman was in the passenger seat beside him. Willis suddenly got very quiet and nervous. In a few minutes, he leaned forward and tapped Unca Billy on the shoulder and said to him, “Brother Perkins, I reckon you done heard ’bout me losin my girl back in June.” Something told me that whatever Unca Billy answered, Willis was going to tell him the story.

“Yeah, Brotha Willis, an I sho was sorry to hear that.”

Willis paused for a bit, as if he were trying to gather himself to go through the ordeal again. He was one of those people whose body shows what’s going on inside him. His face sagged and his narrow shoulders hunched upward and forward, like he had a bad stomach ache. His rough, red hands, possessed of a life of their own, moved awkwardly in his lap. He stared straight in front of him and spoke quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself, so everyone sat still in order to hear him over the engine noise.
“I reckon it was wrong of us, but Sissie bein the oldest an all, she was kinda our favorite. We figgered that outta all our kids, she’d be the one to do somethin for herself. Me an my wife knowed she wasn’t real happy stayin there at the house helpin her ma wit the young ’uns. Kinda restless-like she was. Then she took up wit that boy Ben. We didn’t like him on account of he was so much oldern her an drank an everything. He was kinda wild, ya know. Then when she run off an’ married him an that, we jes hoped everything’d be all right.”

As he talked, I let my mind wander back over what I’d heard my dad tell Deke about him. Joe Willis had been poor all his life. He had left some farming town in Arkansas with his wife and two children and had come to the Monterey Peninsula hoping to better his condition during World War II. He went to work as a mechanic for Klaus Baumgartner, the old German who then owned the wrecking yard. He was a good worker and an honest man. So when old Klaus slowed down because of damage to his eyes from all the cutting torch and welding work he’d done and then retired somewhere around Watsonville near his grown kids, he took Willis in as a partner. Klaus later sold out to him.

By then, Willis and his wife had four kids, with another on the way. Neither of the Willises had much education, but his wife tried to keep the books while Willis pulled parts off wrecks and sold them. Because of his ignorance, Willis never made much money. All he had to show for his effort and hard work was a big brood of kids and a reputation as a decent man.

I never knew what his experiences with black people had been, though I assumed they were similar to those of other southern white people, but he really liked my dad. They got to be real friends, even fixing up and selling some of those old cars together. One time they were working on one, and the jack stand holding it up slipped. The car fell on my dad, its rear spring pinning his shoulder to the concrete floor of the garage. He screamed out in pain. Without hesitating or thinking, Willis bent down and picked the back end of that car up off of the Old Man. The Old Man lost some blood and had to have the gash sewed up. Willis strained his back and was stove up for a month. But they both got well and
kept on working together. In fact, Willis damned near worshipped my old man. I tuned back in to Willis’s monologue in time to hear him say,

“In a little while, they started havin fights an everything, an Sissie come back home to stay with us a while after the first of the year. She stayed a coupla weeks, till he called her up on the phone an then she run back down to Dos Palos where he was. That was the las time we seen her alive.” He stopped and blew his lumpy, red nose in his bandanna. That was the first time I actually experienced his suffering like that, and I wondered how I’d respond if I raised a child up to Sissie’s age and had him or her suddenly taken away from me like she was. Then I hurt for Willis.

When he got to the part about the shootings, his voice got even quieter and sounded more like someone sobbing than someone talking. I had a hard time making out what he was saying, but I already knew the story. No one else spoke. He said, “Now she’s gone, an she wa’nt but eighteen year old. She’s dead an her soul is los ’cause she didn’t know God.” Willis’s grief and pain overcame him. He wept loudly and shook violently.

No matter how many times I heard about Sissie and Ben, it never ceased to remind me of my dad’s middle brother Jigs, the one between him and Smitty’s dad. From what I knew, back in Texas where they grew up, Jigs came home from work one day to find his wife Ruthie in bed with another man. He grabbed a gun and blew their brains all over the bedroom. Then he lit out for the West, moving from place to place and never visiting his family. But even now, some Christmases and Easters he gets drunk and calls on the phone, crying and apologizing. He’s a mess. It’s almost as if he were dead too.

As Willis cried, Unca Billy murmured, “God bless you, Brotha Willis.” When he managed to stop crying, Willis blew his nose again and said, “I’m sorry, brothers. I didn’t mean to burden y’all wit my sufferin. But when I seen that Jeep with them young people in it back yonder, it jes come down on me agin. Ref, would y’all mine sayin a word a prayer wit me?”

Without answering or hesitating, the Old Man swerved the truck off the road and parked, leaving the motor running. When
the dust had settled a little, he and Unca Billy prayed, Unca Billy laying his hand on Willis’s forehead. The prayer was short and quiet so I didn’t hear the words. I thought it was probably because the Old Man had prayed with Willis so many times before and because he was anxious to get down to the Pit River.

“Thank ya, brothers,” Willis said when it was over. “I b’lieve it’s good for us to be here together. I feel better already.” The Old Man drove back onto the road, saying, “The Lord is our refuge in a storm, our help in a time of need, and our comfort in a time of trouble.” I figured the men believed that, but if I had been Willis, I think I’d have wanted more sympathy than that short prayer and those few words offered. But the Old Man didn’t say or do anything else.

“Yes, Lord,” Unca Billy breathed. We moved on.

§ § § § §

Way up ahead of us, where the road climbed out of a canyon over the crown of a high lava butte, rose the dust plume from a vehicle headed toward us. “My goodness!” said the Old Man. “Somebody sure is movin fast on this narrow road.” He pulled the truck over to wait for what we could see was a car to pass. The car slowed down. Instead of going on by, it stopped beside the road across from us. As the dust cloud cleared, we made out an olive-drab ’49 Ford coupe with a State of California seal on its door. I fingered the four shells in my pocket and glanced quickly around the truck to be sure everything was as it was supposed to be. Jack Heater climbed slowly out of the car. I’d never met or seen him before, but somehow I knew him instantly. And I didn’t like him.

The dust had turned into a haze that hung in the air a long ways up and down the road in front and in back of us and a little way into the jack pines beside the road. Heater was alone. He ambled across the road toward us, thumbs hooked in his gun belt. I didn’t think game wardens usually wore pistols, but this was Modoc so I guessed he could do as he pleased. Jack Heater was short and fat, and his loose paunch shook as he walked. He peered out at us through thick sunglasses, and he had the nerve to try to swagger like TV tough guys when he walked.
He had sweat rings running from under his arms down the sides of his heavy, dark-green uniform shirt. It was too hot to be dressed like that. He stank of sweat, which reminded me of what Mom said, “Old nasty white folks ain’t like us. They smell bad.” I didn’t know about all of them, but sometimes Brother Willis smelled a little funny to me. And Jack Heater downright stank. Heater looked more pathetic than fearsome to me, but that was my first deer-hunting trip, so what did I know?

The warden knew who we were because there were no other black hunters who went regularly into his area, and my old man had been going there for years, but Heater didn’t smile or let on. He just walked up and said, “Howdy, boys,” like a big shot lawman. The Old Man grinned, nodded and said, “Howdy.” No one else spoke.

“Lemme see your licenses and tags.” My dad turned to us. Heater didn’t say anything while he examined our licenses and tags. He just sweated and breathed heavily through his nose and mouth in deep puffs. Willis reached across Deke and the Old Man to offer his license, but Heater waved him off. Willis glanced around at us embarrassedly and sheepishly put his wallet back into his pocket. The Old Man saw what had happened, but acted like he didn’t. I knew he saw it ’cause his head gave a little jerk when he looked from Willis back to Heater. He should have said or done something, but he kept quiet. I couldn’t understand why he didn’t speak up because he didn’t usually let things like that pass. He pissed me off taking race crap from that lame dude.

When Heater had finished looking at our licenses and tags, he pointed up into the truck and grunted in his hoarse voice, “All them guns unloaded?”

Deer season wasn’t even open yet, so of course our guns were unloaded. Everyone started handing him the empty guns, one by one. He inspected them all, including Willis’s old .30-40 Krag. When he got to Bub’s, he worked the lever a couple times, raised it to his shoulder and looked down the road through the peep sight before giving it back. The sleek Savage looked good, even in his claw hands. The Old Man handed over his custom-built
.270 Winchester, careful of the scope and making sure the muzzle pointed straight up into the air.

A beautiful gun, it had a smooth, blue steel barrel and a hand-made sport stock of polished, straight-grained wood. Its cheek rest was cut to fit the Old Man. Its pistol grip fitted his hand. The Bausch and Lomb four-power scope sat firmly in its mount and gave the whole weapon a finished, elegant look. You could see Heater’s eyes bulge when he took it into his hands. He tried to act cool, but he handled the gun awkwardly, obviously nervous. He started to raise it to his shoulder and sight down the barrel as he had done with Bub’s .250. But he hesitated, glanced quickly at the Old Man, turned red and let it back down. He worked the bolt once, looked into the empty magazine and said to the Old Man, “Goddamn! Custom?”

“Yes.”

“Must have cost right smart to have a piece like that made.”

“Yes.”

“Belong to you?”

“Yes.”

“Son of a bitch!” Heater said.

What was wrong with that clown? He must have known, as even I knew, that sometimes hunters did use borrowed guns. Sure. But no one would even try to borrow an expensive, custom-built rifle like the Old Man’s. That’s personal stuff.

The Old Man took his gun and put it carefully back into the scabbard belted beside the driver’s seat. The warden backed away and stood there in the dusty road for a moment. Then he waved his hand toward the truck and asked the Old Man, “Whose Weapons Carrier?”

“Mine,” was the reply.

“Lemme see your registration slip.”

I know better now, but I still get an angry twinge when I think back about how Heater badgered us that day. He had to keep prodding and pushing, just like people said he did. He had a legal right and duty to check on us, of course, but he had no cause for suspecting us of any violation. We were only driving down the road, minding our own business. But he couldn’t leave us alone because
we were black except for Willis. And he used Willis to remind us of that fact.

Lots of the people in that part of Modoc knew the Old Man and that he was a minister and a law-abiding hunter. Heater did, too. The son-of-a-bitch. I wasn’t saved, so I could at least think curse words, though I couldn’t say them in the Old Man’s presence. Bub’s eyes looked scared, so I looked at him hard and signalled him with my hand, warning him. We had no reason to be afraid, but I felt tense, too. Damn that Heater! And damn Bub, and the Old Man, too!

Deliberately, the Old Man took the registration slip out of its case on the steering column and shoved it at the warden. As he looked at the slip, Jack Heater asked, “Army surplus, ain’t it?”

“You know these bastards’ll go damn near anywhere. Must be your tracks I seen up in some o’ these hills.”

“Probly so,” said the Old Man, beginning to stare past Heater into the trees behind him. He seemed to be working at keeping his anger in check.

Without a “thank you” or “good luck,” in fact without another word, Jack Heater thrust the registration slip back at the Old Man, turned and started across the road to his car, his pistol slapping his fat behind as he went. He revved up the Ford’s engine and made a U-turn behind us. Screeching to a stop alongside the truck, he leaned across the seat and shouted out the window, “Y’all boys know it’s agin the law to shoot from the road, don’t ye?” Without waiting for our response, he gunned his motor and shot off up the road, burying us in his dust.

The Old Man sat there, waiting for Heater’s dust to settle. I could tell he was mad, but he just stared. Then he fired up the truck and pulled out onto the road. We rode along quietly until Willis spoke up, “Ref, they orta be sumpn a man can do ’bout folks like that.”

“Well, sometimes there is an sometimes there ain’t,” came back the Old Man.

We moved on toward the Pit River. All of our good cheer was gone. Our encounter with the warden had brought us back into
the social reality that our days in the hills had allowed us temporarily to forget. Even in 1950’s California, white people could still harass black people and get away with it. The Old Man kept driving slowly, pensively, no longer scouting or talking, just staring straight ahead up the road. My first Modoc deer hunt was off to a terrific start—we had outrun a white boy in a Hudson Hornet, but a cracker game warden had hassled us for recklessly breathing while black. And we hadn’t even actually started hunting yet.