

“Get ‘em Boys! Get ‘em!”

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

There was a period in Grundy County when folks could let their stock roam freely; never mind that your vegetable garden was knee high, or you preferred not to walk in animal droppings, or your small child was playing on the lawn. Has anyone ever noticed that an old rogue cow had rather eat in your garden or nibble on your lawn grass than graze on the thousand acres of free-range grass? “Yep! Mama had to watch her dahlias and her tomato plants like a hawk!” Those cows, pigs, chickens, or whatever was being raised to keep the family afloat, had free range of the area. In old photos around the mountain, homesteads can be seen behind fences that protected them from destruction. “Git off that fence son. We put that there to keep the animals out!”

Then came the time when a new law was passed that made the farmer responsible for fencing in his animals. No longer could the cattle roam the range like honeybees searching for blossoms. The mention of such a law caused heated discussions around the county. The farmers in the valleys below had always moved their cattle up to the top of the plateau in the spring. They were so dependent on the wonderful, green grasses that sprang forth from the scorched blotches on the mountain. The talk was that the farmers often set fires on chosen land throughout the fall and winter which enabled the grasses to burst out with lushness in the spring. And if the law in question was passed, then all that free, plentiful, summer food for their cattle was gone. However, even after the new law came into effect, there were still hundreds of acres of land so far out in the woods where cattle could roam freely without disturbing anyone.

When Grady Ward Partin was about twelve years of age, his father and uncles rented about eight hundred acres of land in Marion County from an old man named Joe Braden. The land was located at a place called Pigeon, a place about which there is a myriad of wonderful stories told and to be told. Mr. Braden had claims or heir’s rights to the land. It was a perfect place for the Partin Farm cattle to be moved for the summer. A few trips to Pigeon were made to prepare barbed wire fences loosely tacking them to trees in rough patterns throughout the woods. A holding pen, or corral, with a pole gap was also wired in for those times when a cow or calf needed to be confined. On one particular cattle drive, there were about eighty-five head to be moved out the narrow slate road that meandered toward the south end of the plateau overlooking Martin Springs. Probably a bull was going to make the trip too. Speaking of the bull, at one time the farm’s big Hereford bull got out and Uncle Doug told Grady Ward, “Turn him boy, turn him!” Now, turning a bull was something a “bull-dozer” would do, not a young skinny boy, but in those days, when an elder told you to do something, there was no thinking the situation over first. The head strong bull had already started his fast run down the road toward Pigeon, so Grady Ward fell in right

beside him and ran as fast as he could to try to head him back toward the barn. Who do you think won that race?

Wouldn't you think that the old cows, heifers and young calves would march happily out into the road and turn toward Pigeon and behave themselves for the long refreshing trip to new grasses? No! They had been confined to their small acreage throughout the long winter making them as wild and hyper as school children when the barometer changes. Off in every direction they went. Usually one old cow would appoint herself as the leader. In this case it was an old cow with a bell around her neck. She was white-faced with some black spots scattered around, and she was sporting a pretty good set of horns. Grady Edward Partin and his brothers Roy and Doug, usually rode in an old jeep or on horseback while Grady Ward and his cousin Jimmy Bell were the "stock dogs"—as in "on foot all the way." The old road was bumpy, full of holes, washed out, and just plain rough. (*Once many years ago, Grady Ward, our three sons and I went to Pigeon in an old jeep. We had stopped at an old barn and gathered nearly a dozen eggs in a cap and went on our way. When we got back home hours later, the eggs to our surprise were about the only things not broken. The poor old 1949 Willis jeep had been stuck in the mud forever and our backs were nearly broken from digging it out.*) That's how rough Pigeon Road could be.

If you think the road was difficult, when one or two of those young calves decided to play tag and ran off into the woods, and Grady Edward called for the two "stock dogs" to "get 'em boys, get 'em," then things really got rough. Saw briars reached out their thorny arms and grabbed Grady Ward and Jimmy by the legs and arms. Those rattlesnakes and copperheads never had a chance to nab one of those boys. They were just too quick. You know, the cows and calves never seemed to mind the little obstacles on their romp through the woods. Wild grapevines seemed to enjoy tripping the boys or choking them a little as they thrashed their way behind the animals, but rarely did a cow or calf stumble. Why is it that those huge spider webs that one encounters in the woods didn't seem to slow the calves down, but crawled all over the faces and arms of the boys. One can never get those things out of the eyes or hair. Tenacious little devils! Weren't the boys supposed to have the better intellect? Then why were the calves always ahead of them or even at times behind them as though they were the pursuers instead of the pursued?

Luckily for Grady Ward and Jimmy, cows never like to get too far from the main herd, so the roughly five or six mile trip to the prepared gap wasn't too overwhelming. For the most part, the family enjoyed the excursion. Starting out on one of these journeys was always the easy part; however, about two miles into the trip, the cattle and the farmers would begin to show signs of stress. The sweat would roll down into the faces, the feet would ache and hurt inside their shoes, the cattle would slow as though they were windup toys ready to come to a full stop. "Boys, keep 'em moving!" the elders would call to the younger ones. If Grady Ward and Jimmy told these stories to

their offspring today in 2008, it might go something like this: “When we were boys, we had to walk five miles (*thankfully not barefooted and in the snow*) to Pigeon herding cattle to greener grass. It was hot and rough going. The older ones made us walk while they rode horses or in an old jeep or truck. We did all the work. Life was just plain unfair back then!” Actually, the boys had fun, really good family fun—something that is so rare these days.

Finally, the destination was reached; the cattle were herded through the gap, and salt was distributed for their use. When the gap was latched, sighs of relief were heard among the family members—“We did it, we did it!” Then everyone headed home—the best part being that the “stock dogs,” Grady Ward and Jimmy, got to ride back either on horses or in an old vehicle. Several times throughout the summer, trips were made to check on the herd and to replenish the salt. Some of the old cows had bells on them, so the Partin family listened intently for the ringing—so intently did they listen that at home in the night, they couldn’t sleep for straining to hear cowbells. They would call for the cattle to come to the salt, so that a count could be made in an effort to keep the herd together. Sometimes little baby calves came in with their mothers bringing delight to the Partin family, but sometimes the numbers were off which meant that there was work to be done by someone on the farm. If any of the cattle ever found a way off the plateau, they would just keep on going.

On one occasion a few of the yearlings had wandered off into the Gizzard Gulf. Since there were no other cattle at Pigeon, it was easy to track where they made their descent. Uncle Roy Partin and Doug Johnson, a young man who was helping on the farm, packed up their horses and went out to Pigeon to follow the wandering yearlings. Off they went into the Gulf, but by the time they found the cattle, it was too dark to drive them back up the mountain. There always seemed to be a good working relationship between the Gizzard farmers and those folks on top who had wandering stock. Not surprising, Uncle Roy and Doug soon found a farmer who let them put the stock behind their fences for the night. Someone from the farm went down that night to pick them up, and early the next morning they returned, got on their horses and drove their cattle back up the mountain to the herd.

Grady Ward and Jimmy had lots of fun on those trips. Many, many ventures were made out to Pigeon with every one of them leaving a tale to be told. Back in those days, no one paid much attention to the game laws and seasons since that land was at “the end of the world.” Grady Ward had two little shepherd dogs that were pretty good squirrel dogs. They treed by sight or by “winding” (*picking up the scent of a squirrel in the air*) as they traveled in front of the old truck. If they ever smelled a squirrel, they would leave quickly and tree in a matter of minutes. Of course, when they left the road, Uncle Doug, Uncle Roy and Grady Ward would stop the truck and get out, listening to the barking dogs. Each of them wanted to get there first. Grady Ward’s Grandmother Schild had lent him her personal Fox Brand, double barrel, twenty-gauge shotgun that

he hunted with for a year or two. Loaded guns were never kept in the vehicles, so when everyone hit the ground running, they were also loading their guns. On one occasion, the road was muddy, and Grady Ward slipped and fell sticking the barrel of the gun into the mud; both barrels were clogged with mud. (*Do grandmothers ever stop loving their grandsons?*) He noticed the mud and cut a straight stick to use in clearing the barrels. If he had shot the gun, the end of the barrel would have blown up and ruined Grandmother Schild's favorite gun.

As I write this story my brain keeps screaming out—INSERT STORY HERE! INSERT STORY HERE! So I will insert the story here. All this mutter about guns, squirrels and mud just made my thoughts go back about forty-eight years to a similar incident in my own life. Grady Ward Partin and I had not been married long at all, when he took me squirrel hunting. We drove down to the AEDC hunting area. He had previously bought me a 410 bolt action shotgun, and he was carrying a 12 gauge double barrel. I had watched him and listened to his hunting stories, so I felt like I was rather prepared for a good hunt. We parked our little Volkswagen Bug on one of the many little roads that crisscrossed that wildlife area and quietly made our way into the woods.

I knew not to rustle the leaves, to move softly and gently around the area, to listen for a squirrel to bark or scamper along the tree bark, to stop occasionally and take notice of the woods around me and to look for sprout or nut droppings on the ground. I wasn't born yesterday. After all, no sane husband would allow a dummy wife to carry a loaded shotgun and walk directly behind him—would he? Sightings of the little furry critters were not happening. After I tired of being "the dutiful wife two steps behind her master," I stepped up beside Grady Ward and took my place as his helpmate. Suddenly, I spotted a big fox squirrel ahead at the top of a great big tall hickory tree. I showed him the squirrel and after studying the situation, I took aim. My "I-know-more-than-you-do" husband, tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, "You can't hit that squirrel; you are too far away!" I looked at him in disbelief as he stepped in front of me and shot the stupid thing out of the tree. I've never been one who holds her emotions in although age has mellowed me. Carrying my gun with me, I stomped off into the woods alone. I knew nothing about the area we were hunting in, and I didn't care. At that moment, if I never came back to the ones I loved, it wouldn't have bothered me at all.

I walked full speed ahead not caring where my efforts took me. The further I went the angrier I became. The new interstate was being built at that time. All of a sudden, I walked right out into the middle of the dirt, mud, bull dozers and other heavy equipment of the construction site. I looked to the south and saw Monteagle Mountain and knew I'd be home maybe before dark, but I had not walked very far until I came to a side road going back into the woods. I knew we had parked on a road like this, so something told me to venture down that little road in hopes of finding our car. There was the little green bug; I tucked my gun behind the seat and crawled inside. Soon, out of the woods came by beloved. He quickly asked, "Where in the world did you go? What happened

to you?” I responded with “You shot my squirrel!!” Grady Ward once again tried to explain to me that I could never kill the squirrel with that 410 shotgun at that distance. Then I bailed out of the car, jerked the gun out and threw it into a mud hole, and exclaimed, “Then why in the world did you buy it for me?” There were three men besides Grady Ward who witnessed the scene at the car, but they are all dead and can’t testify against me.

Now let’s get back to the Pigeon squirrel hunt. Of course, the leaves at that time were still on the trees, so it was mighty difficult to see the squirrel, but the dogs said it was there—and dogs don’t lie. Squirrel hunters know that the little varmint winds around the tree to the backside so his predators can’t see him. However, this precious little squirrel didn’t realize that he was dealing with a bunch of intellectuals. The wise ones left a hunter standing in the same spot, loaded gun in hand, while the others rather noisily moved out and around to the back of the tree. Sometimes the defenseless little rodent would ride out on a limb, but he mostly scampered back to the other side of the tree. What a dirty trick to pull on a harmless little squirrel! It wasn’t unusual for the family to come home with six or eight squirrels that were often given to Mr. Warner Troxler who lived on the farm.

At the end of the summer as autumn was sneaking onto the plateau, the Partin family would load up and head to Pigeon. When the frost began to sprinkle itself around on the green, wild grasses, it was time to head the cattle home for the winter. It wasn’t always an easy job to round up the herd for the drive home. Occasionally, a cow or two would be left behind because of stubborn resistance to being moved. Those cows with new calves were always the most difficult to get into the groove of moving down the road.

Once, such an incident happened with one of the cows and her calf; she was left behind, but cows cost money, and money buys hay and feed, so they couldn’t be left there for the duration. Uncle Doug Partin and his brother Grady Edward were riding out to Pigeon one day, when Grady made the statement, “If I see that old cow and her calf, I aim to bring her home!” Sure enough, they found her. It was an unusually warm day. Grady Edward told his brother, “Meet me at the corral. I’ll be there with the cow and calf.” There were a few other things that Uncle Doug took care of before he headed directly to the corral. On his way there he came across his brother’s shirt in the middle of the road. When he got to the corral, there stood Grady Edward in his boxer shorts, leaning against the tree with the cow and calf in the corral. He had done what he set out to do. The two animals were towed home, and with the herd in tact, the summer came to an end.