

Everything We Got

Dan Evans, 1981

“See ya down at the pond,” Lyle heard Pete holler to him, even over the whine of the saw that was splitting the squared timber lying on the feeder carriage. But, he didn’t look up. His dad looked up – just for a moment – from the same saw six years earlier.

Lyle’s dad was pretty fair with numbers – ‘rithmetic they call it in school – so the mill owner put ‘em to work keepin’ books in the office over the shop. Lyle’s mom cut off and stitched closed the left sleeves of her husband’s wool shirts and union suits up to the shoulder, to keep ‘em outta the way. All except the shirt he was wearin’ the day of the accident. It was tore up pretty bad.

John Mattox, foreman of the cutting section, had asked Lyle to finish up his skid before joining the rest of the crew for lunch. One of the two engines the mill used to power saws, planers and conveyors was sickly. After the logs on the last skid of the morning were sawn, the saw belt would be slipped off the pulley and a long twisting belt run over from the planer for the afternoon’s work.

Lyle only lost a few minutes of his lunch break finishin’ up. He waved to the operator, who released the compression and braked the drive pulley, which stalled the big engine. Lyle hurried off with his lunch to the pond.

Pete Jorgenson, Mel Berrigan, Lyle, his dad and some others took their lunches down to a log raft on the mill pond when the weather was hopeful. Delbert Johnson kept a crawdad trap lashed to a spike. The take was usually profitable enough to make a Sunday dawn fishin’ trip worthwhile for those so-inclined. Brook Trout in a nearby fork of the Clark River loved crawdaddy tails.

It was cool on the pond. For most of the summer, ‘til about September, their lunch spot on the old grounded log raft was shaded by several pines and the hill they were rooted in. It was also quiet, once the machinery was rested, and free of the dust kicked up by the skid dragging teams that moved the logs through the yard.

Lyle set himself down next to Karl, his best friend since they both quit the eighth grade to work together for Liberty Freight loadin’ wagons. John Mattox, Karl’s uncle, gottem’ their jobs at the mill. Lyle’s dad was against it but didn’t stop the boy. As it turned out, Lyle proved to be natural on the saw. His waste was lowest of any of the splitters.

Karl and Mel were commencin’ a hand of pinochle when Lyle arrived, and Pete was checkin’ the trap. “Goin’ fishin’ with us tomorrow mornin’?” Pete called to Lyle. “Letcha know. Depends on when ma wants me to take her over to the church. Might be able to drop a line with ya for a couple of hours. Letcha know.”

“Only got enough bait for a couple of hours anyhow, at least so far,” Pete said, slipping the wire mesh trap back into the pond.

Bill Lamb and Lyle's dad finished their lunches and set down at the old cable spool with Karl and Mel, to get-in on a final hand of cards before returning to work. Hank Potts glanced across the raft to his boy, Lyle, as he picked up the hand he'd been dealt. Lyle understood the unspoken message in his dad's eyes and went back to listening to Pete's fish tales. Listen was all you could do in any amount of time spent with Pete.

Lyle's mom didn't hold to card playin', a view shared by the church. His dad didn't see nothin' wrong about it as long as it didn't involve wagerin'. "Pinochle ain't a bettin' game," he told his wife more than once. Since then, he'd just learned to not let on that he held a hand occasionally. Lyle didn't care one way or the other. He kept his father's confidence, pretty much ignoring it, in fact.

"Ya handle them cards purtty good there, Mr. Potts." The speaker was a tall, lanky kid that had just started work at the mill the first of the week. He was standin' behind Mel Berrigan observing the game. "How old you be, boy?" Bill asked the kid. "Sixteen as the leaves fall, and my name's Morgan Young, sir." The boy was too respectful and innocent not to like.

Hank finally acknowledged the boy's comment and said, "Gettin' by with just one arm comes sortta natural. Ya might be surprised. You be mindful of the hazards 'round here though. Wouldn't want ya to have to learn it yourself." Hank's voice had become more stern, but the shape of his cheeks and the squint of his eyes was genuinely kind. The warnin' registered well in the young man's mind. He wouldn't forget soon. The reminder to watch oneself while workin' 'round the machinery was good for everyone on that raft. They all took note.

Late that afternoon, Mr. Johnson, the mill owner said to Hank, "Ya might as well close them books for the day. See ya Tuesday. I done promised the missus to take her up to the capital to see Mark. It'll take a good portion of Monday to come back. Train stops at every...well, you know. Have a good day off." The Johnson boy was a fairly new tenant at the state pen. His mother hadn't yet brought herself to the position her husband had. A fine, upstandin' man in the county like Mr. Johnson, couldn't be fixed too tightly with a family disgrace in confined residence at tax payer expense. It was better to forget he had a son, but he had to keep his thoughts in check because the boy's mother couldn't as easily sever the kinship. Johnson also needed his wife's inheritance to keep the mill in operation through, what was turning out to be, the end of the '29 depression.

"Collect Lyle and get on home, Potts," the boss shouted from half way down the steps. "Ya both put in a good week of work." Hank pulled his pencil from behind his ear, slipped it between the pages of a ledger to the mark his spot and rolled the desk closed. He rose and stepped to a dusty window, swinging it out to look at the mill yard below.

The machinery had all been shut down. Men were gradually heading down each direction of the pot-holed county road that passed through the mill. Hank saw Lyle helping Karl unharness the team Karl was responsible for, and waved to Mel as he climbed into John

Mattox's car. Mattox was one of only a few men who drove a car to work. Most couldn't afford to, if they owned one.

Six ten hour days at the mill, walking three or more miles each way and now most of these men were headed home to an evening of chores and a Sunday of back-breaking work in their own fields – on their day off. Most in Harrison County found the hardships of the nation's economic collapse, just a little more troublesome than normal. Their lives were already hard before the depression set in.

"Let's be getting' on," called Lyle to Karl as he joined his father at the shop entrance. "Karl's gonna walk with us to Martin Road, dad," Lyle said as he approached Hank. "Fine son. Let's be goin'." The three were joined by Mack Hansen and the new feller, Morgan Young, as they started down the road.

"How was your first week, boy?" Hank asked Morgan as they all walked. "Been fairly tired out evenin's sir, but I'm gettin' the hang of it. Mr. Mattox says I needn't work so hard, but I wanna do a right good job, since he was fine enough to give me the job and all."

As they walked, the conversation between the five men went from work to plowin' to fishin'. "Lost me a jack of a bass last Sunday night," Karl said. "Got hung up on a stump. Sure was sorrowful to lose that fish."

"You didn't lose much." Hank had made the comment, real gentle and soft, not lookin' right nor left, not breakin' his stride. Mack slowed a little until Karl and Lyle closed the distance between them. The three of them now followed close behind Hank and Morgan. "Hank's right Karl," said Mack. "Why you shoulda seen the Whitetail that out-foxed me up on Sumpter Ridge last October. Biggest buck I ever seen. I swear, it woulda gone two-twenty dressed, maybe two...."

"Not much to lose," Hank said again, almost under his breath. He hadn't looked around. But the sound of his voice made an impression on the group. No one laughed or questioned, but Lyle quickened his pace to move to his dad's right side. Lyle looked down toward his feet, one hand in his belt, the other hand hooked to the collar of a jacket slung over his shoulder.

"Dad," he said. "I reckon I gotta feelin' I know what yer sayin'. You done lost more than anybody I ever knowed when that saw took yer....."

"No boy, I didn't lose nothin'," Hank said abruptly, quieting his son's comments. Looking at Lyle now, Hank continued, softly again, "I didn't lose a thing. There ain't nothin' I got that ain't been borrowed. The rightful owner just needed that arm more than me and come to claim it."

For awhile nobody said a thing. They walked, still a mile or so from Martin Road, where Karl and Mack would break off and head north. Lyle questioned his father. "Everything? Even Mom and me. Even Grandma and ...and the...."

"It's all a gift son," came the reply. "The good Lord give us everything we got. Our farm, our health, even each other. It's all a gift – just loaned to us. That's why I be thankful for the blessings while they be at hand. You'd best be learning that while yer still young, boy."

"I see what yer sayin' there Hank and I gotta agree," called out Mack from behind. "But there be differences somewhat. Like that buck I seen up on the ridge."

Hank stopped, turned and faced Mack squarely, forcing all the guys to stop. "Ya didn't lose nothin' Mack, ya didn't lose nothin'," Hank said firmly and slowly, but still gently. Mack quieted, apparently not at all upset by his friend's insistence. It was pretty hard to get upset over somethin' Hank Potts was likely to say. He was just too sincere and believable, even if it did take you a spell to understand completely what he was drivin' at.

The five resumed their walk, little else said 'til they come to a grown-over trail leading from the road into the scrub Oak near Jewel Creek. Out of the silence, Morgan spoke up and said "I'll part from y'all here. See ya Monday at the mill." Then he started hikin' up the trail. The remaining four stopped. Lyle shouted "Hey, where ya goin'? There ain't nothin' up that old coyote path 'cept a beaver dam and, of course, the old burn't out.....Young....." his voice slowed and stammered and his father touched his arm.

Hank Potts stepped to the middle of the road and called after Morgan, "would you be Jake Young's kin?" Morgan stopped and turned around. "My pa, sir," he said.

Morgan continued, "A day after the fire, the school teacher took me to the train and sent me to stay with my mother's sister in Smith River. She died this last spring. I don't reckon I got any livin' family left and didn't have no place else to go, so I hiked back here and fixed me a place in the old chicken house. I gotta be goin'. Have to keep my dog closed up or he follows me to work. He'll be scratchin' to get out if I don't hurry on. See y'all down to the mill on Monday."

At that, Morgan Young turned and hurried into the dense oak growth that swallowed up the path that was once a wagon road to the farm where Morgan's parents and two sisters had died in a December fire four years earlier.

Mack nervously rolled his floppy red felt hat in his calloused hands. Karl and Lyle stared motionless at the backside of Hank, who in turn, stared at the empty, disappearing trail Morgan had taken. Lyle was afraid to look into his father's face. For some reason, Hank had become pretty sentimental since his accident. His family had learned to avoid embarrassing him when emotions occasionally overcame him.

But, after a moment, Hank turned and resumed his journey down the road, not speaking a word nor leaking a tear. Mack, Karl and Lyle followed. After several moments, Hank turned and called out, in a surprisingly lighthearted tone “better quicken’ yer steps fellers. The cows can’t milk themselves.” And, once again, all four men walked side-by-side together toward home.

At Martin Road, Karl agreed to meet Lyle at the fishin’ hole the next mornin’ at six and then he and Mack made their way north. However, a few strides later, Mack turned and called across the field, still rolling his hat in his hands. “Say, Hank, about...about that buck. It weren’t really all that...I mean, it weren’t nothin’ to get....”

“I know, I know,” interrupted Hank, smiling and barely audible over the rustling of the wild grass in the late afternoon breeze. “See you boys on Monday.”

Lyle and his father turned and continued toward their farm; toward home.