

## My Father Told Me Stories

06/14/2006

Note: These are stories contributed by David Keegan in October 2007. The stories are written by his father, Patrick J. KEEGAN, (b.8/14/32) , who was born in New Hampton, IA. He lived on the family farm in Lawler from 1932-1945. These are a series of stories which his father Patrick H. KEEGAN (1906-1986) had told him as well as some of his recollections of that time on the farm. The stories are mainly about his grandfather Martin (Matt) KEEGAN (1864-1943) and his father Patrick H KEEGAN (1906-1986) as well as Matt's children, who were some of Chickasaw county's earliest pioneers.

**April 13, 1943**

**Reprinted from the New Hampton, Iowa newspaper of the day:**

*Matt KEEGAN died in St. Joseph's Hospital New Hampton, Monday evening April 12, 1943 from a long illness with heart trouble. He was in his 79<sup>th</sup> year. Funeral services will be held this Thursday morning at 9:30 o'clock from St. Joseph's church and will be conducted by the pastor the Very Reverend J.J. LEEN. Burial will be in Mt. Carmel cemetery Lawler, beside the remains of his wife and his children who have gone on before. The deceased was born at Postville a son of the late Mike KEEGAN and Bridget FOLEN and has always resided in this part of Iowa, most of the years in the Lawler and New Hampton communities. As he grew to manhood he received his education in the schools of this section and followed the occupation of farming. In May of 1890 he was married to Rose McFaul at Lawler and they moved to a farm southeast of New Hampton, where they resided until 1936, when they moved to New Hampton. Mrs. KEEGAN died March 6 1940. Mr. And Mrs. Matt KEEGAN were the parents of eight children, John and Helen preceded their parents in death. The living children are Madonna (Mrs. Ray LANDON), Claire (Mrs. Henry MANGAN), Rose KEEGAN, James KEEGAN, Anna (Mrs. Ed LEENEY) all from away from here, and Pat KEEGAN who lives on the old home farm. There are a number of grandchildren and other relatives left to mourn with the above. Mr. KEEGAN was a good husband, father, and brother and a good neighbor and friend. He was highly respected in life and he departed this life well prepared by the rites of his church. We extend sympathy to his children, grandchildren and other relatives.*

This is the official summation of my grandfather's life, prepared by the community to commemorate his passing. It describes the life of Martin (Matt) Edward Keegan just about as effectively as the term "wet" describes the Mississippi river. I was one day shy of ten years, eight months old when he died and I remember him. As they say, he was a fine upstanding Irish Catholic gentleman. That's "Catholic gentleman" if you were his friend and "Irish" if you weren't. One of the stories my father told me illustrates this point.

**#1**

The year is 1928 and my father, Patrick Henry Keegan, is celebrating his twenty-second birthday. This was a Presidential election year and for the first time in his life he would be eligible to vote. Al Smith, "The Happy Warrior" was the Democratic candidate for President and

his opponent on the Republican slate was Herbert Hoover. Smith, a devout Roman Catholic, was the governor of New York state and the former mayor of New York city. His record of accomplishment in elective office is truly astonishing. Hoover, on the other hand, was known for outstanding service as an appointed official, mainly in foreign affairs and in relief efforts before and after World War One. Since both candidates were eminently qualified, the political parties immediately resorted to slander, calumny, vituperation and just plain lies. In other words, it was the typical political campaign. With a true believers diligence, my father waded through the rhetoric, studied the national issues and the positions of both candidates and their respective parties. He discussed the campaign and the candidates at length with Grandpa and anyone else he could corner. After all this effort he reached what was, to him, the only logical conclusion; Al Smith was by far the better candidate. "This is so obvious he can't lose" he expounded to Grandpa. Grandpa, being older and more experienced in affairs of the world, insisted that while Al Smith may be the better candidate, he didn't have a chance. On election eve, in a Rite of Passage for that era, Grandpa took my father to Democratic Party headquarters, where a telegraph line had been installed, to follow the returns. Party headquarters was in down town New Hampton, a good Irish Catholic community, located in a second floor loft over a speakeasy, which was run by the son of the county sheriff, don't you know.<sup>1</sup> Much to my father's astonishment, the early returns from the east coast made it obvious that this time the Republicans were the more effective liars and Smith was toast. About 9:00 PM, Grandpa tapped my father on the shoulder and, in a voice full of resignation, told him it was time to head for home. "Tomorrow's a work day" he growled meaninglessly, since every day on a farm is a 'work day'. Dejected, depressed and confused, my father followed Grandpa to the stairs. As they started down, a local farmer who had been followed the returns for the last few hours at the first floor bar, staggered into the stairwell and headed up the stairs. My father recognized him immediately as a local character who had locked horns with Grandpa on matters of politics and religion on many past occasions. (Dad told me his name, but for the life of me, I can't remember it). Looking up and seeing Grandpa coming down, he sneers and shouts in derision, "Hurray fer Hoover, Matt! 'Tis a great day for Hoover!" Whereupon, Grandpa hauled off and punched him right in the jaw, causing him to tumble, head over heels, all the way back to the bottom of the stairwell. The farmer lies there a moment, then shakes his head and climbs unsteadily to his feet. He stood there a moment, rocking back and forth, then he looked up to see Grandpa glowering down at him. After several seconds, and without the slightest change in expression, he waves his arm and shouts "Hurray for Smith, Matt! Hurray for Smith"! Then he turned and staggered back to the bar for another election return. Grandpa watched him go, then he growled, "Well, at least I converted that son of a bitch"! Continuing down the stairs, they strode out through the bar and headed for home. Grandpa was right; the next day was a work day.

Oh, and just so you know; that was the year that Grandpa turned sixty four.

## #2

I didn't know Grandpa until he was in his seventies. By that time age and injury had reduced his voice to only a shadow of what it had once been, but I was told that in his prime he could sing the birds out of the trees. He was often asked to perform at parties or taverns or wherever people gathered. My father told me about an evening, late in March one year, when the land was locked in cold and snow was still deep on the ground. One evening they were sitting

around the kitchen, which was the only room in the house with a stove, when the phone rang. Two "longs" and a "short" meant the call was for the Keegan family, so Grandpa answered. It was a local farmer, a long time family friend whose name, unfortunately, I do not remember. Probably one of the Burkes. There were at least five Burke brothers that I knew of. "Matt", he said, "it's been a long, hard winter and it seems that spring will never come. I am in desperate need of something to raise my spirits. Would you be good enough to give us a song?" Grandpa laughed and answered, "well now, I'll see what I can do." He stepped back a bit, cleared his throat and started to sing. He sang his favorite music; songs of trial and struggle and hope, which were fitting to the occasion. Songs which he had learned from the source as a very young man. Music which he had mastered as few men of his day. For almost half an hour he sang to make the difficult winter bearable. When he stopped singing, the farmer voiced his gratitude, but he was almost impossible to hear. For those who do not know, the phone system of that day was what is known as a "party line", much like the internet chat rooms of today. Every farm in the district was on the same circuit, so when the phone rang, every farm in the district knew who was being called. To listen in, all you had to do was pick up the receiver. However, when you did, you added a load across the line and that reduced the sound volume. It seems Grandpa had a fairly large audience for his performance, as the line was maxed out.

I find it somehow fitting that Grandpa should be one of the very first performers to take part in an Internet Farm-Aid concert. So help me, according to the story, the next day the cold weather broke.

So, now I ask you; if you had been in that audience, what songs would you have expected to hear? Songs of Ireland, perhaps, or the Great Famine? Or would you expect hymns learned in church? Oh, he knew this music and was proficient at all of it, but the music he chose over all the rest was the music of the deep south. Negro spirituals, plantation songs and Black gospel music. On one hand, the lament of an enslaved and downtrodden people and at the same time, songs of joy and hope. He had this music down pat; the melodies, the harmonies, the accents, everything. What I remember are the lullabies. He taught several of these to my mother, who sang them to me and my siblings. I remember one lullaby in particular, which I thought was particularly touching. No one would dare to sing that song today. The lyrics include words which are considered politically incorrect by those of limited intellect who can not sense the pathos and distress they imply.

Ok, Hold it! I know! I know! How could an Irish catholic farm boy, born and raised in a backwoods corner of what was, in his day, largely a frontier community become this proficient in a music form that remote? Well it seems that among his other endearing traits, Grandpa was stubborn.

According to both Aunt Rose and my father, this was a characteristic young Martin (Matt) Keegan shared with his father Michael. They were both as stubborn as an oak post. The battles they fought were epic. About the time Matt turned sixteen, he decided he had had it up to here with his father and his intransigence. (Funny; this seems to strike a chord). So one night he packed his stuff (socks, clean shirt; possibly a loaf of bread) and "ran" away from home. Actually, back in those days, you walked. According to the story, Matt traveled east until he reached the Mississippi River. In the 1880's there were no 'Child Labor' laws and no Social

Security or Income tax withholding claptrap. A sixteen year old was considered an adult, so he had no trouble getting a job as a deck hand on a river boat. The steamer worked its way down river, picking up cargo here, dropping off cargo there, heading for New Orleans. One night, about the time the river boat reached the northern border of the state of Louisiana, it did what steam boats often did in those pre-OSHA days; it blew up and sank. Apparently Matt was on deck when this happened, because he was blown overboard into the river, which at this point is deep, dark and about a mile wide. Early next morning several black children from a nearby village found our badly injured hero, washed up on a mud flat. The people of the village, most of whom were former slaves freed during the Civil War, dug him out of the mud and hauled him back to their settlement. They cleaned him up and treated his injuries, which were fairly extensive. It was days before he could move and it would be months before he was well enough to travel.

Lets review this situation for a moment:

Here we have a young white boy, not a penny to his name and too injured to travel, trapped by circumstance in a village populated by a people who live in dire poverty and who, only fifteen years earlier, were plantation slaves subject to the violence, indignities and caprices of a particularly brutal strain of humanity. They had no reason to trust, and every reason to hate white men. However; the Keegan luck, which has been known to change the course of history, held again. It seems they were also devout, practicing members of the Baptist school of Christian philosophy. You know; the real kind; who actually try to live the way the Good Book says you should? So naturally, they treated Matt with kindness and generosity. The families in the community took him in, fed him and helped care for his injuries. Eventually, he managed to get off a message to his father telling him where he was and apprising him of his situation, but in those days it could take weeks for a letter to travel very far. In the meantime, he had nowhere to go and no way to get there if he did.

As his injuries healed and he became ambulatory, Matt explored the village. The people, he found, eked out a living fishing the river and growing what crops they could on the mud flats. The only activities in the village, other than work, were the social and religious programs centered on the village church. Predominant among these was, (would you believe), the church choir. As you know, Matt did love to sing; so it came to pass, that sixteen year old, blond and blue eyed, Irish Catholic, Martin Keegan, joined the village's African American Baptist church choir and every Sunday, until his recovery was complete, he stood amongst the children of former slaves and sang the music of trial, despair, joy, hope and freedom, which he carried with him until the end of his days. Music was not the only thing Grandpa learned that summer. He also learned that good people come in all sizes, shapes and colors and can be found in the most unexpected places. Then again, he probably already knew that.

In time, Great Grandfather Michael received his son's letter and, as fathers have done since the days of Abraham the patriarch, sent money and made arrangements for passage so his son could come home. It took about six months.

### #3

No one really knows who it was that first said: "All it takes for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing". I would not be surprised to learn that my grandfather never heard this saying. But that doesn't matter, because if someone had uttered it in his presence, he would have looked askance at the speaker for stating the obvious. Unfortunately, the early part of the twentieth century was a time when, all too often, good men failed to act. In the former Russian Empire, the Communists were using blood and horror to secure their grip on the land. In Germany, the Nazi's, under dear old Adolph, were using murder and terror to bring down the Weimar Republic. Meanwhile Benito Mussolini, known as Il Duce (The Leader), was striving to make the trains run on time over the bodies of his victims in Italy, Algeria, and later on, Ethiopia. In Japan and Spain revolution was fomenting. In Spain the Communists and the Fascist Falange party would face off in a war that would last until 1939 and cost approximately one-half million lives. In Japan the militarists would eventually come to power, leading to the invasions of Korea, Manchuria, China and eventually, World War Two. In practically every other nation in the world Communism, Fascism, Nazism, Socialism and every other form of totalitarian philosophy known to man jockeyed for power. The Fascist and Socialists showed frightening strength in staid, conservative old England. Even the United States was stricken by this plague. In this country the leading contender for political dominance was a home grown horror known as the Ku Klux Klan, or KKK.

The KKK, an organization preaching racial and religious intolerance and "white supremacy" was originally founded shortly after the Civil War. It reappeared in a more virulent form just before World War One, when the United States was struggling to meet the challenges imposed by a massive influx of immigrants fleeing oppression and poverty, many of whom were Catholic or Jewish and few of whom spoke English. Appealing to the middle class and claiming to be a "purely benevolent" club, the Klan drew members immediately. When the United States finally entered World War I, the group capitalized on the conflict by promising to defend the home front against "alien enemies, slackers, idlers, strike leaders and immoral women," as well as the traditional scapegoats, "Niggers, Catholics and Jews". In the ardently xenophobic atmosphere that permeated the US after World War One, Klan membership soared. Becoming even more strident, [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org) the group now added opposition to dope, bootlegging, graft, night clubs, road houses, violation of the Sabbath, unfair business dealings, sex and "scandalous behavior" (???). By 1921, the Klan numbered almost 100,000 members. At its peak in 1924, its membership was estimated at about three million. 40,000 uniformed Klansmen paraded through the streets of Washington, D.C. during the Democratic National Convention. At the convention a resolution condemning the Klan was introduced and precipitated a bitter controversy. In the end, the resolution was defeated. Like a modern political lobby, the group was so influential that many politicians felt compelled to court it or even to join, particularly in the Midwestern states. Senators, congressmen, governors, judges at all levels, even future President Harry Truman donned the hood and robe (though Truman shortly quit, apparently disgusted by an anti-Catholic tirade). While it seemed that the tide of extremism, oppression and terror was rising everywhere, there were places it did not. There were places the Klan was afraid to go. They had good reason to be afraid.

In the early 1920's the Klan came to Chickasaw County. They came like an old time tent revival, complete with drummers and preachers, eager to spread the "New Religion" of hate and intolerance. From the beginning there were problems. The citizens of Chickasaw County and the surrounding territories were second generation immigrant families from all over northern Europe. From Norway, Sweden, Germany, Ireland and even Czechoslovakia. They had built a community, in spite of famine, fire, flood and war, by learning to work together. In other words, everyone knew who his neighbors were. The Klan recruiters were not well received. There were "incidents". In spite of these problems they did, as Dad said, <sup>2</sup> "Manage to con a few of those Damned idiots from the other side of town into signing up". For an initiation fee of five dollars, each recruit received his hood and robe, Klan insignia, booklet of Klan bylaws and, at the official swearing-in ceremony, their names were "Inscribed in the Official Klan Roster". That was the next problem; where to hold the induction ceremony. They approached a number of farmers in the area, trying to get permission to hold the ceremony in one of their fields. They weren't having much luck with that either.

One of the farmers they approached was George Gaffney <sup>3</sup> who was, apparently, one of my father's heroes. Mr. Gaffney was shorter and thinner than Dad and several years older. As an infant he suffered an injury, reportedly inflicted by his father who was subject to fits of rage, which left his back severely deformed. He always walked as if someone had tied his elbows together behind his back. As a result he lived much of his life in pain. He and his younger brother Elmer, who was sixteen at the time, were working the farm. According to Dad, Elmer was present when the Klan organizers made their pitch. "As a member of the Klan", they told the Gaffney brothers, "you would be protected from those Dammed Catholics and Jews who infest this area". "Ya"! George answered. "Like those Dammed Keegans and Burkes who cultivated our corn crop ven I vas in da hospital last year"! "Or dos Dammed Wyllies, who got in our hay crop, or that Dammed Dickman who helped take care of the cattle"! "You get off our land or I'll shoot you", he snarled. "Elmer, get the shotgun"! So they left.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, according to Dad, "They talked one poor, dumb bastard who had a farm just south of New Hampton into letting them use his pasture for the initiation ceremony". When the time came, the Klansmen spent most of the day getting ready. They put up signs directing the initiates to the field and assembled a large cross out of heavy planks wrapped in burlap and soaked in kerosene for the "burning cross" ceremony. As darkness fell, the initiates and Klansmen from outside the area began to arrive. Cars and wagons were parked along the road and the edge of the field. After the sun had set, the ceremony started. Klansmen in full regalia assembled in front of the cross, carrying flaming torches. The Grand Who-Ever-He-Is lighted the cross and the initiates were marched in. They stood before the flaming cross, surrounded by the robed and masked Klansmen as the Grand WEHI started to speak. Suddenly there was a loud Whack! and the flaming cross exploded. A strange high pitch sound and a dull thud echoed off the wreckage. Everyone in the crowd froze in shock. Then the remains of the cross shattered to the same whack! squeal! thud! as before. Everyone on the field started to panic. Then another whack! eeak! thud! and one of the cars parked along the road leaped as it's engine detonated. Horses screamed and bolted and panic won the day. Robes impeded flight and were cast aside or shredded, along with regular clothing, on the barbed wire fences surrounding the field. Thus ended the 1924 Klan initiation ceremony in Chickasaw county, Iowa.

According to dear old Dad, Grandpa told him later that he "just happened" to be walking on a hill about a mile from the initiation ceremony that night. On top of the hill he found old Bill Dowd with a jug of corn squeezings and a Sharps, 44-70, single shot, breach loader. I do not doubt Grandpa for a moment, but there are one or two points I would dearly love to clarify. First of all, why did he "just happen" to be out walking on that particular hillside, on that particular night; seeing as it was someone else's land and five or ten miles from home. Second, what could he tell me about an old, octangular barreled, breach loading, single shot rifle, which I found one day in 1940 on a shelf high up in the back of our garage. It was too heavy for me to lift. When I asked Dad about that rifle all he said was, "Put that back where you found it and leave it alone!" So I did. The presence of Mr. Dowd at this event I do not question. I only met him once and it was a little like visiting Plymouth Rock or Grant's tomb. He was a relic of a bygone era; literally, a man who had outlived his time. He dealt in "corn squeezings", and somehow the sheriff never did manage to find his production facilities. The fact that the sheriff's son was one of Mr. Dowd's most successful distributors was purely coincidental.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking of the county sheriff, the Klan organizers did file a complaint with his office. The Sheriff told them that he had no idea who could have done such a terrible thing. He also said that whoever it was had made it known that next time they would not just shoot crosses and car engines. There was much speculation throughout the community as to the identity of the perpetrators. There were three leading suspects, two of whom were Matt Keegan. The story of this "event" spread throughout the territory and into southern Minnesota, where there were many Swedish lumberjacks, who were well acquainted with Matt Keegan. Whenever anyone proposed holding a Klan rally in Minnesota the Swedish lumberjacks just laughed. "Ya, we make bets on how far you run"! The Klan organizers never came back. Furthermore, they never came back to the whole northwest.

What's that, you say? How were the Swedish lumberjacks of southern Minnesota acquainted with Matt Keegan? Well, it seems Matt's younger brother, Mike owned a bar.

#### #4

According to dad, Grandpa and his brother Mike were not a whole lot alike. Mike was shorter and rounder and not a big fan of physical labor. For years he had owned a tavern in Lawler, which he had to close when prohibition came along. After closing the tavern, he opened a road house ten or fifteen miles north of New Hampton, or about half way to the Minnesota border. On pay day (Saturday in those days of the six day work week), the Swedish lumberjacks would come down to Mike's tavern, and it was not uncommon for things to get a bit boisterous. A couple of times, when Great Uncle Mike tried to assert control, they threw him and all his employees out the front door and did considerable damage to the place. He couldn't call the law; running a road house was illegal, so he would call his brother Matt. Dad said he remembered lying in bed on Saturday night and hearing the phone ring. Grandpa would answer and say, "Oh hello, Mike! How are you? - - - Yes, I see. - - - They are, now. - - - OK, I'll come up". Grandpa would leave the house, start the car and drive away. The story is, he would time his trip to arrive at the road house at precisely ten PM. He would walk into the tavern and up to the bar, whereupon Mike would pour him a drink. Then he would turn around, lean against the bar and survey the merriment while he slowly sipped his drink. When he had finished, he would tap the

bar loudly with the empty glass and in a quiet but clearly audible voice announce; "OK boys; closing time. Time we all head for home". Fights would immediately break up. Chairs were returned to their upright positions. Those unconscious under the tables would be pulled out and revived. Last drinks were finished, coats and hats were donned and with respectful farewells, all would leave the premises. For reasons which defy explanation, he was never challenged.

Ever.

John Wayne, eat your heart out.

1

I remember that speakeasy. It was a bar when we lived in New Hampton. They sold Cokes for five cents, plus a nickel deposit on the bottle. There were two bartenders. One of them would sell me Cokes without charging me the nickel deposit on the bottle because I was Matt's grandson. The other, not knowing this, would give me a nickel back when I turned in the bottle. I worked that racket all one summer. (How do you like that. I've just confessed to cheating my coke dealer.)

<sup>2</sup> No, he never said which side of town was 'the other side'.

<sup>3</sup> I knew Mr. Gaffney. He was very thin, had reddish hair and a very angular face. He spoke with an accent I can not identify. The Gaffney farm was about three quarters of a mile due north of our place, on the old road between New Hampton and Lawler. He owned a tall, skinny, Allis Chalmers tractor. One day, when I was eleven years old, our old Fortson broke down and dad borrowed the Allis Chalmers to drag the Fortson in for repairs. When it was time to return it, Dad drove the car and I got to drive the tractor. It was the first motor vehicle I ever drove all by myself. When sitting on the seat I could just reach the steering wheel and the throttle lever mounted on the steering column. I could not reach the gearshift lever or either of the brake peddles, which were on opposite sides of the gearbox, or the clutch pedal, which was next to the right hand brake peddle. To stop or change gears I had to hop off the seat and land on the appropriate peddles and then hop back onto the seat. This was a real problem, because popping the clutch tended to kill the engine. You had to hand crank the engine to start it and I wasn't strong enough to do that. There was no floorboard. If I had missed the peddles I would have been road kill. <sup>4</sup>

When Dad told me this story, I got the feeling that if George had asked, I would be a Gaffney now.

(You know; The first born? As a gift, if asked?) <sup>5</sup>

As part of an unrelated conversation, dad once told me about the time he and Uncle Jim were stopped by the town constable in (I believe) Lawler, with a bottle of "Bill Dowd's finest". The constable put them to the question: "All right boys, where'd you get this"? They replied, "Charley. - - You know; the sheriff's son"? The constable paused, looked both ways and then muttered, "Well Damit, you keep quiet about that", and sent them on their way. For some reason, dad thought that was hilarious.

## A Sense of Honor

11/26/06

It was the quiet time at the end of a late autumn evening. The days work is done and the house is quiet, except for the hiss of the high pressure gas lamp<sup>6</sup>. From its position in the center of the kitchen table, it lights up the entire room. The dinner dishes have been cleared away and all that remains is the heel of a loaf of bread wrapped in a dishtowel. Since Grandma is away, tending to the needs of a large and scattered family, Grandpa and Dad are home alone tonight. They are seated on opposite sides of the kitchen table, engaged in one of their favorite evening pastimes; reading.

Then there is another sound, faint and intermittent. A skittering, scratching sound. Both sets of eyes swing to the kitchen wall across from the table and the brand new mouse hole, which has recently appeared in the baseboard. Framed in this mouse hole is the pointy nose and whiskers of a mouse. The nose wiggles and the whiskers twitch, and then they both are gone. Neither man moves. Their eyes remain riveted on the empty mouse hole. Once again comes the skittery, scratchy sound and the nose and whiskers reappear. Both men remain motionless. After a few seconds the mouse comes cautiously out of the hole, sits up on his hind legs and tests the air for sound or motion. Then in a flash he pops back into the hole. Slowly Grandpa puts down his book, raises his right hand and picks up a crumb of bread from the table top. He lowers his arm and tosses the crumb so that it lands some six to eight inches in front of the mouse hole. A few seconds later the nose and whiskers reappear and cast about, alert for any threat. Soon they detect, and zero in on the inviting aroma of bread crumb. Slowly and cautiously the mouse exits the hole and sits, testing the air for any sign of danger. Then, in one quick bound he reaches the crumb, scoops it up in his paws, stuffs it in his mouth and dashes back into his hole.

Slowly Grandpa raised his hand and selected another crumb from under the dish towel. This time the crumb lands just over a foot in front of the mouse hole. As before, the nose and whiskers reappear, but soon afterward the mouse pops out of the hole. Ever alert, he scans the area for signs of danger before scurrying across the floor and scooping up the crumb. For a moment he pauses and looks around before he scoots back into his hole. The third bread crumb, slightly larger now, lands just over two feet from the mouse hole. The room is silent, except for the hiss of the gas lamp, and suspense fills the air. Once again the mouse pops from his hole. While he does not throw caution to the wind, it is with greater confidence that he goes hop! hop! hop! across the floor to the bread crumb. He picks up the crumb and samples it, before he turns and scurries back into his hole. His inbred sense of caution at being out in the open and completely exposed cannot be denied. The next enticement is not a crumb, it is a significant piece of bread. It lands over three feet from the mouse hole and only about two feet from Grandpa's chair. After several moments the little mouse, once again, pops out of his hole. He casts about for a moment before locating the piece of bread and then, casting caution to the wind he goes hop! hop! hop! across the floor toward it. Sitting up on his hind legs he picks up the fragment in his fore paws and starts to consume it on the spot. At this point Grandpa seizes a flyswatter sitting on the table and brings it down, SMACK! on the mouse and killed it dead.

Everything is silent, except for the hiss of the gas lamp. Dad makes no move. Grandpa gets up from his chair, goes to the wood box and gets the dustpan. He comes back and scoops up the dead mouse from the floor, goes to the stove, opens the firebox and throws the corpse into the flames. He closes the firebox, puts away the dustpan, returns to his chair, picks up his book

and, once again, starts to read. Not knowing what to do or say, Dad makes no move, he just stares at Grandpa, and there is still only the hiss of the gas lamp.

After one or two minutes, Grandpa closes his book. He holds it for a moment and then sets it on the table. Dad watches in silence as Grandpa sits for several minutes more, staring at the wall above the mouse hole. Then, in a soft but emotion filled voice he declares "That is the most despicable thing I have ever done"! He looks at Dad and his face mirrors his distress. "I made friends with that little mouse"! he said. "I used trickery and deceit to gain his trust, and then, when he believed that I was his friend, I betrayed him! I did not believe that I could do anything so dishonorable"! He turned toward the wall again, bowed his head and sat for several minutes, staring at the floor. Then he sighed a deep sigh, stood up, and with head still bowed, went off to bed, leaving Dad to bank the fire, turn down the lamp and ponder the measure of a man's honor. 6

*High pressure gas lamp: the late 1920's version of the Coleman gas camping lantern.*

## The Yard Bull

*As a youth I heard this story from various family members and also from people who were not family members, some of whom claimed to have been eyeball witnesses. Furthermore, my younger brother Mike reports that he told this story to a bunch of lawyers and judges standing around in a Los Angeles court house one day (typical). One of the older lawyers became quite agitated and claimed he had been working near the stockyard as a youth and had actually been present when the following took place.*



In the early twentieth century, the stock yards of Chicago were the industrial hub around which much of the city rotated. Rail lines brought in livestock from all over the west. Here the cattle were bought and sold as they moved through the yards to feed the nation. The ebb and flow of livestock through the holding pens and alleyways of the stockyard was a ballet of commerce. A ballet choreographed by strong men in work boots.

In those days, the stock yards consisted of a large number of pens with wooden walls and gates, leading into a series of alleyways, which connected every pen in the stockyard with every other pen. The cattle could be moved from one pen to another by opening or closing the proper series of gates. When a train arrives, the cattle were unloaded into large sorting pens near the tracks. Under the direction of the auctioneers, cattle handlers sorted the new arrivals into groups, to meet the demands of buyers from packing plants, canning companies and dealers, stationed on overhead walkways. When a buyer made a successful bid, he signaled to the foreman of

a work crew, who took charge of the cattle

and moved them through the alleyways to the buyer's holding pens. These work gangs were day laborers. They were not paid by the

**"Uncle" Jim Keegan in his middle to late 60's** stockyard, so their only income was the stipend they receive for moving cattle. It was the foreman's job to negotiate the fee for moving a herd and to distribute the proceeds to the members of the crew according to status. Naturally, the foreman's share was the largest. Crew membership was by invitation only and crew foremen were selected by the exact same method used to select the clan chieftains in old Ireland. When necessary, the crew held a toe to toe election and the last man standing was foreman.

As a work crew moved cattle, they opened and closed the necessary gates, which blocked the path of any other crew. Since standing and waiting was costly, there had to be a way, short of open war, to determine who had the right-of-way. This was the foreman's second major responsibility. A two man toe-to-toe election quickly and quietly determined crew status. The senior foreman of all the work gangs in the stockyard was known as "The Yard Bull". All crews deferred to the Yard Bull.

In the middle twenties, the two young men of the Keegan family ended up in Chicago, where most of their older sisters had married well and had settled down to raise families. Shortly after they arrived, older brother Jim worked his way into one of the stock yard crews, and in due course, i.e., a week or two later, was "elected" crew foreman. Over the next several days, in a series of relatively short and one sided "elections", the status of uncle Jim's work crew was established fairly high in the food chain. These demonstrations of "political muscle" caused a good deal of talk and speculation among the stock yard personnel. For a time, the question of Right-of-Way seemed to be settled. Perhaps it had been prearranged; the other foremen deferring to the "new kid" and all the while setting him up for a fall. Then, early one day, Uncle Jim and his crew were moving a fairly large herd and who should they block but Himself, the Yard Bull. The Bull storms forward and starts ordering Jim's crew to change the gates, clear the alleyway and allow his herd through. Uncle Jim arrives on the scene and countermands this order. Thus it was decided that an "election" for the position of Yard Bull would be held forthwith, or as soon as a suitable "voting precinct" could be arranged.

There are two reasons to think this whole thing had been arranged. First, my father had accompanied his older brother to work that day, which was not his normal routine. Second, even before the "election" was called, work in the yards slacked off and men were gathering from everywhere. In short order one of the sorting pens was cleared (the view from the overhead walkways was premium, don't you know), seconds were selected and an "election judge" appointed. At the urging of the "election judge" and other interested parties, it was decided that the first ballot would not be cast until 10:00 AM. because "they're coming in by bus from the financial district". (Yes, I know; and now you know the origin of that line). At the appointed time, in the appointed place, voting commenced.

There are two things you must understand. First, this contest was economic in nature and these men were not enemies. Second, this was a gentleman's contest, conducted per the Marquise of Queensbury's rules, which state that a round ends when either man leaves his feet. After a knock-down, the contestant has one minutes to "toe the line" in the center of the ring. If he fails to do so, the man standing is the winner. Both Uncle Jim and The Bull were young men, in the prime of life, and fit beyond the wildest dreams of today's flabby youth. The Bull was big and strong and a veteran of many such contests. Jim was smaller, but he was also quicker and no stranger to "ten round elections" himself. Through the morning the battle raged. Blows were landed by both sides with force enough to bruise the viewers. Wagers were made, both large and small, and you could see the bookies swinging from elation to depression as the tide of battle shifted. After two solid hours of combat, in which neither man gave ground, the noon whistle blew. Both men were still on their feet. This had never happened before, so there was no precedent to follow. By mutual agreement a recess was called. At the urging of certain interested

parties, (the bookies?) it was agreed the contest would resume in two hours, which gave store owners and business men from the more distant parts of the city traveling time. With the formalities concluded, Uncle Jim and The Bull, arm in arm, retired to a nearby speakeasy for a couple of pitchers of lunch. That day the place was packed.

Well before two P.M. the stockyards and adjacent office buildings were buried in a sea of humanity. Every window, staircase railing and roof was jammed. The cattle cars and engines on the nearby tracks were covered. The alleyway fences were loaded far beyond their limits and space on the raised walkways was prime. The crowd was so dense our two combatants and their seconds had to fight their way back into the arena. Then, at exactly two P.M., the two men walked to the center of the ring, shook hands, "toed the line" and the contest resumed.

Since antiquity there have been stories of "epic battles". Contests of honor between men of valor; Achilles and Hector before the walls of Troy; David and Goliath before the armies of Israel. This was such a battle. Men of iron will, locked in combat, trading blow for blow. Neither man yields uncontested ground and time ticks inexorably on. By three P.M. the voices of the crowd are failing. Exhaustion has taken its toll on combatants and observers alike and still neither man will yield. By four P.M. the pace of battle had slowed to a crawl. Both men are bruised and bloody and arms burdened with fatigue make each blow an act of will, and still neither man will yield. Now the crowd is silent, locked in the intensity of the moment, focused on the fact that they are witnesses to legend. But we are fast approaching the limits beyond which human flesh can not be driven, even by legends.

Suddenly the five P.M. whistle sounds, signaling the end of the trading day. On normal days at this time, the auctioneers fall silent and the traders repair to their offices to balance accounts. The sound jars the crowd out of their reverie and forces them back into the world of reality. In spite of the heroics of the moment, there is business which must be tended to, there are tasks which must be completed. Murmurs and restlessness ripple through the crowd. The sound of the whistle and the disturbance in the crowd breaks the concentration of our combatants as well and once the rhythm is lost it can not be regained. Therefore, by mutual consent, the battle ends. And so it was decided; hence forth, in the Chicago stockyard, right-of-way will be determined by which of their two crews arrives at an alleyway intersection first.

It is ironic: In a battle which was basically economic in nature, both contestants actually lost money, since they missed a days work. What is even more ironic is that, after all this effort, neither man held his position for very long. Being intelligent, talented and ambitious, both Uncle Jim and The Bull moved on to better things soon afterwards. In those days, even a foreman could not earn enough to support himself in the stockyards.