

CHAPTER ONE

THREE CREEKS

“No, Daddy, no! I’m scared...” Was all I got out before the waterwings my grandma had made me out of two one gallon lard buckets and a flour sack went sailing into the bushes one way an’ all I could see in the other direction was sky, trees, water, sky, trees, water...

THREE CREEKS

I splashed face first to the surface of the murky creek all the way out in the middle of the swimmin' hole. I came to the surface, spittin' an' sputterin'...tryin' to hold my head above water.

"Put your head down, boy!...Swim to me. Come on...Put your head down...Reach for the bank."

I looked up with water blurin' my vision at my daddy standin' up on the clay bank of the local swimmin' hole at Three Creeks, waving me toward him. He was a hard-as-nails, muscular, square-jawed, broad-shouldered man without a ounce of fat on him.

I was to be eight years old in three days, June 18, 1949...if I survived. My daddy was a driller for Shell Oil and we currently lived just outside of a boomtown named Gainesville, Texas, in some former Army barracks. The base where all the drillin' crews lived had been named Camp Howes durin' the war.

The war they called World War II...guess there'd been another one before...had been over almost four years and we had already lived in seven boomtowns in three states, searchin' for oil during the war an' were still at it. I was born six months before Pearl Harbor.

Ken Farmer

Daddy tried to enlist in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, an' even the Coast Guard, but they wouldn't let him, said he had a critical occupation, whatever that is...drillin' for oil for the country's war effort.

But, anyway, every summer, we'd go to my mama's home in southern Arkansas just seven miles north of the Louisiana line off the Haynesville Road. That part of the state was known as the deep piney woods.

I could always tell when we were gettin' close. "Daddy, I can smell pine trees."

'Course you have to understand cars weren't air-conditioned in those days, you had to drive with the windows rolled down...Or if it was cold, you cracked the little triangle window in the corner of the front ones, 'specially when mama or daddy were smokin'.

Grandma an' grandpa lived way out in the country on a dirt road in a ramblin' home they referred to as a dog-run house. They called it that on account it had a twelve-foot wide hall down the middle of the house from the big wrap-around front porch to the screened-in porch at the back. There were bedrooms on each side with fireplaces an'

THREE CREEKS

grandma's kitchen was at the far end of the house on the other side of the big dinin' room.

There wasn't no electricity or runnin' water. Grandma used coal-oil lamps for light, had a big, wide cast iron woodstove to cook on. I can still remember the taste of her hot buttermilk biscuits with fresh churned butter an' sorghum syrup in the mornin's.

She counted on us kids to split wood for her wood box beside the stove when we were there an' give grandpa a break.

They had a good deep drilled well that we got to go draw water from with this long, skinny galvanized well bucket. There was a two-holer outhouse about sixty feet from the back door.

Grandpa was born in 1883 and had retired from the sheriff's department at the end of the war. He was now a truck farmer—everbody called him Big John...Big John Jamison. He was about 6'3" an' weighed around 285...Nobody messed with Big John. He wore blue bib overalls ever day over his longhandle top with the sleeves cut off in the summertime.

Us grand kids had been told he once picked up a bale of cotton on his back and carried it thirty feet

Ken Farmer

on a bet. Believe a bale a cotton weighs about five hundred pounds or maybe more. Don't know if that's true or not, but we all believed it.

For such a big man, he was gentle with us kids...was actually afraid to spank us. He'd leave any discipline that had to be dealt out to grandma.

Her name was Mame...well, it was Mary Alice, but he always called her Mame an' she couldn't of weighed a hundred pounds soakin' wet. She would be the one to tear our butts up when we needed it, usually with a peach tree switch we'd have to go cut ourselves.

We'd go to their house when school was out for daddy's vacation cause he liked to go fishin' with mama's brothers an' their kids—our cousins. She had one sister an' four brothers an' there was a real passel of first, second an' third cousins lived fair close.

One brother, Uncle J.B., his wife, Aunt Thelma an' my three cousins, Jessie, Don, an' Hubbert, lived about a hundred yards down a sandy road from grandma an' grandpa. The others lived eighteen miles away in Eldorado, Arkansas.

Mama's sister, Aunt Anna Lee, an' her husband

THREE CREEKS

Uncle Ford, lived near Homer, Louisiana with their four kids.

Daddy an' mama would leave my older brother an' me there for the summer when his two weeks was up an' he had to go back to work—we lived for the summer. Never had to wear shoes, 'ceptin' on Sunday for church.

Like I said, grandma had made me this set of waterwings, on account I couldn't swim yet, for when we'd go down to Three Creeks. It was about two miles from the house by road.

It was a fairly large area because three creeks came together an' that's where everybody around came to swim...most of them were relatives of some sort. It was also used for baptisms an' was surrounded by big trees an' grapevines an' grandpa had hung a rope swing from one of the oaks that hung out over the water. He would go down there to take a bath...even in the winter.

I think daddy finally got tired of puttin those cans in that flour sack an' figured it was high time I learned how to swim...

“Kick your feet, sunshine! Pull the water to you. Come on...come to me...Kick...Kick.”

Ken Farmer

Don't know if I was more scared of drownin' or of him, but I did what he said—put my head down, kicked my feet and pulled the water to me.

“Good job, Foot!”

I had been christened Henry Lightfoot Lee after a couple of ancestors on my daddy's side of the Lee family of Virginia. They said Henry ‘Lighthorse Harry’ Lee was a hero of the American Revolution an’ Francis Lightfoot Lee was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Somehow between when I was born an’ now my name got shortened to just ‘Foot’...Oh, an’ Lighthorse Harry was Robert E. Lee's daddy.

I looked up, rubbed the water out of my eyes as he leaned over, grabbed my arm and pulled me up—I made it, but I screamed bloody murder while I was still in the air.

“Hurt you, boy?” He set me down on the bank.

“Daddy, Daddy, I stepped on somebody just ‘fore you pulled me out.”

He knelt down in front of me, glanced over at the murky water then back at me. “What are you talkin’ ‘bout, Foot?...There's nobody in there.”

“Yes, there was...Honest Injun, Daddy, I stepped on somebody.”

THREE CREEKS

He studied my face for a minute, got to his feet an' dove headfirst into the creek...He was wearin' some cut-off jeans for a bathin' suit just like I was.

My brother, Bobby, an' cousins...Don an' Hubert, ran up to where I was to watch Daddy as he swam back to the bank an' commenced to feel around with his foot.

Then of a sudden, he dove under the water an' in a couple of seconds he come back to the surface an' had a blonde-headed young girl in his arms.

Her name was Bethany Cade...she was fifteen or thereabouts...everbody knew who she was. There was thirteen or so in the Cade family...nobody knew for sure...an' they all lived in this one shotgun shack over near Jolley's Store. My cousins said they was inbred...whatever that means.

Bethany's head flopped over to the side, with her blonde hair hangin' limply as Daddy waded out of the water with her in his arms...could tell right off she was dead...

Daddy laid her on the top of the bank, turned an' ran to our '39 Ford sedan up on the road, got a towel, brought it back an' covered her face.

Ken Farmer

“Now you boys stay here, I’m gonna go get your grandpa, he’ll know who to contact...an’ don’t touch her, hear?”

We all nodded as he ran back up to the loggin’ road that went past the swimmin’ hole, started ol’ Huldy, turned her around an’ drove off in a cloud of dust.

Cousin Hubert, he was a year younger’n me asked, “What’d she feel like, Foot?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Kinda mushy an’ slick.”

He reached his foot toward Bethany’s arm.

“Hubert! You heard Uncle Joe.”

Don pushed him away from her body. He was about the same age as my brother, Bobby, three years older’n me.

Daddy’s name was really Bob, or Robert, but the family all called him Joe, don’t know why...happened ‘fore I come along.

The sun was settlin’ down toward the tops of the trees ‘round Three Creeks.

Hubert looked up. “Hope Uncle Joe gets back here with grampaw ‘fore it gits dark.”

Bobby looked over at him. “Why, what’s the big deal?”

THREE CREEKS

“Just don’t want to be down here in the bottom with no dead body’s all.”

Don turned from starin’ down at Bethany. “How come? She’s dead.”

“Yeah but Mamie...”

Mamie was grandma’s colored washer woman who was born on the place an’ said her grandma and grandpa was slaves for my great great grandpa, but none of ‘em would leave when he freed ‘em durin’ Lincoln’s war...Mamie said they was manumitted, whatever that means. Great great grandpa let ‘em all be sharecroppers so’s they could make a livin’.

“Well, Mamie says haints come out when it turns dark where somebody’s just died...’specially down in the bottoms.” Hubert turned an’ looked around at the darkening deep woods on all sides of the creek.

Don suddenly grabbed his arm an’ yelled, “Boo!”

Hubert nearly jumped out of his skin, turned and whaled on his older brother with both fists. “Dang, you! Don’t do that. Ain’t fair...I’m gonna tell mama.”

Ken Farmer

Don bent over laughin'. "Shoulda told Uncle Joe to bring back a sugar tit while he was gittin' grampa."

"You just wait."

We heard the brakes squeal on daddy's Ford up to the road an' in a minute him and grandpa were comin' down the slope through the woods.

Grandpa walked right up to Bethany's body, knelt down an' pulled the towel off. He studied her for a few minutes, turned her head to the right then the left an' looked up at daddy.

"Been strangled, Joe. See the bruise marks around her neck?"

Daddy leaned over an' looked where he was pointin'. "Can even see the thumb prints on the front."

"Uh-huh...Used both hands. Strong man...broke her neck. Heard the bones grind when I turned her head."

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