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Popanse Creek

Steve Jansen

Down near the railroad tracks on the far side of town ran a swiftly moving creek. Local folks say that once upon a time or back when men traveled by horseback it was actually a small river or tributary of the Popanse River that dissected the county from the northeast to the southwest. Legend has it that the Popanse Indians used the river to irrigate their cornfields. Tribes from the north navigated it down to the plains here, their canoes laden with hides of caribou and bear. Here they would trade for corn and deer-skin and then head further south to trade their valuable hides. On many a summer morning the cool mixed with the humidity of the day to usher up dreamlike steamy vapors that hid the movement of the swift canoes. But if you listened closely you could hear the precision paddling of oars gently dipping into the waters or the dulcet tones of a native song rumbling down the channel only to be lost in the fog.

Across the creek was an ancient willow tree with droopy, thin leafed branches that hung over the water like an old woman washing her hair from shore. Young boys would hang a rope from one of the sturdier branches and tie a large knot at the end so as to be able to stand up while holding the rope in one hand and a knife made of whittled sticks in the other. Then they would sail across the great divide hair rustling in the breeze and bloodcurdling war hoops cascading down on the enemy below.

First to lead the charge for his band of warriors was Bip Mullen. Occasionally, he would find a feather lost by a wild goose or duck, place it in his red bandanna and creep along the banks, stick held tightly like a fine bow, ready to hunt down that evening's dinner or protect his tribe from invaders. He would hold his whittled stick of a knife in his teeth and with one hand held tightly on the rope, urge his band on. Then he would circle his free arm in the air, violently stirring a pot of emotions within his braves.

Bip wasn't the biggest or the fastest or the most skilled of the bunch, but he always went first. He was asthmatic since birth, tall for his age and rail-thin. You could count the ribs on his chest like rungs on a ladder. Perhaps his condition prevented him from being the most athletic, but it never diminished his fearless nature. And his closely knit band loved him for this. Who else would lead a band of twelve year-old savages across the swirling waters of Popanse Creek to fight the insolent intruders.

As Bip was always first, then little Timmy O'Shea was always last. Timmy had suffered and beat leukemia as a small child. He was very young then, barely three years old when diagnosed. But by age five he had beaten the dread disease and was able to live a

somewhat normal life. As a result of his battles, or possibly a result of massive dosages of chemotherapy and radiation, his growth at this formative age had been stunted. No matter how quickly he endeavored to keep up with the other boys, little Timmy always trailed behind.

Oftentimes they would go down to the small local grocery store for pop or candy or sweet rolls. Timmy never seemed to have enough money with him. His father was a butcher at the meat market the next town over and his mother did sewing for the ladies in the neighborhood. Even with insurance, Timmy's medical care had been extremely expensive. But the O'Shea family, had prayed together and stuck together. They were very close and very happy.

Not having enough money ever bothered little Timmy. Often Bip would 'lend' him enough for a chocolate candy bar, his favorite. Other times, Timmy just helped himself. Not being very tall gave him the perfect cover he needed when in a small crowd and Timmy learned early on how easy it was to just help himself to a candy bar or two. After all, his pockets were only two feet off the ground and who looked at peoples' shoes anyways. Sometimes he would just stand near a couple buying their groceries chocolate bar in hand and the clerk would just ring it up on their tab figuring he was with them.

That was when Bip tagged him with the nickname Chocolate Timmy. And whenever he heard his nickname a shy smile would bless his freckled face. He was one of them.

Not having the weight or momentum to swing himself across the creek, Chocolate Timmy found himself swinging aimlessly only halfway over the creek. Somehow he lost his grip, dropped his homemade weapon and fell what was thought to be twenty to twenty-five feet from the rope but was probably more like ten to twelve feet into the fierce waters of Popanse Creek.

A tuft of red hair appeared on the surface and then, his face redder than anyone had ever seen and cheeks puffy as a blowfish, popped out of the water. His arms thrashed wildly amid the rough waters which had begun to sweep him downstream. His band led by Bip ran along the banks hopping tree branches with bows and knives high in the air in an effort to keep up with Chocolate Timmy.

"Help, help – I can't swim." His head disappeared underwater momentarily and then surfaced again. None of them knew Chocolate Timmy couldn't swim. They had practiced their archery on homemade scarecrows, refined horseback skills on overturned tree trunks and caught an occasional fish on safety pins but had never thought about swimming events.

“Hold on Timmy, I’m comin’.” Bip, already short of breath from the frantic run, dove into the creek and swam out to his friend. He paddled hard as he could but his wheezing turned worse and he began struggling for air. Gulps of air alternated with gulps of water as his oxygen-starved lungs betrayed him. By the time he got to where his friend had been he had almost drowned himself and Timmy had floated even further downstream. Two of the other boys helped pull Bip out onto the bank.

His burning chest heaved against closing lung passages.

Droplets of water fell from his hair onto his face and mixed with his tears. He raised his head in agony to look at his band of friends. Their frozen faces shared the same tears. Their friend had not surfaced again.

“I could—n’t reach him. I could—n’t save him,” Bip gasped between each syllable. He lay across a large boulder wheezing and heaving and spewing mouthfuls of water.

Not far away the shrill truncated call of a whippoorwill pierced the air. Bip left the creek that day for perhaps the last time. His bare feet padded along the bank tracing footsteps left long ago by Popanse braves returning home, their band smaller with each treacherous campaign. The screams and wails of deerskin clad mothers and lovers rose from the village like smoke from smoldering campfires ascending above the clouds to be heard throughout the plains.

The next day at the spillway down-river in Kishwaukee the body of little Timmy O’Shea was found. It was not the first time Popanse Creek had given up its dead.