

## Chapter 6

### Under a Death Sentence

Most everybody knew that Pappy Roosevelt brewed corn liquor in a shed behind the hog pen furthest from the two-lane black-top county road that ran by his place. But the smells of the still and its corn liquor got lost in the powerful odors of the hog wallows' mud and manure.

One summer afternoon in nineteen and forty seven I stopped at Bertha's Place for an RC Cola. Whit Saunders and I talked for a while and the topic of Pappy Roosevelt's illegal brewing came up. I asked Whit, "Do you figure the sheriff knows about Pappy Roosevelt's corn liquor?"

Whit nodded and grinned. "Wink Winkler's brother-in-law, William Boyd Shunt, has a cousin who's a friend of Deputy Sheriff Truitt Crabtree. According to Wink, Truitt said, and I quote, 'We figure it's better to have Pappy Roosevelt half-drunk in his hog wallow than stone sober in the streets of Kettle.'"

The Roosevelts, Harlan McKinley Roosevelt and Ovieta Blankenship Roosevelt, lived on the family's hog farm with their son, George Boy. George Boy and I had been in school together since first grade. He earned mostly "S's," satisfactory, in grade school, and in high school he got C's, except for A's in shop and vocational agriculture. By the tenth grade George Boy towered over the rest of us boys, over six feet tall.

At school George Boy would walk up to you, smile, and stick out his hand like he wanted to shake your hand. Then just after starting a good hand shake, he would begin to squeeze your hand and knurl your knuckles until you yelled whatever word he told you to

yell. One time in the school cafeteria George Boy got hold of William White's hand, squeezed and knurled his knuckles and said, "Say 'damn,' William White, say 'damn.'"

William White scrunched up his face in pain and held back as long as he could then yelled, "Damn!" George Boy laughed and released his grip but our principal, Mr. Lawton, heard what William White yelled and told him to go to the office. After a while you'd think nobody would fall for the false promise of George Boy's outstretched hand. But there's a compelling feature to a fellow grinning and sticking out his hand for a shake, even George Boy. Along with most everybody else, I just reached out and took it.

Sometimes George Boy would sneak up from behind, put his thumb and forefinger on either side of one of the muscles connecting the back side of a boy's neck to the top of his shoulder, and then pinch and squeeze real hard. Always a surprise, and it always hurt like the devil. Once in eighth grade George Boy did it to a girl. She let out a piercing scream then fell to the ground and laid there kicking her legs in the air, screaming and crying. To the best of my knowledge George Boy never again pinched a girl's neck.

Even though I often looked over my shoulder to make sure George Boy wasn't sneaking up behind me, sure enough, sooner or later I'd feel his pincer bear down on me. The last time it took my breath away. I winced and dropped my shoulder down low hoping he would let go. "Ahhhhh." George Boy laughed and said, "What's a matter Freddy, cat gotcher tongue?"

Just to compound things, George Boy sometimes had a bad case of the uglies. Not the kind of ugliness that's inherited from parents. The kind that got put on and worn by choice. He had coal black hair that he often didn't comb, and it was common for him to

have a pimple or two on his face that needed to be popped. When George Boy had a cold he'd go a long time without blowing his nose, and then when snot started to drip towards his upper lip and he saw somebody look at him, he'd shoot his tongue up and lick away the snot. He'd stand there and laugh with strands of boogers hanging between his lips.

William White once said George Boy had twice the strength and half the intelligence of an ox.

To be fair, George Boy sometimes washed and combed his hair, and popped his pimples. Momma said, "When George Boy fixes himself up, he can be right nice looking." And George Boy had grown into a powerful halfback on the Kettle High football team. Kids in school, as well as the coaches and folks in town, admired his accomplishments on the athletic field. In the tenth grade George Boy earned a starting position on the Kettle Tops. At times he could be a nice guy. Maybe that's why we fell for his tricks. Sometimes George Boy and I would talk and laugh together at Sunday school. One day in the summer after fourth grade a lot of us kids had gathered at the Sour Apple River beach in Riverfront Park. While we played a softball game, Missy Witherspoon, who couldn't swim, fell into the river. She screamed for help. George Boy threw aside his softball glove, jumped in the river and pulled her out. Later his Momma beamed when she said, "George Boy didn't know how to swim. I don't know how he did it, but he saved Missy."

George Boy's given name, George Boyd, got changed to George Boy long before he entered first grade. Whenever Pappy Roosevelt asked him his name, George Boy would insist that his name was "George Boy!" Pappy Roosevelt would laugh and George

Boy would laugh, and before anybody knew it, "George Boy" got stuck on him like a bug on flypaper.

The Roosevelts' hog farm sat about two miles beyond what folks called "the other end of town." Most folks lived in "this end of town." The other end often had a lingering and unpleasant odor, mostly due to the nearby swamp. Starting with the spring thaw, continuing through the summer and until a hard freeze in winter, the swamp oozed a smell that resembled a mixture of swamp slime and rotten eggs. The rotten eggs portion of the odor came from an underground spring that fed the swamp with sulfur water. In addition, the swamp's aroma got a powerful boost from Pappy Roosevelt's hog farm, particularly on warm days. When a breeze passed over the farm and swamp and then blew into Kettle, many a lady would walk around town holding a perfumed handkerchief over her nose.

George Boy's Momma, Ovieta Blankenship Roosevelt, always made a point of identifying herself to strangers as "Not of the New York Roosevelts." William White said he doubted anybody would make that mistake. Most folks knew her husband had grown up on Mud Fork, about ten miles from Kettle. She also insisted that her full three names be used when ever she got singled out for having done something special at a club meeting or a church social. Mrs. Roosevelt took special pride in her Blankenship family's history for it included a colonel in the Confederate Army and a cousin who in nineteen and twenty-two ran for election as a Republican candidate for Congress.

She had powerful arms with large biceps, and stood tall. When she fluffed up her brown hair she seemed even taller. Whenever she came to town she wore a nice dress and hat, and when only running an errand she looked like most women did when they dressed

for Sunday church services. Mrs. Roosevelt sometimes did volunteer work in the schools and belonged to the Kettle Women's Preparedness Club, an organization that emphasized keeping up with the times. One year she chaired the club's committee on modern cooking and stood strong for cooking complete meals from canned foods.

People often shook their heads in wonderment at the fact that Ovieta Blankenship had married Pappy Roosevelt. When I asked Momma about it, she said, "Harlan" – she always called Pappy Roosevelt by his given name – "was in the same class at Kettle High School as your father and me. He was a nice-looking young man. People often said he had considerable promise, even though he had a difficult time in his academic subjects." Then she laughed, more to herself than towards me, a quiet little laugh that caused the dimples in her cheeks to dent in. She looked pretty when she did that. "Harlan once told me that for a tall girl I was right pretty, and then asked me out on a date. I told him I appreciated his asking me, but I said no, for I already had my eye on your Daddy. Not long after that he and Ovieta started dating. She was in the class two years behind us." Mamma smiled and said, "I guess he liked tall girls, for she was taller than me. They had quite a courtship. Seemed like once it got started they were never apart."

Although my Momma called him Harlan, folks around town knew him as Pappy Roosevelt. I asked Momma where his nickname came from. She said she didn't know for sure, but guessed that everybody's hearing George Boy call him Pappy Roosevelt might have done it. Or maybe it happened because of the combination of Pappy Roosevelt's large size and the fact that he looked older than his age. Sometimes he looked sixty, if a day, but he graduated from Kettle High with Momma and Daddy. Other than when he went to church, Pappy Roosevelt always wore his dirty bib overalls, brogans, and wide-

brimmed straw hat. Due to his mouth continually carrying a large wad of tobacco and an oversupply of tobacco juice, two brown lines ran from each corner of his mouth to his chin. Even after he cleaned up for church.

Pappy Roosevelt took pride in his hogs' blue ribbons at county fairs, often winning over hog farmers from Kentucky and Ohio. "But," Whit Saunders commented, "he can't take full credit for it. Pappy Roosevelt married into the Blankenships, who first developed that hog farm and its prize-winning stock."

At Gruber's Department Store one day when some fellows discussed hog farming, Hartford Wilson said, "After Pappy Roosevelt got into the Blankenships' hog business, he took to hog raising like a duck takes to water. And on the side, he developed a profitable little hobby." Pappy Roosevelt began to produce corn liquor about the time George Boyd began to insist he had the name of George Boy.

Pappy Roosevelt attended Marshall College in Huntington while Ovieta Blankenship finished high school, and the summer after she graduated they married. He studied to be a high school chemistry teacher. After failing freshman English for the fourth straight semester he quit college. Pappy Roosevelt told some fellows at the Post Office, "It were the verbs what sunk me."

Soon after the wedding Pappy Roosevelt got a job as an assistant in a research lab at the Union Chemical plant near Charleston. The elder Mr. Roosevelt said, "We're just dirt farmers from Mud Fork, but my boy Harlan's smart – he's got what it takes. He's gonna do well at Union Chemical."

Momma told me that at the wedding reception Mr. Blankenship gave a toast to the couple and talked about his new son-in-law's chemistry background. How it might lead

to the invention of new formula-based hog diets, and even greater improvements in the Blankenship family's line of hogs. She said, "You'd have thought he just got a new prize boar, not a son-in-law."

Pappy Roosevelt's career at Union Chemical started and ended the summer he married Ovieta Blankenship. Officials at the plant blamed Pappy Roosevelt for an explosion in the lab where he worked, one that took out most of the building's plumbing.

One summer day when all of Kettle smelled like a hog pen, I walked by the Post Office. Barney Brammer and another fellow, both of them wearing a railroad engineers' hats, stood there sharpening the blades on their pocketknives on the smooth stone of the Post Office's front window ledge. They talked about Pappy Roosevelt. Just as Barney mentioned the lab explosion, Pappy Roosevelt walked by. He stopped and stared at Barney for a couple of seconds, and then said in a loud voice, "Barney Brammer, it warn't my job to warsh out all their danged test tubes."

The elder Mr. Blankenship passed away not long after Pappy Roosevelt became a full-time hog farmer. Folks said that once Pappy Roosevelt began to run the farm, he devoted considerable time to what he proudly called "Research on secret hog food recipes. Fine-tuned mixes of chemicals and exactly right portions of meats and vegetables."

Barney Brammer and his friends smirked when they talked about Pappy Roosevelt's "research." But I had a different view of it and said so to Barney. "I figure that's how new ideas get tried and take hold in life. Pappy Roosevelt may be a little different, but he's trying new things. Experimenting."

Barney said, “Well, now, Freddy, maybe you’re right. I sure like his experiments out in the shed beyond the hog pen.”

I found it difficult to bring together the rough-looking man who had a hard time smiling with Momma’s description of Harlan Roosevelt when they attended Kettle High School. How could a man age so fast? Then I’d remember the blow that fell on him, the loss of his little girl, Opal. The way it happened would age anybody. Opal had been born about two years ahead of George Boy and lived only about a year and a half. One day while Pappy Roosevelt took care of Opal, Mrs. Roosevelt went to the store. He mixed up feed and chemicals for the hogs while Opal played and toddled around the back yard. Pappy Roosevelt walked down to the hog pens to put the mixture in the troughs. “I kept lookin’ over my shoulder, and she was right there,” he said later. “I only turned away once, when I poured the mix in the troughs.”

When Pappy Roosevelt returned to the back yard, he couldn’t find Opal. He looked everywhere, called some neighbors, then called Chief Tackett, thinking somebody might have snatched her. The chief alerted the Kettle Volunteer Fire Department. The men came out to the farm and looked high and low. One of the firemen noticed that the cover on the underground cistern next to the house had been pushed ajar. “Well,” Momma said, “you can guess the rest. He directed the beam of his flashlight down into the dark of the cistern. There in the water was little Opal. She was floating face down, not moving.

“Harlan changed after that,” Momma told me. “Before his little girl died he got up early and went out to work in the barn or the hog pens. He looked for ways to improve

the stock, win the hog competition at fairs around the region. After Opal's death he stopped." Momma described how, since then, on warm mornings, Pappy Roosevelt would dump his special mixes into the hog troughs, and then sit for hours in one of the old wooden Adirondack chairs he'd placed beside each of the hog pens. He'd spend his mornings watching the hogs wallow in the mud. Near each chair he kept a garden hose, and from time to time he'd grab it, twist the nozzle and spray water into the hog pen to increase the mud supply. Then he'd reach into his hip pocket, pull out a small flask of corn liquor and take a sip.

Momma said, "I've often wondered what life might have been like for Harlan and his family if Opal hadn't fallen into that cistern." What if I'd had a sister and the same thing that happened to Opal had happened to her and my Daddy? Would he spend his days sitting in our back yard drinking corn liquor? What if, years from now, I had a little girl and it happened to me – what would I do?

George Boy worked around the farm and helped out with what he called "Pappy Roosevelt's scientific work." On warm mornings, as soon as he got his chores done, George Boy would join his father in one of the Adirondack chairs, grab a hose, and add water to a hog pen's mud supply. The two of them sometimes made bets on whether either of them could lift some or all of a particular hog.

Barney Brammer told folks at Bertha's Place that one day he delivered some feed grain to Pappy Roosevelt's farm, and while he unloaded it Pappy Roosevelt pointed to the largest boar in the hog pen and asked, "George Boy, do you think you can lift his hind end?"

"You bet, Pappy Roosevelt!"

“Twenty-five cents says you cain’t do it.”

Barney said George Boy jumped up out of his chair, climbed into the pen and sloshed through the mud to that hog. He grabbed the hog’s hind legs a couple of times, but the slime on the hog caused him to lose his grip. When he finally got a firm hold on both hind legs the hog commenced to squeal and thrash about in the mud. The hog kicked loose from George Boy, ran a few yards away and then turned and launched a surprise attack – hit George Boy right about the knees and flattened him. George Boy got up, now as muddy as the hog, and ran head first into the critter. The two of them rolled and grunted in the mud like two men in a wrestling match. Pappy Roosevelt jumped into the pen and helped George Boy bring the hog down. Pretty soon George Boy had himself seated on the hog’s back and the hog’s legs had splayed out underneath him. Pappy Roosevelt stood beside George Boy and the hog.

Pappy Roosevelt broke into a dark brown grin and put his hand on George Boy’s shoulder. Barney said he yelled to them, “Congratulations, boys.”

Pappy Roosevelt raised George Boy’s right hand, like a referee does after a boxer wins a prize fight. George Boy hopped off the hog and Pappy Roosevelt hosed the mud and hog slime off the two of them. After they sat down in their chairs, Pappy Roosevelt smiled, took a nip of corn liquor and said, ‘Ornery booger, warn’t he, George Boy?’”

“Yep, Pappy Roosevelt, he were.”

“Let’s mark ’im.”

From the barn Pappy Roosevelt brought clippers that resembled a pair of pliers. George Boy threw a rope over the hog’s neck, looped it around his front legs, pulled the big boar to the ground and wrapped a couple of turns of rope around his snout. The hog

squealed and bit at the rope as Pappy Roosevelt clipped two bloody notches in the lower section of his right ear.

“He don’t seem none too happy, Pappy Roosevelt.”

“Well, son, cain’t say I blame him. As good as we treat them hogs, the truth is they’s all livin’ under a death sentence. But when you think about it, who ain’t?”