



## PHANTOM CHICKEN THIEF

This story happened when I was five or six years old. I do not personally remember its happening, but I do remember it being told. It was perhaps embellished a little each time it was retold, as I will take the liberty of doing here to enhance its interest.

It took place in the 1930's during the last years of the great depression. We lived on McGee road in Gwinnett County on Grandpa Brownlee's farm. Times were hard. Money was scarce. Gasoline sold for about ten cents a gallon. Farm labor was seventy-five cents a day from sun-up til sun-down, and people were glad to get it. Most farmers had no money to pay even that, so they "swapped work" to get the crops gathered. People who probably would not otherwise have done so would steal from those who had foodstuff, to feed their hungry families; corn from your crib, chickens, pigs, calves, cows, - anything that could be eaten or easily sold or bartered for food or other necessities. It was in this environment that this story takes place.

We cannot even begin to describe what it was like to today's generation – that has plenty of everything. Today's "needy" are in much better financial condition than most "well-off" families were in our community in those days. It is hard for those of us who lived through those times, and are none the worse for it, to be sympathetic today for the so-called needy "poverty level" families. They are more likely to appear to us just to be "whiners", but that's another story.

Since I don't really know for certain, let's say this story began in Snellville at Aubrey Peter's Pure Oil Service Station, a local gathering place in those days for young men on a Saturday night. Two brothers, Leslie (Monk) and Hubert Moon, who were farm neighbors of ours, were there. My brother Hollis (Cedric) was at the home of a girlfriend, Jannette Knight, along with some other young folk for a routine Saturday night social gathering. It may have involved a card game of Rook, maybe some homemade ice cream, and certainly as a minimum the passing of "courtin' wax" (chewing gum). This was several years before he met the love of his life, and spouse of over 60 years, Miss Nellie Ruth McCart.

The nickname "Cedric" came from the very popular radio program of that time, Lum and Abner, a family situation comedy. Cedric was one of the characters on the program. Other boys in the community had been tagged with names of other characters on the program as nicknames. None that I know of stuck permanently, but Hollis was readily known and referred to as "Cedric" during that period of his life.

Hollis was sixteen or seventeen years old and was permitted to use the family car. It was a Chevrolet, either a green solid wheel 1928, or a black yellow spoke wheeled 1931 model. Dad traded for the 1931 model about that time.

Now Hubert Moon, friend and neighbor, also wanted to, or was, dating Jannette Knight at the same time as Cedric. On this Saturday night he longed to be at Jannette's house,

rather than standing around Peter's service station telling tall tales. There were no sources of entertainment in Snellville in those days, no movie, no bowling alley, just hanging out, or in those days it was called "hanging around". If someone had access to a car, someone else might contribute twenty-five cents for two and one-half gallons of gas and they would "ride around" until there was just about enough gas left to get home. There were a few who might invest in a half-pint of bootleg whisky (white lightning). It was available in the community. The Moon boys were known to occasionally (maybe frequently is more appropriate) partake of such drinks. Maybe they had sipped a little on this Saturday night.

The Moon brothers did not have a car, but through a mutual friend they had access to one this night. Hubert wanted to be at Jannette's house. Cedric was at Jannette's house. The problem, it was concluded, was how to get Cedric to leave Jannette's house. Monk Moon, it seems, came up with the idea of convincing Cedric he was needed at home so he would leave, then Hubert could stay at Jannette's house. Yeah, but how to do that. "I'll think of something", Monk said, "Let's go down there".

"Down there" was the Knight's house, about two miles east from Peter's service station, on an unpaved road, which today is US 78 highway. The Knight house was about five miles from the Ewing house, mostly dirt road with curves, ruts, bumps, and sand beds. It was not an ideal road for a teenager to be speeding.

The three, Monk, Hubert and the person with the car left Peter's service station. We'll give the person with the car a fictitious name, we'll call him Fred. "Monk, what are we going to tell Cedric", Hubert asked? "Now here's what we're gonna do", Monk said. "When we get there, Fred you pull in the yard and turn the car around so we can leave in a hurry". "Hubert, you go with me to the door". "I'll go in and tell Cedric he is needed at home". "When he leaves Hubert you can go in". "What are you going to tell him Monk", Hubert asked? "I'm going to tell him Mr. Kelly (Cedric's Dad) has shot a man in the chicken house and he needs to go home quick". "You can't tell him that", Hubert said. "Yes I can, and that's what I'm gonna tell him", Monk said. "He'll be scared to death", Hubert said, "and he might wreck the car getting home". "No he won't", Monk said, "that's why we are going to turn the car around and be ready". "After I tell him, I'll come out with him, when he leaves, I'll jump in the car and we'll catch him before he gets to Snellville. We'll get him to pull over and stop, then I'll tell him what we've done, that we've just pulled a joke on him". "Are you sure this will work", Hubert asked? "No, but we're gonna do it anyway, I can't wait to see the look on Cedric's face when I tell him his daddy has shot a man in the chicken house", Monk said, as they turned into the driveway to the Knight's yard.

Monk and Hubert quickly got out of the car. Fred backed the car around so he could pull out right behind Cedric if he hurriedly drove away as expected. Monk and Hubert hurried up the front steps and across the front porch

Monk knocked on the screen doorframe. The front door was open, as was the custom, to provide a breeze through the house. The knocking on the screen door made a flapping

sound, since it did not fit tight as they usually didn't. A family member came to the door. "Is Cedric Ewins here", Monk asked? "Well yes he is" - - "well we gotta see 'em right now, he's got an emergency at home", Monk interrupted!!

"Hollis (everybody did not use the nickname Cedric) can you come here, Monk Moon is here and says you got an emergency at home". With that announcement Cedric got up and went to the front door. Some of the others followed to hear what the emergency was all about.

"Cedric you better get home quick", Monk said, before Hollis could speak. "Why", Cedric asked? "Your Daddy has shot a man in the chicken house", Monk said excitedly, "caught him stealing chickens outright I guess"!! Cedric just stared at Monk in stunned silence with his mouth open (that's the Ewing male trait, always hold your mouth open when thinking or looking at something intensely). Hubert was just standing there on the porch watching intently and smiling. Someone in back of Hollis exclaimed, "Oh my Lord, is he dead"? Monk never had a chance to answer. Cedric recovered from this stunned silence, shot past Monk, never noticed Hubert, took two steps across the porch, by-passed the front steps, leaped into the yard and ran to the car. Hubert kept smiling. Monk turned and ran to their car where Fred was waiting. Hubert was still on the porch – still smiling. Several others present had now spilled out onto the porch.

Cedric started the car, came out of the yard in a circle, with wheels spinning and throwing dirt and gravel against the other cars parked there and all the way on to the front porch where the spectators were all standing. Hubert was still smiling. Cedric skidded slightly sideways as he entered the road from the driveway.

In the meantime, Monk had made it to their car. "Get this thing started Fred, we got to catch him before he gets to Snellville or we'll never catch him". The car was slow to start, but finally did. In an effort to catch up, Fred gunned it, also throwing dirt and gravel, and almost lost control as they turned skidding and fishtailing into the main road.

By then Cedric was about a quarter-mile up the road, stirring up a lot of dust, since it was very dry. "Get on it, get on it", Monk said. "I can't see for the dust", Fred said. Cedric had "left them in his dust", as the old saying goes. On they came past the old school house, the Baptist church, the Methodist church, the new consolidated school, the Snell's home, the oak grove, past Peter's Service Station, Mr. Walt Rawlin's store and Sawyer's old store. Here he entered the paved segment of the Atlanta highway (now US 78). Monk and Fred, try as they might, was way back. They had not caught Cedric before he got to Snellville, and on the pavement he was gaining speed and leaving them further behind. On he went past the Tom Snell homeplace, past the Grizzard's, and to the turn-off at the old Lanier homeplace (now McGee road). He bounced and skidded slightly as he turned right off the pavement onto the dirt road again. "He is gonna beat us home sure as shootin", Monk said. On past the Phillips, the Cofer's, skidded in the sand-bed as he entered the curve, past the Moon house, and now home was in sight.

He was expecting to see lantern lights, neighbors, a lot of cars and maybe the sheriff. Not a lantern light was to be seen, complete darkness, as he turned into the driveway. No cars in the yard, what's going on? He pulled to the usual parking place in the back yard and stopped. He sat there for a minute and sighed.

A car was driving by very slowly. Cedric didn't think much about who it might be. His thoughts were on what had just happened. "What are we going to do Monk", Fred asked, "are we going to turn around and tell him tonight"? "Nah", Monk said, "he knows it wasn't so by now". I'll think of something to tell him before I see him. Let's go back to Peter's Service Station and get a little coke to mix with this. Then we'll go get Hubert after while. He'll be "mad as all get out" if we don't come pick him up".

Hollis got out of the car and started into the house. Well, he thought, those Moon boys have done it to me again. "Is that you Hollis", Mama asked? "Yeah, it's me", Hollis said. "What did jaw'll do tonight", Mama asked? "Nothing", he said, as he dropped his pants on a chair, "Nothing at all".

By Thomas H. (Pap) Ewing

(My embellished version of a story told to me two or three times)

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Post script:

Of all the places I mentioned that they pass on the way home, only one of the houses is still standing. Although there is a Snellville Baptist and Methodist church, they bear no resemblance to the churches of that time. All the stores and both schools are gone. They were all perceived to be in the way of progress.