

1900 words

## COON CREEK DAYS

by Lyle Owen

Coon Creek empties into the White River, which is expanded into Lake Taneycomo up and downstream from Branson. The creek enters the lake on the side of the lake opposite to this town.

In my high school days, in the early 1920s, our family lived in a small house (one room at first, two finally) a couple hundred yards up Coon Creek. This creek is a small one, and floats a boat only where lake water is backed up its mouth to about where we lived.

Our trips to town were often by walking, and I carried out a 50 pound sack of flour for Mother's bread baking a good many times. And how good that bread was! Pies and cakes and cookies too, all hot and aromatic from the oven. These were baked in a wood-burning range; it took some work wood cutting to keep its maw satisfied, but the range served as a house heater too, and maintained a hot water supply in its reservoir.

One wonderful cake Mother baked was with black walnuts throughout, a white icing on top and with some lemon flavor too. The black walnuts were cracked with a hammer and picked out on rainy days. The hot bread and other baked things coming fragrant-fresh from the oven made the nostrils dilate and the taste buds dance. One of my favorite cakes (and knowing this Mother made it for my birthdays) was a chocolate-banana layer cake: sliced bananas and chocolate in between the layers, chocolate icing flooding the top.

This all sounds fattening, even artery clogging and heart disabling in these latter days. But we worked and walked so much we all were lean. My father died at 95 and Mother is approaching 92, so perhaps the diet did not do us in.

Sometimes our trip into Branson was by rowboat, down the creek and angling across the lake, especially when there was a heavier load to be carried like a sack of feed for the cow or chickens. Even then there was shoulder carrying of the sack from the Farmers Exchange in town down to the lake, and then, after rowing back upstream across the water, more work lugging the load from our Coon Creek boat landing up the hill to our barn or house. Usually these sacks weighed a hundred pounds, heavy enough to temporarily curve an otherwise straight but slender 135-pounder, but occasionally I carried over by boat and my back a 4-bushel bag of oats, weighing 128 pounds, and found that somewhat staggering. I fancied myself getting shorter and squatter as the bag on my shoulder crushed me toward that faraway center of the earth that all weights love.

In addition to these whole oats brought out from town as one of our livestock feeds for the mules and other critters, we bought rolled oats in hundred pound bags for the man and boy critters and also for some animal use. Little boughten boxes of rolled oats were too small and expensive for all the eating that went on up Coon Creek, what with three growing and ravenous boys, not to mention Father, and Mother too -- and baby chicks and the dogs and the goldfish. Dad used to eat his oatmeal with a tablespoon, thinking smaller tableware a waste of time, though Mother thought this somewhat inelegant and reproved him from time to time for not using a teaspoon as more arrived people did. She was always trying to civilize us. But these arguments of tradition or elegance did not noticeably move him.

We had other reasons for buying rolled oats by the hundred pound bag, for we used it, dry, as a starter food for baby chicks. Mother also sprinkled the dry rolled oats on the surface of her large outdoor water lily pool, fed from a spring by the house, to feed the numerous goldfish there. The fish rose, dozens and dozens of them, happily to get the floating flakes. The golden fish, some quite large, between the water lily pads and blossoms, made a pretty sight. Mother had as many as 25 blossoms at a time there. She loved flowers, and watched over them and worked for them like her children.

Mother also cooked oatmeal by the washpan full for the hounds, the greediest gulpers of tasty oatmeal that our family ever saw. I used to wonder if the dogs ever tasted it, so fast did the great globs go past their tasting place.

Most often our trips to Branson were by walking, as when going to school there and for many errands. From our house there was a rough rocky trail to Seven Falls, then the way continued by the public road carved into the base of the bluff called Mount Branson. This bluff overhangs the lake on the side opposite from town, and the road at its base led to the east end of an old iron bridge with plank floor that led us across the water and into Branson. The bridge is now long gone, carried away by floods and replaced by a large concrete highway bridge a half mile farther upstream.

The heavy plank floor of the bridge used to rattle and resound, as did the board flooring of a smaller and similar bridge then across the mouth of Coon Creek. These boards were long and strong but somewhat loose, and sounds of crossing traffic, especially an iron-tired wagon or a galloping horse, echoed up and down the valley. Many a night, sometimes from my bed,

I heard the loud and rapid hoofbeats of running horses on those bridges, the plank floors acting as amplifiers. Sometimes there were laughter and shouts and gunfire, as well as the hoofbeats on the boards, as some young fellows, full of oats and hormones and maybe something else, hurried somewhere shouting their conviction that it was good to be alive.

It was by the road at the base of the bluff, and then the iron bridge and on up the hill in town, that we walked to school. One has faraway, sometimes sweet memories, of these days of his teens. Sometimes I walked to school without my brothers, and as I approached the bridge from the south I watched eagerly and hopefully the road on past there to the north. For that way lived a maiden, sixteen and lovely, who had caught my eye and twinged my heart. I was very shy and only a worshiper from afar and never had a date with her. But if I was lucky I got to the bridge when she did and we walked across and on up to school together. I knew the color of her red coat a long way off, and altered my pace to get to the bridge right if our distances were unequal.

In the decades later one remembers these things with a little smile, partly of amusement and partly of regret. One of the wise Greeks of long ago, Euripides the playwright, said that if we could be young twice and old twice we could correct all of our mistakes. Dear girl, 'tis more than forty years since then, and since I saw her last. Is she gone? Is she still here in this world (she and her family moved away), but a shrew instead of the dream I remember? Is there about her still something tender and pretty, or was I wrong even then, misled by youth and hormones?

At the Branson High School there were 2-year graduates and 3-year graduates before my time, but it was not until the 1922-1923 school year

that this became a 4-year high school. Before that year Taney County young folks who wanted to finish a full high school went to Forsyth (public) or the School of the Ozarks (private) to finish the fourth year, or occasionally they went to live outside the county while finishing. But Branson at last got a third high school teacher for the year mentioned, three being required for a 4-year high school. The new one was R. L. French, and he was also the school superintendent as well as a teacher.

Also for that year a new one-story white cut-stone schoolhouse was built for the high school, its first separate building. Left standing nearby as a grade school was the two-story red brick building which the year before had been grade school below, high school upstairs. We were the first seniors, the 11 of us who graduated in May 1923, to occupy that stone building, and I have a picture of the class, ~~all 11 of us with the~~

~~3 teachers,~~ on the steps of that school. *Also I have a fancier one taken in the yard nearby. It is hand tinted by the photographer and includes the 3 teachers as well as the 11 seniors.*  
Both those buildings, the red brick one and the stone one, are gone.

When the stone school was torn down ten years ago, after more than a third of a century housing eager and uneager learners, I salvaged one of the cut stones as memory laden, and have it against a tree as a little seat in the front yard of my present country place on a high bluff west of Branson.

We graduating seniors had caps and gowns for commencement, the first time used there apparently, and our rent must have paid for the gowns for several days. Anyway I remember walking to school in the medieval flowing outfit on a May morning before commencement day, from Coon Creek in the country and along the bluff road, and clear through town to the schoolhouse on the hill. I guess I thought I'd paid the rent and might as well get my money's worth. Or maybe the seniors had agreed to come to school that

way. The gown of course was a new sight to some. Near the Seven Falls bend in the bluff road I met a farmer I knew, and he looked me over in the robe and exclaimed "Lyle, I didn't know you had turned Catholic!" He really thought I had abandoned our country Protestantism and taken holy orders in the Church of Rome.

The new teacher, Mr. French, or "Professor" French as we somehow called him (him only of the teachers), was a real intellectual, unlike many a teacher who over the years passes across the front of the room. He read, and he read some substantial things; he thought; he had ideas, and he talked with at least some of the students about these things of the mind. He was this year reading William James, long a famous professor of psychology and philosophy at Harvard University, and he invited several of us boys to read James too, outside of any class, and to come to his house one evening a week to discuss with him the classic James work on psychology. Professor French helped the three or four of us get copies of the book for our reading and discussion, and mine is still in my library.

When the time came for the senior class play I was given a very little walk-on part with one or maybe it was two lines to say. I figured then and now that that was because the director and the other seniors estimated that to be about my dramatic capacity, and I had no regrets, only relief, for the smallness of my part. I remember wondering vividly if I would forget even that one line, but I guess I got through it. They let me make a speech at commencement, and that was more than enough consolation though I really needed none.

Much, much more floods one's memory, but this is enough of old Coon Creek days.