



## Growing Up with Pop Cliff – The Introduction

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Dusk was coming on fast, maybe another 20 minutes of light.

We were working our way back to camp along what was left of an old logging, just a couple of ruts, overgrown with knee-high underbrush. Running along the crest of the mountain, we were close to the tree-line, where the air was too thin for trees to grow tall, so they grew wide, with branches and trunks that were crooked, twisted, and gnarled.

Against a darkening sky, their silhouettes looked just like the cave trolls kids read about in scary books.

But I was carrying a loaded 30-30 Winchester and Pop was only a few yards ahead of me.

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Pop Cliff was born in 1906, and I was born in 1952. That would make him 54 years-old, I was 8, and he ran past me like an 18-year old sprinter bolting from the starting-blocks, the only thing I heard as he went by was a gasp... **Bear!**

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Every kid should have a Pop Cliff. When I think of the ways he affected my life, it's easy to realize how lucky I was to grow up with a Pop Cliff.

I started spending my summers with Pop Cliff, when I was six, right after first-grade. It was like a great adventure. He treated me like a grown-up kid, (he gave me my first rifle, a 22 cal. single shot bolt-action, that first summer), and Mom Grace, doted on me. I could do no wrong in her eyes.

Pop was one of those larger-than-life characters you hear or read about, and count yourself lucky if you have one in your life. I don't just mean I saw him that way when I was a kid, looking up to the most "awesomest" grandfather any kid could have, I mean even now, when I look back on some of the memories he gave me over 50 years ago.

In his younger years he was a road salesman for the Hercules Powder Company, selling all kinds of explosive things; gunpowder, dynamite, blasting caps, and other things that blow-up. His territory covered northwestern Virginia, and southeastern West Virginia - lots of mountain roads.

Mom Grace had pictures of him posing beside his company car, a Chrysler; cowboy-booted foot on the driver's side door sill, his Stetson pushed back on his head and his waist-jacket pulled

back to show off the holstered Colt-45 automatic on his hip. It wasn't unusual for him to have a trunk full of *company samples*, as he drove through the mountains and valleys in his territory.

He was a good man that would help you in any way you needed if he could. He had a personal code of honor that you could trust, and his word and handshake were as good as any legal contract. He expected yours to be the same. He was a hard-working independent guy that quickly let you know if you were a friend or a son-of-a-bitch. The only in-between was family.

He was also a notorious practical joker. And I don't mean the handshake-buzzer kind. I mean the kind that would throw a snake on you and then fall down laughing at your antics to separate yourself from said snake.

Some of his pranks were planned ahead of time, but most were spur of the moment impulses that he couldn't resist, like the snake.

He moved his family to Maryland's Eastern Shore sometime in the late 1940's and became an independent contractor. Bulldozers - one old TD14 cable-blade, and another TD14 hydraulic-blade. These were big machines. Not as big as the huge Cat-9's, but big enough to clear forested land, which was how he made his living now.

He still had the Colt, but it had to stay under the front seat now instead of on his hip. He also brought his Virginia mountain's personality, which could, at times, give the flatlanders of the Eastern Shore cause for consternation. Quite a bit of it if you happened to fit into his "son-of-a-bitch" category.

There are a lot of land developments in the Ocean City – Berlin – Deal Island, and Georgetown areas that were first cleared by one of his dozers, and a lot of waterfront lots that owe their nice shorelines to his fill work.

He wasn't a big man, but he was strong. One of my most impressive memories of him was when he cut a 12-foot section from a 10 or 12 inch diameter tree, and hoisted it on his shoulder to carry over to his "stuck" dozer. When you're clearing low-land forest, even a tracked dozer can get stuck - deeply stuck. He would use logs like this, cabled to the dozer tracks, to back-peddle out of whatever hole it was in.

To a young boy, a man like this was awe-inspiring. That he gave me my first rifle, taught me how to shoot, took me on the job with him, (I rode on the dozers crunched into the seat beside him), and treated me like a big kid only added to my hero worship. Yep, life was good with Pop Cliff.

Anyway, back to the bear ...

I was eight years old, it was cold November, and Pop had taken me out of school for a week-long bear hunting trip in the mountains, my first camping trip. (5 more were to follow, each year until I was 13) This was the close of our first day of hunting and I was feeling on top of the world;

carrying my own loaded rifle, (just like the adults), and hunting bear with my grandfather. Could life for an eight year-old boy get any better?

Or worse?

I wasn't paying much attention to Pop, I was looking at those grotesque stunted trees - trying to convince myself that they were just trees, and not the monsters they looked like. And trying not to let Pop see that I was scared.

I heard him start to run, and turned just as he pounded past me yelling **Bear!** Looking past him, about 20 yards ahead, was a huge black bear, standing tall on its hind legs, right on the edge of the same trail we were walking.

Gun? What gun?

I don't even remember starting to run, or passing him, but the next thing I know, I'm about 10 or 15 yards ahead of Pop, and still trying to put more distance between me and that bear.

That's when I noticed that he had stopped running, and was bent over like he couldn't get his breath. "Come on!" I yelled, but he still didn't move. "Pop, are you ok?", but he didn't answer. He couldn't. He was laughing too hard.

He knew what that tree-line must have looked like to an eight year-old on a mountain top at dusk. And he knew what that broken, lightning-burnt tree trunk would look like to a kid that wasn't paying attention. Like I said, he never missed a chance for a prank or practical joke. And everyone was fair game. Especially an already scared grandson.

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