



## Pop Cliff – The Rifle and Redman’s

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*Author’s Note: this is #3 in the Growing Up With Pop Cliff series.*

“No Pop! Stop!” I pleaded, and he did, until the next time. There was always a next time. For the next eight years I lived on guard for the next time.

But I could usually count on a little “serves you right” satisfaction most evenings, especially Thursday evenings. That’s when Mom Grace and Pop stayed up a little later than usual watching Thursday Night Wrestling.

Every man-of-the-house has his chair, and Pop’s was a fairly large and comfortable wing-back chair, almost right in front of the TV.

Mom Grace always sat on one end of the sofa, which was on the wall behind Pop’s chair, still facing the TV, just not as close as Pop was.

I usually sat in the other wing-back, across the room from Pop. It had a good view of the TV too, but even better, it had a good view of Pop-Pop in his chair.

Pop worked hard all day, most days, so it usually wasn’t long after he sat down that I would hear the beginnings of a snore. More like little snorts really, because he never got the chance to fall asleep enough to get into a really good snoring rhythm. It was those little snorts that would start me grinning and giggling, I knew what was coming next, and it served him right.

First his head would nod forward on his chest – that would rouse him enough to jerk it back up, and then it would loll back against the wing of his chair. Now I could barely contain myself. I knew what always happened next.

Agh!, Erk! Cough! He woke up gagging, making those awful sounds. It serves him right, just a little payback.

You see, Pop did smoke, but mostly he chewed. Redman’s Long-Cut Moist Tobacco to be precise. And he would still have a wad of “chew” in his mouth when he sat down, and after a few minutes the tobacco juice would start dribbling down his throat. Nasty tasting stuff.

It was as predictable as sunset.

First he would nod off, with a wad of chew in his mouth, naturally. Then when he would nod, and jerk his head back against the wing of his chair, that nasty brown juice would build up until it started to dribble down his throat.

It didn't take him long to wake up when that happened!

Mom Grace knew what those brown blotches on my feet were too, so I think that's why she never reminded him to get rid of his chew before sitting down for the evening. I was her darling boy – serves him right.

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It usually wasn't long after his morning cigarette that the pouch of Redman's would come out, and he would have a wad of "chew" in his cheek most of the day.

This meant he had to spit every few minutes, and of course he thought there was nothing in the world funnier than spitting a glob of that gross brown juice between my toes whenever he got half a chance. Anywhere on the foot seemed to count, but between the toes was like scoring a touchdown.

His "spittoons" were also unique. Like his empty coffee cup, or even an astray.

When we were driving, he always used an old fast-food drink cup, just sitting in the middle of the front seat between us. It's amazing he didn't spill them more often than he did.

Since we lived in Salisbury, and most of his jobs were 30 or 40 miles away, we were in the car a lot.

He would use those cups until they were almost spilling over, and then start scanning the side of the road for another big one. He liked those big 20-ouncers.

I was the one that had to get out and get his new spittoon when he spotted one.

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My first rifle...

Pop presented me with an old single-shot 22 cal. rifle one morning, with the words; "Here I think this is about right for you, let's go see if you can shoot it." I don't think my little six year-old feet touched the ground all the way out to the backyard!

He showed me how to carry the rifle safely, always unloaded, with the barrel pointed down to the ground, and never across your chest or on your shoulder like you see on TV.

That's a good way to shoot a buddy if you're not careful. I guess Cheney never got to meet Pop.

He spent a few more minutes telling me how to be a responsible rifle owner – and warning that if he ever saw me doing it wrong he would take the rifle back until I was at least ten. So I better pay attention.

I did. That old 22 cal. was a powerful symbol to me. I was a big kid. I had a gun.

Now it was time to show me how to use it. He set up a few tin cans against the shop wall, about 50 yards away, and pulled out a box of 22 cal. Shorts.

He showed me how to open the bolt to put a shell in, then close it and pull the firing pin ram back to the cocked position. This rifle was so old that working the bolt didn't automatically cock the rifle – like on most guns. It had a little knurled knob on the end of a spring-loaded ram, which would slam into the firing pin when you pulled the trigger.

Then he took aim at one of the cans, sighted, and fired.... Bam! Nothing ... He hit the shop wall about three inches left of the can. Click – he opened the bolt and put another round in the chamber. After he pulled back the ram to cock it, I noticed he took a little longer with his aim this time.

Bam! Again nothing, just another slug in the shop wall, still a couple inches left of the can. Another shot, and another. He finally hit the can, but he had to aim way right of it to do it. So now he takes the bolt completely out and looks down the barrel. He turns it a little left, a little right, then says “come on,” and into the shop we went.

Turns out the barrel was bent. Just a little, “sprung” he called it. Not enough to make the gun dangerous, but enough to make hitting your target pretty tough.

You can't just go bending on rifle barrels willy-nilly, so he went to plan B. He fired up his Acetylene torch, grabbed a brazing rod, and added just a dab of new metal to the front sight. You did know those old rifles were open iron sights, right? No scopes for us. Once his braze cooled he filed it to match the profile of the rest of the sight, and back to the “firing range” we went. Ready to try out our new bronze-tipped front sight.

It took that whole box of shells, and part of another. A few taps here and there on the new front sight between shots, and by mid-morning he had that crooked-barrel 22 cal. shooting as straight as a brand new gun.

My turn. Pop handed me the box of shells, grabbed a bucket to sit on, and turned me loose. It took a little while, but by the time I ran out of bullets I had at least hit a couple of the bigger cans.

This must be what heaven is like.

Pop said we could get more shells tomorrow so I could practice some more, “But first we'll have to do something about that shop wall. I can't work in there with you shooting holes in it” he said.

I didn't think about anything else but that rifle for the rest of the night. I wasn't even going to complain about having to get up so early, at least not this time.

First thing next morning we were off to the hardware store for more shells and some other things he needed. You could buy ammunition just about everywhere except the grocery store back then. Pop bought two more boxes of Shorts and four boxes of 22 Longs. He said the Shorts were fine for target practice at 50 yards or so, but I should be shooting farther than that, and the Longs were more accurate at longer distances than the Shorts.

When we got home he took the cable-blade dozer and drove it around to the back of the lot where his stack of marsh mats was stored. A marsh mat is something a dozer or dredge crane, mostly dredge cranes, use when they have to work on wet marshy ground that won't support the weight of heavy equipment. They lay them down in front of the tracks, and then drive on, sort of like taking your road with you. The mats are usually about four feet wide by ten feet long, and made of four inch-thick by twelve inch wide planks. Heavy stuff.

They have a couple holes augured in each end for a loop of steel cable that is used to lift and place the mats. The only way to handle them was with heavy equipment.

He hooked onto one of the mats and winched it around to lean upright against a couple trees near the back of the shop. Instant firing range! With this set-up I could shoot as far as a couple hundred yards away if I wanted. And if I missed high, the stray rounds would end up in the woods behind the shop where there were plenty of trees, but no people, to catch them.

I practiced with that rifle the rest of the summer. Every day that I went to work with Pop, my rifle went with me, and every night I cleaned it the way Pop showed me.

Sometimes he wasn't clearing wooded land and I couldn't practice, so I just rode in the dozer seat with him while he cleared and graded, but whenever we were on a job in the woods, he would find a safe place for me to shoot, and turn me loose to practice.

He didn't stand over my shoulder the whole time, but I always knew he was watching, because twice he caught me handling the gun "like a kid", and twice I lost it for a whole week. Those were loooong weeks. There never was a third lost week though, I soon became one of the safest six year-old gun owners in town.

And after those first couple weeks I didn't shoot from 50 yards anymore either. I had a regular shooting table set-up at the 100-yard mark, and before long it wasn't safe for a tin can to be anywhere in sight.

Pop said if I kept practicing he would take me squirrel hunting before I had to go back to school. Forget those "Visions of Sugarplums", I had visions of Daniel Boone.

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