



The Man Who Knew Pie Was Round

A Humorous Memoir

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Pop's Lesson in Higher Mathematics

My grandfather Pete was uneducated, but he was a romantic and a philosopher. One of my favorite memories of him is the day when I was doing my homework at the kitchen table, and he and my Dad came in from their daily "magic act." (They would both walk down the street and turn into a bar.)

Anyway, I was doing my Algebra homework, and Pop (that's what we called Pete) asked, "Whacha doin, Jurry." Pete had this rural Arkansas accent. My name is Jerry and he—well, you know.

So I said, "Pop, I'm studying Algebra."

"Why, ain't thayat entrustin'," he drawled. "Say something in that there Algebra, then."

So, being a wise guy, I said, "Okay, Pop, pi r squared."

"Heck, Jurry," said Pop, "Everybody knows that pie are round. And, besides, it's pies, not pie. Otherwise, it just don't make sense in that there grammar rule."

A Philosopher from the WPA Bucket Brigade

While that anecdote is illustrative of neither Pop's romanticism nor his philosophical inclinations, it does point out what a card he was after about three Budweisers. In fact, throw in a shot of Jack Daniel's, and he would wax nostalgic about his days in the WPA camp in Tennessee. Pop loved Franklin D. Roosevelt and was proud of his own personal role in our nation's recovery during the hard times of the Great Depression.

One thing about Pop: he never forgot the details of a story; he only forgot that he had already told it—many, many times. In fact, my grandmother nearly went cross-eyed from rolling her eyes every time Pop launched into one of his favorite tales.

"Yep," he would begin, "I was workin' on that there WPA job in nineteen thirty and six. I believe it was a coast-to-coast bucket brigade designed to even the level of the Atlantic and Pacific. Some people called it a make-work project, but I don't know for sure. All I did was pass that full bucket west to the next guy in line. Besides, we were in western Tennessee. You know, it took nearly two weeks for the empty bucket to get back to us going east. Entrustin', but kinda hard on the back."

The Meaning of Life

"But, you know," he would continue (here's where Grandma would roll her eyes), "that's the meaning of life. We're all replaceable parts on God's eternal bucket brigade. No matter what we do to get out of passing that bucket, eventually our need to eat makes us get in line.

"So, Jurry, keep studying that Algebra. Once you figure out that pies are round, I know you'll grow up smart and be like that WPA foreman—except, maybe, for the fact that a bunch of us got drunk one night and wailed the tar out of that goober."

Hairy Harriet: The One That Got Away

Then, when he thought Grandma wasn't listening, he'd tell his one romantic story about the wistful, lost love of his youth.

"Hairy Harriet," he called her.

"Harriet and me was school friends," he'd begin. (Here's where my Dad would roll his eyes. Dad resembled Grandma in more ways than one.)

"Yep,"—he said "yep" a lot—"I figured me and Harriet would one day hitch up. Strong as a mule, that gal was, and nearly as hairy."

Then, after waiting a bit for someone to ask, "How hairy was she?" he'd answer his own question.

"Harriet was so hairy that when she was born, that there doctor couldn't rightly figure out if'n she were a boy or a gal. She had a tough time growin' up there in the sticks with all that hair. She couldn't keep the possums away to save her soul. She was plumb hirsute."

The Mystery of "Hirsute"

Now where in the world did Pop learn a word like *hirsute*?

"Yep, I read that there term *hirsute* in a Sears Roebuck catalog advertising hair removal—you know, them there depilatory products. It happened to catch my eye just as I was ripping the page out in the outhouse," he'd explain.

(I have often wondered whether the lead content in the print on Sears Roebuck catalog pages might have had something to do with the high incidence of colon cancer among Pop's contemporaries.)

Love, Loss, and Hair Removal Cream

Anyway, here's where Pop's eyes would well up with the sadness of remembering Harriet. He would pause and wait for the inevitable question, without which this oft-told tale could never end.

"What became of Harriet, Pop?"

His answer:

"Well, she ran off with one of those snake-oil salesmen. I never saw her again until the 1950s, when she was on one of those commercials advertising Nair—you know, that hair-removal cream."

One Final Piece of Wisdom

"But, you know," he would say philosophically, "your Grandma is a good woman, though. Plus she has sense enough to know that pies are round."