

Song of the South

You probably don't know about BB guns in Athens, Alabama in 1957. Or bustin' sugar rocks in a sunny field of goober peas in the dead silence of an Alabama

summer. Or shooting cottonmouths off the old iron footbridge in the swamps next to the Valley Gin, which in the Cotton Kingdom didn't mean vodka made unpalatable by the addition of juniper juice.

Well, it's time you knew. You need to know this stuff to be a real American. It ain't treaties and battles that makes an American. No. It's knowing the coppery flight of a BB out of a Daisy Eagle and running barefoot and wild in the Old South when a kid of 11 was still just a kid of 11.

Ask any Southerner. He'll tell you.

Athens was the county seat of Limestone County, and goober peas are what people who don't know any better call "peanuts." Mostly Yankees. They didn't know anything. We all knew that.

A sugar rock was a geode, and Athens was littered with them. So me and Tommy Thompson used to go out in the goober field and find them sugar rocks and bust 'em on the road to see the crystals inside. It was quiet in Athens then, real quiet, and hot. That's how Alabama is. Was, anyways.

In those days, I spoke Southern. The first year I was in Athens, the other kids called me "that Damyank on the corner." I wasn't sure how a Virginia kid was a damn Yankee. Didn't Marse Bob have some little part running the Army of Northern Virginia? All my people were on the right side of that war. But the memory of Sherman lay heavy on these kids who probably had never heard of Sherman.

After a while I learned that words needed a padding of spare syllables to be comfortable and relaxed, and today I hate to see words all short and uncomfortable and stunted.

I remember my mother's horror when she asked Willy Bill Farinner, also 11, if he wanted to lunch with us. "No thank ye, Ma'am, ah has done et already." Well, I don't guess Willy Bill was exactly Milton, but then I don't guess Milton was exactly Willy Bill. Call it a draw.

Anyway, this iron footbridge went over a little creek in the marshes next to the gin. It was rusted, and the creek was full of minners glittering and shining when something chased them. Skeeter

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hawks flitted everywhere, iridescent green and red and looking dangerous. They're sometimes called "devil's darnin' needles" or "snake doctors," but only people of no 'count call them "dragon flies."

So I'd go there alone with my BB gun and lean over the rail and wait. Sooner or later, a cottonmouth, just a little one, would park itself against a rock as a breakwater, and I'd draw a bead, and that would be that. One summer I got 13. We kids could shoot, I'll say that. It was the high point of my life. I peaked early, and it's been downhill since. It was so quiet, and kinda pretty with the bugs and minners and clear water, and not lonely.

You don't need people around all the time. I didn't, leastways.

There was, of course, war. The South has a knack for it. We didn't do duels, not formal ones anyway. If provoked, though, I was capable of yelling, "I'm gonna knock you upside the head, you no-count scandal, knock the far outta you." In what Yankees regard as English, "scandal" means "scoundrel," "far" is what burns things. "No-count" means "of no account." But we regarded the North as a minor current of the language.

Me and this other fool, Jimmy-Jack 'Callister—this was Scots-Irish country, though I didn't know it, and most of us had those chiseled Elvis features—Jimmy-Jack and me used to go to the little ramshackle country store near my house on Pryor Street and steal 12-gauge shotgun shells. I'm not proud of it. I did

it, though. I'd stick one in a roll of toilet paper and buy the roll. I wonder what the people in the store thought was wrong with my family.

We'd cut them off just in front of the wadding and use the birdshot to make match-head spoke-guns. I won't tell you how because someone would do it, blind somebody, and sue me. Back then, we sort of figured if you did something stupid, well, you did it, and had to live with what happened.

And then we'd put the powder and primer part on the end of a BB gun and shoot it off at night, and get a spout of far that went three feet in the air.

It was another country. ■

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