

Trunk Stories

by **Clifford Royal Johns**

When I inherited my paternal grandfather's railroad pocket watch, I worried about actually using it. It meant a great deal to me, so I didn't want to lose or break it. The watch is one of those things I have where touching it, or even just seeing it, reminds me of the person who owned it. For instance, when I bake in my friend Alvina's pan it reminds me of her. My grandfather wound that watch every morning and wore it every day from the time he began working for the P&LE railroad in the early 1930s. It was just part of his way, a way that affected my whole outlook.

When I was a boy in the 1960s, my grandfather would often drive down from Pittsburgh to our dairy farm in southwestern Pennsylvania to spend the weekend, sometimes to hunt, sometimes to fish, and other times just to help with repairs around the farm. I liked his visits because he paid attention to me, even though I was the youngest of four kids, and he seemed to genuinely like teaching me things. In retrospect, it's clear he taught me lessons that were often unrelated to the actual subject at hand, for instance, instructing me about fishing might have really been about the potential payoff of patience, or taking apart an engine and putting it back together might have been about organization and the proper sequence of things—"So you don't have any parts left over when you're done," as he would say.

My grandfather was a short round man who wore bib overalls, a hickory-stripped railroad engineer's cap and often smoked a swooping calabash pipe. Sometimes he would bring a bottle of whisky and sit in the living room stacking shoes from the kid's shoebox on top one of the snoozing English Setters who still liked him anyway.

My memories of childhood are mostly just still photos, snapshots of the tractor parked on the barn bridge, the field of sorghum above the house, or the whelping box we kept in the dining room when one of our setters had puppies. For people important to me though, I retain more of a photographic negative; I remember people by the

shape of the hole in my life they leave behind. My grandfather's watch reminds me of that missing piece, that hole, but I choose to wear it anyway, retaining a piece of the man and his memory close at hand.

Once, when I was eight, my father decided we should have some shooting practice. For this, my father, my two brothers, and I would stand on the back porch and shoot at empty coffee cans set on sawhorses or logs, using the hill just above the house as a backstop. This time, rather than just watching then chuckling when we didn't hit anything, my grandfather decided to shoot at the makeshift targets too. He was a knowledgeable man with a gun, a good hunter, especially of pheasant and grouse, which were plentiful on the farm's back hill. "Come on Skee-zix," he said, "let's go down to my car. I think I'll shoot one of my own guns."

We walked down the hill, me trotting along, and him walking with his sailor's rolling gait, past the smoke bush and the pine tree to his car, which was parked on the gravel-covered barn bridge.

My grandfather drove an enormous, black, Cadillac Fleetwood Sedan Deville with fins, chrome everywhere, and enough trunk space to carry supplies for a three-month arctic expedition. The car was eighteen feet long. When he walked to his car to retrieve something, I always went with him in hopes of seeing what he might have stashed in that cavernous trunk.

He seemed to carry everything a human could want in that trunk, and he organized things so carefully that if he pulled anything out, the shape of the hole clearly identified what had been removed, much like an intricate, French-fit box. In that car's trunk he'd packed boots, a cooler, a folding chair, some shotguns in gun cases, a suitcase full of extra clothes, railroad flares, a glass gallon jug filled with gasoline, a glass gallon jug full of water, an old blanket in case he had to crawl under his car to fix it, enough tools to repair anything from a bicycle to our John Deere 3010 tractor, and various, mysterious boxes and leather cases. That day I found out his trunk also contained an enormous holstered 45-caliber Colt revolver on an elaborately tooled leather belt—the kind with small leather loops to hold individual bullets, just like the gunfighters wore in the movies.

When we returned to the back porch, my father and brothers had brought out the

22, two 16-gauge shotguns and the appropriate bullets and shells. My brothers and I fired off a few rounds, then grandpa showed all three of us some improvements to our technique. Since I was the youngest, I got most of the instruction. Until that day I'd only shot the relatively light 22-caliber rifle, and even that was a bit much for me, I was eight, after all. When my father went inside for something, Grandpa, leaned against the porch's corner post, smiled, took a puff on his pipe, and said, "You want to shoot this?" He drew the 45-caliber revolver and showed it to me.

I said, "Sure," staring in awe, and a bit of fear, at the ancient gun.

When he handed it to me after loading one shell in the cylinder, I suspected it weighed too much. I could barely hold it up, yet I was a boy like any other, and I was determined I could handle it. With both hands, I hoisted it up in line with a blue Maxwell House coffee can. Grandpa cocked it for me. I pulled the trigger.

I don't think the Maxwell House can had much to worry about, but I believe I did hit the side of the hill, though maybe not. My father came running outside, and found me sitting on the porch, the terrific boom still echoing in my ears, my arms akimbo. Grandpa reached down and picked up the gun, holstered it, leaned against the porch post again and took another puff on his pipe while looking down at me. "I think you missed," he said. Then out came that quiet chuckle that made me feel like he was pleased to see me making mistakes, perhaps even proud of it, and perhaps a little proud of how well his somewhat dangerous practical joke cum learning experience had worked. His chuckle was accompanied by a grin, a twinkle in his eye and a knowing nod. He was always willing to stop what he was doing and teach, if I was willing to learn. He seemed to think that I would learn best by making mistakes. I learned a lot.

My grandfather carried his fishing gear in his car trunk too, including the extra rods he kept prepared for me and my brothers. We could go fishing anytime. We went to Lake Somerset and a few pay-lakes in the area, but I preferred just walking down the hill to fish for bluegill in the pond on our farm. I think he liked fishing with us so much because he liked to tell stories, and fishing is mostly sitting, and waiting, and talking a lot. He would tell stories while he caught fish and I stood there holding a rod doing, I swear, the same exact thing he was doing, but somehow not catching anything at all.

“It’s the way you hold your tongue,” he said one day, “and I’m wearing a hat.”

At Lake Somerset on a warm, clear summer evening he said, “I think this is the lake, yep, over there by the dam, just beyond that tree, I once caught a fish that was twenty-eight inches between the eyes.” I figured he was telling one of his embellished fish stories. It wasn’t until later when my father said it was the absolute truth that I started to believe it. Then my father added, “If you measure the distance from one eye, down around the tail and back to the other eye, twenty-eight inches isn’t all that big a fish.” My grandfather didn’t react to my father’s explanation, but he did seem to enjoy my frustration at finding out that the story was the truth and not the truth at the same time.

Once, down at the farm pond, grandpa sitting on his lawn chair fishing and me sitting on the ground holding my fishing rod and watching my unmoving bobber, we saw a ripple speeding across the pond. I said, “I wonder what that could be?”

“That’s a muskrat,” he said.

I stood up, but all I could see was a ripple. I thought it could have been a snake, or a fish swimming close to the surface, or just about anything, but he said it with such calm indifference that I believed him without question.

“How can you tell when it’s a muskrat?” I asked.

He put some tobacco in his low-swung Calabash pipe, tamped it thoughtfully with his thumb, then lit it. He looked at me with that twinkle and grin he’d get when he was about to tell a whopper, and said, “Because it was swimming backwards, and muskrats always swim backwards to keep the water out of their eyes.” He said it as though he was teaching me something important. He said it carefully in between puffs on his pipe, yet his cheeks rose, and his eyes still twinkled, and his chest shook just a little. I knew he had pulled my leg, though at the time I’m not sure I knew which part of his answer was the leg puller. I believe he knew what it was. I suspect it probably was a muskrat.

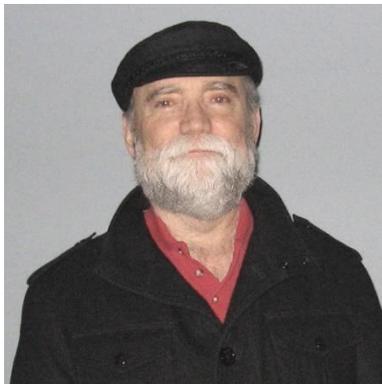
My grandfather always carefully considered what I said. He didn’t answer quickly or offhandedly. At Lake Somerset, he once pulled in the biggest fish I’d ever seen. I told him I thought it was big enough to win a prize. After he put the fish on the stringer, and lit his pipe, he sat down. This time, he pulled off his frayed Sherlock Holmes style fishing hat, which was covered with tied flies he used when fly fishing, then wiped his forehead

with his shirt sleeve. He squinted at me to make sure I was listening. “Well, now,” he said, “I once caught a fish that was so big, that when I pulled it out of the water it took four minutes for the hole in the lake to fill back up.”

Twinkle. Grin.

Many times in my life, I’ve been told by a relative or family friend that I remind them of my grandfather. I like the comparison and consider it a terrific compliment. He had a work-hard-then-relax kind of attitude, and he was a pretty good craftsman in wood and metal. Although I don’t drive a giant black Cadillac with fins and chrome and an improbable trunk, when I pull out of my garage you can almost tell what kind of car I drive by the shape of the hole it leaves. Yet, I doubt my craftsmanship or my car is what my relatives think of when they compare me to my grandfather. I suspect it’s more about other attributes we share, including my sense of humor. Once a neighbor boy watched me plant a Japanese lilac. After the hole was dug, he asked what I planned to do with the dirt piled up beside the new tree. I leaned on my shovel and considered the question carefully. I looked him in the eye. “Well, now,” I said, “I guess I’ll just have to dig another hole and bury it, won’t I?”

My grandfather died when I was thirty. Our farm was long since sold off, and he’d retired and moved to Florida. Still, his departure left a hole in my life, and while holes tend to erode at the edges, the hole he left will never fill. It is by the shape of that hole that I recall the man. I still wear his watch.



Clifford Royal Johns grew up on a dairy farm in Southwestern Pennsylvania. He lives in the Chicago area with his wife and his dog where he writes and builds furniture. He is the author of *Walking Shadow*, a science fiction/mystery novel. His short stories have appeared in *Shimmer*, *Story Station*, *Crossed Genres*, and many other magazines and anthologies. He recently completed his MFA in creative writing at The University of Southern Maine.