

## Kinfolks and Tall Tales

by Brenda Kay Ledford

*Tell me the tales that to me were so dear, Long, long ago, long, long ago.*

—Thomas Haynes Bayly

I grew up in the shadow of Shew Bird Mountain in western North Carolina. Storytelling held a familiar place at our family gatherings.

Every Sunday afternoon my sister, brother, mama, daddy and I would visit my grandparents, Bob & Minnie Ledford. They lived in the Matheson Cove two miles from us. We gathered on their wrap-around porch for stories in the summertime.

My cousins, Jacky, Tommy, and Bobby Matheson often joined us. They brought their musical instruments and entertained. None of them could read music. They just started strumming their guitars until they got the tune. Tommy sang the ballad, “Tom Dooley,” who was hung for killing his lover in Wilkes County, North Carolina. Then Bobby told a story about hunting.

“You know, Granddaddy Bob Ledford loved to go squirrel hunting,” Bobby began with his Southern drawl. “He brought ’em home for Grandma to make dumplings or fry like chicken.

“One day he took Aunt Reba with him. He told her to wait by the oak tree so she wouldn’t scare the game away. Granddaddy gave her a pencil to play with while he hunted. When he came back, Aunt Reba showed him lots of pencils. She had broken the pencil into small pieces.”

Everyone chuckled. Daddy leaned forward in his rocking chair and asked, “Do you remember the Christmas of 1932?” Grandma and Granddaddy nodded their heads. “It was rough back then,” said Grandma.

“Well, it turned out to be the best Christmas I ever had,” affirmed my daddy. “We went to bed Christmas Eve with empty stockings hanging over the fireplace. It looked very bleak for us younguns. There was no money to buy presents during the Great Depression.

“Early Christmas morning baby Ray woke us screaming, ‘Santa Claus came!’ We rushed into the living room and could hardly believe our eyes. He was licking a peppermint candy cane. All our stockings bulged with oranges, apples, hazel nuts and stick candy. My brothers poked their hands into their overall pockets and blushed when Dad asked who brought the goodies.

“Finally, Reuben confessed. He, Robert and Ralph shelled corn on Christmas Eve and traded it for treats at Ed Murray’s country store. As they trudged through the

snow, Reuben fell and spilled the corn. When spring came, cornstalks shot up in the dirt road. So that turned out to be the best Christmas I ever had.”

Grandma smiled at my daddy and agreed she would never forget that Christmas. “I tell you, son, I sure loved to make dried apple stack cakes for Christmas,” she said.

“How did you make them, Grandma?” I asked.

“The stack cake is made with five or six thin layers using a cookie recipe. Dried apples are cooked with a little sugar and cinnamon and spread between the layers. It’s best if you soak the cake a few days.”

“Where did you get the apples?” I asked.

Granddaddy spat tobacco juice across the yard and spoke. He explained that my great-grandfather Dallas Matheson owned three-hundred acres on Shew Bird Mountain and grew an apple orchard above the frost line.

He raised many kinds of apples. The black beauty was deep red. The Ben Davis had light coloring with red streaks and white inside. The other apples included the horse apple, hog sweet, red June, striped June, striped May, pumpkin apple, queen pippin, pound apple and others with no names.

Each fall Granddaddy Ledford, my daddy, and uncles hitched a horse to the sled and went up the mountain. They hauled apples to the house and stored them in the cellar. Granddaddy made long trays with lightweight lumber for drying apples. My grandma peeled and sliced the apples and spread them on the trays to dry in the sun. At night the trays were put on the porch, then placed on the racks the next day.

My mama interjected, “Those were the best apples I ever ate. Do you remember hiking up Shew Bird Mountain when we first got married, Ronda?”

“Yes, I do,” said Daddy. “I wonder if the Devil’s Post Office is still there? It was like a tunnel crawling through the cave. Young people wrote love letters and left them there. They said people could hear the mountain roaring all the way to Hayesville. Some folks said it was a volcano; others thought spooks lived there. You couldn’t pay me enough money to crawl through the Devil’s Post Office now. You know it’s probably full of rattlesnakes.”

“Talking about spooks, do you remember when Granddaddy saw a ghost in Murray Holler?” asked my brother, Harold. “Tell us the story, Granddaddy!”

“Nobody wants to hear that story again,” said Granddaddy. “Do me a favor, Harold. Fetch the wheelbarrow and go to the springhouse. Bring us some ice-cold watermelons. I’ll tell a ghost story after we’ve had a bite to eat.”

“Yes!” yelled Harold. He and Daddy headed across the pasture to the springhouse. When they returned, Granddaddy sliced the watermelons with a butcher knife. He gave everyone a big, juicy piece. My cousins and I held a contest to see who could spit seeds the furthest. Jacky won by an inch.

After we finished eating, the family gathered on the wrap-around porch for more stories. Coral clouds skipped across the skies and the sun pulled its shade behind Shew Bird Mountain. A full thunder moon cast light on the faces of my loved ones. Tommy strummed his guitar and hummed the hymn, “Precious memories, how they linger, how they ever flood my soul . . .”

Granddaddy cleared his throat and spoke in a low, spooky voice. A hoot owl screeched on the ridge and goose bumps ricocheted up my spine. I edged my cane-bottomed chair closer to Mama. She put her arm around my shoulders and whispered in my ear, “Don’t get scared. It’s just a story,” she added with a smile.

“One cold winter night I was walking home,” began Granddaddy. “Sleet tapped on the dirt road. I came to the Murray Holler and heard a horse trotting toward me.

Fog hugged Hyatt Mill Creek and I couldn't see the rider. I rushed toward the horse to get a ride home. By this time, it was snowing to beat the band. I spied a ghostly figure on the horse. His cape whipped the wind."

Granddaddy leaned forward and spread his hands like a turkey buzzard. He spat tobacco juice over the banister and wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. His eyes darted from person to person. He scraped his chair on the porch and I jumped.

"The horse came closer," continued Granddaddy. "It snorted and I could feel its breath. The rider threw out his arms like he was trying to grab me. Snow covered his cape. I screamed and tore out of there. I didn't stop running until I fell breathless on the front porch of our house."

"Well, it's time to go," said Daddy and stood up. "You all come see us," he added and waved at everyone.

Grandma hugged us and gave Mama a jug of ice-cold buttermilk to take home. Daddy picked me up and carried me to the car. Lightning bugs flashed like lanterns in the tops of pine trees. I felt safe in my daddy's arms after Granddaddy's spooky story.

I'll never forget that afternoon on Granddaddy Bob and Grandma Minnie's wrap-around porch. The stories my kinfolks told long, long ago will always remain in my childhood memories.