
Uncle Oren And Other Yarns

James Ray

TC2, Gold Canyon, AZ

Uncle Oren

And Other Yarns

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PROLOGUE

On a hot, dusty July mid-morning the glare from the sun reflecting off the front end of a Lincoln stretch limo as it turned down the main street of West Jefferson cast a sharp, bright streak of light across the hood that would have blinded Stevie Wonder. 'Cept the street was empty—nary a soul on this sweltering summer Sunday morning. What was so remarkable about that was there were no other cars in sight, none on the road and none parked along the street of, what was on the night before a bustling, rowdy, typical Saturday night in the only town within twenty-five miles in rural, backwoods, northwestern North Carolina. The New Jersey license plates were barely visible through collected highway dirt and grime—stark reminders of a long, hot summer drive. The black exterior combined with the tinted windows gave the car a surreal, eerie, shimmery appearance, not unlike a distant oasis mirage rising from the desert sands; that is, if anyone had been around to take notice.

Down at the corner of Main and Jefferson, in front of the rundown, ramshackle West Jefferson Hotel sat a forlorn looking, lanky individual reading the Sunday paper. Well, it may have looked like he was reading to the casual observer; actually he held the crumpled paper up rather high, to the brim of his well-worn, dirty sweaty russet felt Fedora hat in an effort to shade the blazing sun. Occasionally, a fly braved the summer heat and buzzed unnoticed overhead. Those who knew Oren doubted that he read anything although he was a virtual font of encyclopedic information throughout the county. One of those rare individuals who knew everything about anything and anyone though he barely eked his way through the local high school curriculum, mainly on the strength of his kinfolk; that is when he deigned to even bother to show up at school. Harboring a lifelong dislike for anything organized, especially organized with rules, Oren avoided school, church, meetings, government and work; especially work.

Tentatively, the long black limo eased up the street, driving so slowly it seemed as though it wasn't even moving, gradually coming to a stop where Oren sat, apparently taking no notice. The car idled for several minutes in place casting a dark shadow across Oren and his newspaper. Still Oren paid no notice. After an excruciating wait, the rear window of the limo rolled partially down emitting a gust of an air-conditioned breeze. The interior of the car was so dark that looking in from the boardwalk through the glare of the sun you could not have made out the person sitting by the window, seeing only a silhouette. Still, Oren apparently paid no notice.

Finally, from the man in the car came a deep hoarse cough, a cough borne from years of heavy unfiltered cigarette and Cuban cigar chain smoking. There came another cough, louder. Still, Oren moved nary a muscle. At last, a deep, rumbling voice came from within the car. "Mister, say mister?"

Still no movement from Oren.

"Yo!" came a shout through the still hot air in a loud roar.

Deliberately, wordlessly Oren lowered the newspaper, carefully folding it along the original creases and fastidiously laid it in a neat pile on the sidewalk beside the beat-up, faded blue and white old lawn chair he was sitting in. He placed an old, weather-worn brick on top of the newspaper to keep it from blowing away in case a rare breeze blew by. After a couple minutes he spit a stream of snuff juice into an old coffee can, reached down and picked up a pint Mason jar and took a long slow swallow, replacing the jar on the boardwalk next to his lounge chair. Oren then slowly stood and looked carefully to his left and then to his right, removed the lucifer from his mouth he used as a toothpick and drawled, "Are you talking to me?"

"Say mister, could you tell me where the Church of God is in this town."

Oren pondered the question for a moment. "Well sir, let's see," pointing up the street, "if you drive up yonder

three blocks, turn left down by the cheese factory as you are headed to the furniture plant on your way out of town to Smythville...no, no, wait, that would be the Presbyterian Church.

"Ah, yeah, if you go back up the street," this time pointing back in the direction from which the limo had come, "go left, up to the top of the hill, then afore you get to Farr Hill it'll be on your right...Oh, wait! Reckon that's the Methodist church."

At this point, Oren stood and scratched his ill shaven chin, thinking and mumbling to himself. After a long moment, he shaded his eyes with a scrawny left hand pointed on up the street and proceeded, "If you drive on up this here road two and a half miles, just past where old man Winfred's barn burned down back in '48, keep your eye on your right hand side of the road and you'll see a small, white-washed building with a steeple of green roof shingles. There's where...wait, whoa hold on. Come to think of it that there's the Episcopal Church!"

Oren studied the cloudless sky for a moment and intoned, "The Catholics here about meet in Mr. Studdard's basement on Sunday morning. I don't reckon you're referring to them there Catholics, though, are you?"

Now Oren's face was drawn up reflecting a confused, thoughtful expression. After an agonizing passage of time, his face brightened up and he beamed, "Reckon God hain't got no church in this here town."

With that having been said, the rear window rolled up, and almost soundlessly the long, black limo slowly pulled out into the street and drove unhurriedly south out of town as Oren stood staring long after it had driven out of sight. Shrugging his shoulders at last he put the lucifer back in his teeth, sat back down in his lawn chair, rummaged through the newspaper until he found the section he was looking for, held it up to shade his eyes and turned back to his reading apparently unconcerned about the heat.

THE CURIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING HIRAM HARDIN'S UNTIMELY DEMISE

I was sitting on the porch at my grandma's farmhouse late one afternoon in the summer of '64, just me and Uncle Oren both of us mostly lost in our own thoughts as was customary. At the time I thought Uncle Oren must be close to a hundred years old but I reckon the truth of the matter was that he more like in his early eighties; perhaps, closer to his seventies—at any rate, old especially so to a young teenager. Uncle Oren sat in a rocking chair with an old coffee can for spitting his snuff juice. Occasionally he'd fire up one of his hand-rolled cigarettes packed with Bull Durham tobacco from a cloth, string-tied bag. At thirteen I was too young to smoke; leastways, that's what my ma kept telling me. Someday I'm going to roll my own cigarettes, just like Uncle Oren I promised to myself. I never did. I couldn't get past the coughing and hacking brought about by the course, rough tobacco smoke. I came to admire folks with the fortitude to be able to smoke those cigarettes—especially the unfiltered ones like my grandma who smoked Lucky Strikes until the day she died of lung cancer. When they quit selling Lucky Strikes without the filter, she would buy the filtered Luckies, break off the filter and smoke them *natural, unfettered* as she liked to say.

We'd moved down to Ashe County, North Carolina from the Detroit, Michigan area last year. I stayed at my grandma's house (actually, the place belonged to Aunt Gertrude) and worked on the farm. My brothers took turns staying with me. The rest of the family, including the other five children was domiciled in an eight hundred square foot bungalow located about a mile up Buck Mountain Road. In addition to milking the cows and feeding the hogs twice a day, during the summer we had additional chores working in the garden, chopping thistles in the field, repairing fences, baling hay, cleaning out the barn and sheds, you name it—my grandma was never at a loss of

providing us with chores to do. She used to quote from scripture, “An idle mind is the devil’s playground,” and she was determined to make sure the devil spent no time with us—though in truth I never saw her shadow cross the doorway of any church come to think of it.

Uncle Oren was my favorite of all the people in the world. He was laid back, content with his tobacco and liquor, gently swaying to and fro in his rocking chair on the porch. My ma thought he was nothing but a no-account drunk—and said so often enough. That didn’t deter me in the least, not one little bit. The stories he would tell! That’s how I got my education of the history of North Carolina and insight into the world in general, though when I got to school the teachers were hell-bent on imparting a different version of the events. I got into several, sometimes heated discussions over the matter with them, but I never wavered in my faith in Uncle Oren’s recounting; I mean, he *lived* through it which is a lot more reliable than reading something out of a book. A book no doubt published some where’s up north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

He’d been quiet for quite a spell. “How are you doing, Uncle Oren?” I finally asked in a teenage boy’s impatience.

“I’m dry.”

I looked over and realized that his mason jar was empty. “You want me to fetch you another jar from the granary?” Long ago I spied my old man stashing Uncle Oren’s supply of moonshine in the granary one evening, hiding it out of sight from the prying eyes of grandma and my mother. When I went to check on it the next day to satisfy my curiosity, when nobody was around, I found his cache of liquor hidden on the top shelf in the back corner. The granary was a treasure trove of old tools and equipment, lots of stuff accumulated through the generations of farming. There was an old saddle and harnessing gear collecting dust that I used to ride astride an old sawhorse, imagining myself as a cowboy back in the old west.

“See if you can find me a taste of that Tennessee Sour Mash and I’ll tell you the true events surrounding the unfortunate demise of my cousin, Hiram Hardin.”

At the thought of learning another fragment of family history, I quickly jumped up snatched the empty mason jar and bounded off the porch. “Yes sir, Uncle Oren. I’ll be right back.”

After digging around in the back of the granary I found a fifth of George Dickel. I filled the pint Mason jar, and replaced the bottle of George Dickel back where I found it. I recapped the Mason jar and raced back to the porch eager to learn another slice of history.

“Here you go Uncle Oren, I found some George Dickel for you.”

Uncle Oren took a long draught from the jar, recapped it and set it back down on the porch beside his rocking chair. “Thank you, sir. That is some mighty fine sour mash.” He always called me sir; made me feel all grown up.

After we sat a spell in silence, Uncle Oren started up his story and this is how he told it, near as I can recall.

Cousin Hiram, he was my daddy’s brother, George’s oldest son you see. He was a might peculiar; a mystery to the rest of the family. Hiram was four years older than me and I followed him around like a shadow when I was a boy. We were inseparable. I learned all about life following Hiram around; observing all that he did and I listened and retained everything that he ever said. He taught me how to fish the creek for trout; how to track and hunt rabbits in the winter; how to read the sign. He showed me how to sit quietly in the woods and observe nature. He taught me all the things you can’t learn in school—which I gave up on at an early age.

When I got a little older he showed me the proper way to roll your own smoke without spilling any of the tobacco; he showed me the proper way to dip snuff and drink from a mason jar. Yes sir, he taught me all the

important things in life. Hiram had no use for school. Said he was a sight smarter than that school Marm and he didn't have no time for her brand of foolishness.

Well sir, in the spring of '98 (that was the year your grandma was born) the talk around town was overshadowed by events happening in Cuba and the eventual declaration of war between the United States and Spain. The way Hiram figured it, people were getting a might itchy, wanting to prove themselves after the disaster brought about by the War of Northern Aggression. Not only that, it's been over 30 years since there had been any fighting (unless one considers the Indian *problem* out west) and we know how Americans live to fight. By early summer the buzz was all about Teddy Roosevelt and the 1st Calvary Brigade which soon became known as *Roosevelt's Rough Riders*.

One day in June Hiram spotted a story in the newspaper out of Winston Salem telling how the Rough Riders were being transported from San Antonio, Texas to Tampa, Florida in preparation for the invasion of Cuba. Hiram announced to the family that he was heading to Tampa to join up with the *Rough Riders* in their upcoming adventure in Cuba. The family collectively tried to talk Hiram out of his foolishness, but he'd made up his mind. Admonishing me to be strong and look out after the young'uns, Hiram left for Florida.

We didn't hear a word from Hiram all summer. Then along about toward the end of October one Saturday afternoon here comes Hiram walking up the road to our farmhouse strutting like a peacock on the trail of a hen. I had just finished putting the last of the potatoes in the cellar when I heard Hiram call out to me. I dropped what I was doing and ran up to meet him. He gave me a big bear hug and I stood back to admire him. Hiram was dressed out in the uniform of the 1st Calvary.

After supper we were sitting on the porch and Hiram spent the next couple of hours regaling us with stories of his adventures with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough

Riders. It seems that when he got down to Tampa Hiram convinced Lieutenant John Henry Parker to let him join his newly formed Gatling Gun Detachment as an unofficial aide de camp. He served as Lieutenant Parker's gofer and did everything from delivering messages; finding and fetching whatever the lieutenant needed in terms of supplies and material. He soon became an invaluable member of Lieutenant Parker's staff through his resourcefulness and ingenuity.

When they landed at Daiquiri in Cuba, Hiram with the help of his new friend, Owen was able to arrange the purchase of several mules that Lieutenant Parker needed to transport his four Gatling Guns. They were ordered to the forward position with three of the four Gatling Guns to cover the assaults on both the San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill that the Americans were preparing. I sat in rapt attention listening to Hiram recount the battle and the now famous charge up San Juan Hill by *Roosevelt's Rough Riders* and the Spanish counterattack. Later they were deployed to take part in the siege of Santiago.

After the Spanish forces in Santiago surrendered, the Spanish government agreed to an armistice with the United States in August and relinquished control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. In mid-August, Hiram along with *Roosevelt's Rough Riders* landed at Montauk Point in Long Island, New York. They spent the next month in celebration of the victory before being disbanded on September 15th.

It took Hiram the better part of a month to work his way from New York to his home in North Carolina, where he finally arrived sometime after mid-October, regaling us with his many exploits on his way south.

I was completely enthralled by Hiram's retelling of his adventures. He'd become a larger-than-life hero in my eyes. I could close my eyes and easily visualize Hiram charging up San Juan Hill.

Uncle Oren paused and sat there for a long time with a far away, misty look in his eyes. I sat there

spellbound, saying nothing to shatter the moment. Finally Uncle Oren reached down and picked up his mason jar and took a long slow, swallow of his sour mash. He then took out the fixings and rolled himself a fresh smoke.

Hiram was a man now. He'd crossed that bridge from adolescence to manhood. When the word got around Hiram became a hero in the county. He couldn't go anywhere without people stopping him and begging him to recount again his tale of the Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders charge up San Juan Hill which had become a national myth and part of the American folklore.

On April 1st, 1899 the Treaty of Peace with Spain was signed by the United States. Hiram was down in Alabama seeing his friend Owen who he'd met during the war. He spent most of the spring in Alabama before returning home in late summer. I was thrilled when he got back and followed him around everywhere he went. Hiram never seemed to mind having me tag along.

On April 1st, 1900 the family was gathered around the homestead after Sunday go-to-meeting for our usual extended family dinner. Your grandma was two at the time, the youngest of the clan. There must have been forty or more people there. The weather was unseasonably warm that day and they had set out several tables on the lawn for Sunday dinner. I remember we had Southern fried chicken, potato salad and pinto beans with a choice of several different pies for dessert and of course, sweet tea. It was a most beautiful day.

Afterwards the menfolk were pitching horseshoes, smoking and imbibing from mason jars and swapping lies. Hiram pulled me aside and said he wanted me to help him set up a celebration display he'd learned when he was down in Alabama with Owen. He called it *anvil shooting* which he explained is the practice of firing an anvil into the air with gunpowder. Owen said that they had been doing it in celebration of American Independence down there in Pisgah, Alabama for as long as Owen could remember. When I asked him what in the devil anvil shooting was, he

started giving me a dissertation as we walked over to the granary.

He said they used it during celebrations as a substitute for fireworks, which they couldn't afford. Typically, two anvils are used. One was placed upside down as a base on a hard surface, cement or preferably, a steel plate. Another anvil, which was called the flyer (as in projectile) was placed right-side up atop the base. The space formed by the anvils' concave bases is filled with black powder. A fuse is constructed and stuck out from the two anvils where the black powder is compressed between the two anvils. The fuse is then lit and the resulting deflagration of the powder sends the projectile anvil several feet into the air with an accompanying loud bang. Hiram assured me that when they fired anvils down in Pisgah for the Fourth of July it was a blast.

You see, Hiram went on to explain, the technique depends on the fact that black powder is a low explosive, which burns more rapidly under pressure. Deflagration is a rapid combustion of the powder rather than an explosion which launches the anvil projectile up in the air instead of blowing it up.

It sounds dangerous, I noted.

Of course it's dangerous which makes it all the more fun, Hiram explained.

How much black powder do you use? I wondered.

Usually we can get a pound or so of black powder in the hollow of the base of the anvil. There are approximately seven thousand grains in a pound of powder. Just to give you an idea, there are about thirty grains of powder in a forty-four caliber bullet.

Owen said that the practice of anvil shooting actually dates back to Clement of the first century who was a patron saint of the blacksmiths and farriers. Blacksmiths would celebrate by dressing someone up as "Old Clem" and letting him preside over the merriment. His scepters were tongs and a hammer. Toasts would be made to Old Clem

from as early as dawn. Once sufficiently toasted, the Clem-du-jour would then lead a parade of staggering drunken smiths through town to the town center where they would fire an anvil.

When the failed War of Southern Independence ended the Union Army carried off the field pieces and cannons that the Confederate Army had used with such murderous effect at places like Shiloh and Chickamauga. The subsequent lack of cannons left the South without the usual means of making noise to celebrate the Fourth of July. Before the Civil War, field pieces had been used at the courthouse squares during militia-sponsored military parades to keep in practice and to celebrate. That all ended in 1865.

After that, the practice of anvil shooting became part of the post-war legacy throughout the Deep South for celebrations that needed noise, the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve for example. The practice of anvil shooting became a Southern tradition and a regular feature at state and county fairs.

And now, today, we are going to celebrate the signing of the Treaty of Peace with Spain with an anvil shoot.

This should be great fun, I managed to say.

We rummaged around in the granary and found a couple of anvils that Hiram said were just perfect for the anvil shoot. They looked to weigh about a hundred pounds apiece. So I fetched a wheel barrow in which to haul them. Hiram also located a steel plate which we could use for a base and a length of angle iron for the fuse. Then Hiram found a black powder bag that he said belonged to his grandpa and cinching that to his belt we hauled our provisions out to the front yard.

We went out to the street and set up our little display. We laid the heavy steel plate on the gravel road and placed one of the anvils upside down on the plate to serve as the base. Hiram took care to make sure that the plate and base anvil were as level as possible. Then he filled

the hollow of the base anvil with black powder from his pouch. We laid an angle iron ramp from the anvil to the ground and Hiram poured a trail of black powder from the anvil to the ground along the angle iron. He placed the second anvil on top to secure the angle iron and compress the black powder. That was the flyer, the projectile anvil, Hiram proudly proclaimed.

Once we had everything in place, we went over to where everybody was gathered around and Hiram explained what we were doing and why—in celebration of the signing of the Peace Treaty to end the Spanish American War. Hiram made me stay back with everybody and he walked out to the anvil display on the street which was about thirty yards away. We all got quiet as he bent over and taking a lucifer from his pocket, he ignited the fuse and stepped back about half way between us and the anvil display.

There was a huge explosion and a great cloud of white smoke! I invariably flinched even though I knew what was coming. The projectile anvil flew up in the air about thirty to forty feet and all our eyes were on the spectacle. Thus distracted, nobody saw what happened to Hiram.

Later we learned that the horn on the projectile anvil became detached from the explosive shock and flew sideways in our direction striking Hiram in the head killing him instantly.

The local blacksmith explained to us what went wrong with Hiram's anvil shoot. First of all, he said that many blacksmiths believe that a forge weld is a strong method to join iron together. Normally it is, but the joint is not as strong as the original metal that makes up the pieces unless the weld is properly made. He went on to explain that a welded joint is usually not as strong as the original material unless it is made of double thickness, forged down into the original thickness of the joined pieces. When anvil feet or a horn were forge-welded to the body of some of these old anvils, the forge welds were only forged without

the benefit of the double thickness taken into account. Those welds were not as sound as the original wrought iron material that went into the body of the anvil. The welds actually represent planes of weakness at the seams of the welds. That is why it is so dangerous to *shoot* some of these old anvils like Hiram tried.

Uncle Oren sat there for a long time in silence. Finally he reached down and picking up his mason jar, took another long draught of his sour mash. He then set the jar back down on the porch. Taking the fixings out of his pocket he rolled himself a smoke and fired it up with a lucifer. Through the drifting smoke I noticed tears in Uncle Oren's eyes. I didn't say a word and kept my thoughts to myself for a change.

"We never shot another anvil, no sir, not for as long as I can recollect," Uncle Oren finally whispered.

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