

WHAT HAPPENED AT SCHOOL LAST WEDNESDAY?

By Robert D. Culp

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I really don't know, honest. I hope Pa doesn't ask. I never got to school last Wednesday. I started out with the best intentions. In fact, the morning began with that old red-ball sun promising a most wonderful day. I shoveled down my bacon and grits like Ma stuffing the kitchen stove. Then I grabbed a huge hunk of cornbread and beat it out the door.

It was still cool. I was earlier than usual. I squinted up at the top of the ridge to see if Cotton was coming. Cotton's my best buddy. We fight and fun around together like two of Flitter's he-pups. Cotton lives just over the ridge. You can't see his house from mine, but you can see the smoke from his chimney.

Man, it was a great morning. I flung acorns at Ma's chickens just to keep busy till Cotton showed up. A holler from the house put a stop to that, so I chased down Flitter and her pups and wrestled them till I heard a whoop from atop the ridge.

"Hey, Rooster," called Cotton, sliding down through the chickweed on his rear. "The pigs are in the orchard. Let's ride them!"

I untangled from the pups and jerked my shoes off. Cotton already had his clodhoppers dangling around his neck. You can count on him to give himself the edge.

"Come on, Rooster," he shouted. "First one off is a wormy peanut."

"Wait up, Cotton. You'll scare them afore I can get on." I draped my shoes over my neck by the laces and caught that cheater at the edge of the orchard. We rolled in the grass a couple of times, and then shushed one another.

The pigs had stopped rooting and were staring at us mighty suspiciously. We'd ridden them often enough that they could almost remember it.

Cotton and I sidled around them. I'd sighted mine, a red one named Long Body. If Cotton ran to form he'd jump on Bobtail.

"Now!" I yelled.

Those pigs squealed and wheeled, but I was flat on Long Body's back sticking on tight as a tick. I looked back and saw Cotton well up on Bobtail.

As usual, those pigs gallumphed down the hill straight for their mudhole beside the crookedy creek. They jounced along like a wagon with square wheels. Hanging on

was no easy job. But the real battle came at the mudhole. The contest was to see who had the nerve to stay on longer. A perfect ride was to unload exactly at the edge of the soup. You couldn't help but get your feet muddy; that's why the shoes had to come off.

Long Body was skinny and fast. That's what I liked about him. We always got to the mudhole first. Of course, that gave Cotton a target to shoot at, if he could hold his head still long enough to see me.

At any rate, this time was no different. I rolled off right at the edge, and lit there on my left foot. Cotton was determined he would beat me. When he landed he was up to his knees in mud. I thought about Cotton sitting through school all day in muddy pants, and I didn't mind his winning so much.

We waded down the creek a ways to wash our feet. It was then I noticed the bees.

"Cotton, did you see that honeybee leave those swampcandles? He flew straight as a bullet. His hive's thataway." I sighted along my finger across the creek.

"You reckon we can find it before school?" asked Cotton. He was already on the other side headed through the woods.

We dodged around the oaks and scooted across the bright meadows. Every time we lost one bee we'd pick out another one. It's easy to tell the ones that are headed home. They fly as straight as you can fling a hickory nut, and twice as fast.

"Listen, Cotton. There's the schoolbell!"

"So?" We're late again. You knew we'd be late when we started so early."

Cotton had me there. Starting early had never got us there early. Listening to that bell scolding us, I heard some whuffing and snorting coming up the hill behind us.

"Cotton, here come Long Body and Bobtail following us."

"Big deal. They're not gonna get our honey."

"All right, smart guy. But you keep an eyeball peeled for Old Lop Ear."

Now that made prickles on the back of his neck. If there was one thing to be scared of in those woods, it wasn't a she-bear with cubs, it wasn't a flat-headed snake, it wasn't a yappy coyote or a yowling bobcat. No sir! There was only one thing that turned us white. It was Old Lop Ear – the meanest, orneriest, ugliest hog in the west half of Arkansas.

"Rooster, are you spoofing me? Do you see Old Lop Ear?"

"If I saw that hog, you wouldn't see me. But Pa said Old Lop Ear was over in these woods, and these pigs act awfully at home here." I watched Long Body and Bobtail snuffling along towards us like couple of dogs.

"Come on, Rooster," said Cotton a little shakily. "We'd better get to school. We'll find that bee tree Saturday."

“Cotton, it can’t be much farther. Let’s spot the tree and mark it. Then we’ll have all day Saturday to get the honey out.” I wasn’t going to miss this chance to show Cotton how much braver I was.

It didn’t last. There was an explosion in the blackberry thicket just ahead. Old Lop Ear came busting out of there with blackberry runners hanging onto his bristles. All I could see were red eyes and yellow tusks. I took one bullfrog leap and landed square on Long Body.

That pig was still oozing mud, but I grabbed hold of both ears. He headed straight back to the mudhole. We ripped through chokecherry tangles and dogwood thickets. We slammed against a big old sweetgum and bounced off a young hickory. My shirt was shredded like cabbage for Ma’s coleslaw.

At the mudhole I put my feet down and let Long Body run out from under. I shinneyed up the post oak that stretched over the mud before I took time to look back. What I saw made me awful glad I’d been partial to the fastest pig.

Cotton was riding Bobtail. That pig was hopping like a toad, with Old Lop Ear chewing at his next-to-nothing tail. They reached the mud and Bobtail and Cotton both disappeared into the deepest part.

Old Lop Ear stopped when the mud reached his belly. I saw Long Body and Bobtail surface and, free of us, wade out of the mud as easy as you please and start gobbling down acorns. Old Lop Ear ignored them and glared at the mud. I kept still.

In a minute I saw a bump in the center of the mudhole. There one blue eye popped open, then a second. Old Lop Ear snorted, but didn’t seem inclined to go in after Cotton.

The sun climbed higher and higher. The mud on my front turned to concrete. That cussed hog flopped down in the shade of some sumac at the edge of the woods.

“Cotton. You all right?” Soon as I said it, up popped Old Lop Ear’s head. All I could see of Cotton was the dried mudball sticking up out of the mudhole, with holes for his eyes and nose and mouth. He didn’t dare answer.

It was late in the afternoon before Old Lop Ear really went to sleep. Cotton slipped out of the mudhole and into the creek beside it.

“Cotton, where you going?” I didn’t want to be left treed like that.

“This way, Rooster,” he whispered. “We’ll sneak up the creek to your house.”

I was panicked. Cotton disappeared up the creek. There was only one way out for me. I took a deep breath and dropped. I made a funny plop when I hit the mud. I went clear under, but that was lucky. When I stuck up my head and eased one eyeball open, there as Old Lop Ear glaring around to see what had disturbed his nap.

As soon as he was down again I squirmed up the side of the mudhole and down into the creek like a slippery salamander.

I caught up with Cotton at the third bend. We scrubbed at the mud and dipped into the deeper holes all the way up to where we could see the house. We washed and washed till long after the schoolbell said it was four o'clock, but it wasn't any use. We'd probably be brown the rest of our lives.

We made up a story about how an old she-bear had attacked the schoolhouse and we'd fought and wrestled that bear clear across the schoolyard and into the creek and saved the teacher and all the other kids.

Then Cotton headed over the ridge to his house, looking like a wornout muskrat. I wandered up through the garden sort of scared to reach the kitchen door.

I never got a chance to use our story. Pa caught me coming past the barn. He just grinned.

"Hi, Rooster. You've got mud in your ear." Then he pumped while I stuck my head under the heavy stream of cold, clean water. When we went in to supper, Pa winked at Ma and nothing more was said.