

Tom Remembers Trip To Lake James



My father wrote...

A few of us boys had been talking about going up to the lake in a covered wagon. The lake was 40 miles away. One of the boy's father was a rural mail carrier. He said he could get us two to three small tents from the National Guard that probably would sleep four to five boys. Worth said his dad would let him take their covered wagon and a team of big grey mules. Big Issac said we could take our covered wagon and a team of mules, Joe and Maude.

We decided to meet up at the big rock swimming hole the next morning. Well, 20 boys, 14 to 18 years old showed up. They were a foul mouthed bunch. There was no way that I was going to put up with that for two weeks. It would drive you nuts. I hate a foul mouth and I never had to listen to that kind of language at home. So, after we had our swim, Worth and me got together and I told Worth I would come up to his house and we would talk it over for we wanted to go very much.

The next morning I put the saddle on Charlie. He was young horse, a pacer and very well trained. I had already had him in the swimming hole and he was not afraid of the water. He started to swimming just like a dog. In fact, he seemed to like the water better than our other horse Big Red. Charlie was a thoroughbred. He was a little harder to ride than Big Red was. I found that out the hard way.

I was riding Charlie down the road one day and we came to a fork. Charlie was traveling very fast. I was going to take the left fork, but Charlie had other ideas. I ended up around his front legs, but he stopped dead in his tracks and never moved until I could get up. No harm done - maybe I was just a little embarrassed.

When I got to Worth's home, he and his mother had just finished making a gallon of homemade peach ice cream. Oh boy, was it good! As we were eating, we talked to Worth's mother about going to the lake and she said personally she would not want us to

take any of those older boys, to choose the boys that we would enjoy spending two weeks with - all about our age - then take Big Jim with us to look out for all of us for she would trust Big Jim and he was a good swimmer, and for us not to take any boy that was not a good swimmer.

We gave our list to Worth's mother and she said she would write out copies telling each mother what clothes and food to get ready and the morning that we would start and for them all to come to my home early that morning, for I lived almost in the center of all the boys' homes. She said she would have Worth's father put the tents in his covered wagon, and she would tell each mother how much money that Worth and me would have, and we would start the trip next Tuesday morning.

Worth said his dad would put enough feed into his wagon for his mules and a tin tub for them to drink water from. Big Issac said he would do the same for his team. Worth said his father would also contact a man he knew real well that lived next to a big rock church about half way to the lake on the left side of the road and he would let us spend the night on his property and we could get water from his well for ourselves and the mules. We could rent a place at the lake to camp on and also get water. Big Issac figured the mules would walk about two and one-half miles per hour.

We left my home at 6:30 A.M. and stopped at 10:00 A.M. for 30 minutes to water the mules at some farmer's home. We paid him for his trouble. We stopped again at 1:00 P.M. for lunch, again at some farmer's home, and started after lunch at 2:00 P.M., and stopped again at 4:00 P.M. to water the mules again. We got to the rock church at 6:30 P.M. We traveled approximately 22 miles the first day. Everything was looking mighty good.

We stopped our wagons between the church and the house next door and Worth's father's friend came out and talked to all of us boys. He was a very nice man - easy to talk to with a grin most all the time while he was introducing himself.

When he came to Worth he said, "You must be Forrest's boy."

Worth said, "Yes sir, and my father said to give you his best regards."

Worth and his father certainly did look alike.

Mr. Ellis said for us to just call him Frank and he showed us where to put the wagons and where to take the mules and let them drink out of his water trough. He also showed us where to tie our mules up to feed them. The mules had a head harness on or a bridle, which had a bit that went into the mule's mouth. Also, there was another head harness under the first one called a halter. The halter had no bit so we would take the first bridle off that had the bit on it and tie the mule up from the halter so he could eat and sleep.

Mr. Frank showed us where we could set up our tents and where we could build a fire if we wanted to cook anything. We had a small stove that burned wood. We had wood and

some small kindling to start the fire with on our wagon. We decided not to build a fire that evening but to wait and build one the next morning and cook some scrambled eggs and some of our canned sausage and warm up some of the biscuits that our mothers' had sent with our food and make a pot of coffee. Worth and me walked over to Mr. Frank's home and met his wife. We asked her if she had any milk we could buy and she let us have two gallons for 75 cents.

With all the help from Big Jim and his ability to get things so well organized, by sundown we were ready to play or just sit down and talk and relax. Big Jim was quite a story teller. He told his story of the haunted lady in the graveyard because we were going to sleep about 100 feet from the graveyard. Just about the time we were getting settled down from Big Jim's hair raising story, Mr. Frank came over and gave his version of the haunted lady in the graveyard and his story topped Big Jim's by far. By then I think we all had enough of the haunted lady in the graveyard. In fact, I don't think some of the guys slept very good. But for one, I know I went to sleep and the next think I knew Big Jim was feeding the mules and building a fire in the wood stove getting ready for breakfast. Big Jim cooked breakfast while I got everyone up and he was quite a cook! Big Jim said he wanted us to get to the lake rather early so we could get us a place to camp and get everything set up before night. Big Jim and I drove our team and wagon and Worth drove his.

Believe me, everybody was so happy and relieved that Big Jim was running the show, including myself. Most all the people were just a little shocked or amazed that a black man, or a nigger man, would be looking out and taking care of a group of white boys but Big Jim and me were used to that. At one of the farm homes we stopped at, as I introduced myself, I also introduced Big Jim and I think the man was very much embarrassed. He didn't seem to know what to do, but Big Jim handled everything very easily. He did not offer to shake hands with the man. He gave the man a big smile and said, "I am so glad to know you, sir."

We got to the lake okay and found our campsite and we had everything set up before it became dark. We had lots of fun talking and walking around the lakeshore. We found a sandy beach where we could go swimming and a place where we could buy things at a little store and also could rent a small boat for four, but just two oars, and a place where we could buy fish bait. We all had fishing poles and fish hooks.

Then we all went back to our camp and Big Jim said we must set up some camp rules. He and three boys would feed and water the mules. Two boys would build a fire in the stove, and he would take one boy and cook breakfast. Two boys would wash dishes and two more boys would clean up and he would rotate the boys each day. He said he thought we should do things in groups of four for safety - like going swimming, boating, fishing, or just exploring, and no horseplay or horsing around. Big Jim was quite a father to Worth and me - he had asked us to help him set up the camp rules and also help enforce them.

The next morning, I woke up early so I helped Big Jim water and feed the mules. I told him after breakfast that I was going to walk up and see the man that rented the boats and

ask him if we could rent a boat and buy some fish bait and row up the lake and find a place where you could fish while I made some long swims. I wanted to see about how long I could swim before I got too tired, for I wanted to get to where I could swim at least one mile before I went in the Navy.

Big Jim said, “Tom, you sure you are going into the Navy?”

“Yes, some of these days - for that’s the only way I will ever get to see the world. Just don’t say anything to Big Issac or Mother Jane about it.”

Then I said, “I want to talk to the man that rents the boats. I don’t know if he will let you and me rent a boat. I didn’t like the way he talked to me last night. He asked me if ‘that damn nigger’ was with me and I said ‘Yes, Sir. In fact, he is looking after us.’ I didn’t much like the way he said ‘that damn nigger’”

Big Jim said, “Now, Tom, don’t let him make you mad and you say too much back to him, for we have got to stay here almost two weeks yet.”

I said, “Okay, Jim, don’t worry about me.”

And when I got up to see the man and asked him if we could rent the boat, he said yes, if we would go up the lake where there was not anyone about, it would be all right. So, Big Jim and me caught four big catfish and some of the boys caught some and we had fish for supper, so our first day turned out to be a beautiful day.

Our second day was about the same as our first day, only Big Jim and myself went a little farther up the lake and I had my mile swim, then I went in the boat and Big Jim had his swim. All the other boys went for a swim at the regular beach later that afternoon. Worth and Big Jim made up a list of the things that we would need to buy and four boys went to the store and bought our supplies and we all paid our part.

The next nine days were about the same. We even had a better time than we had anticipated having. We spent 12 nights at the lake and I did 24 miles of swimming, so I felt very good about that and I was learning how to float and stay in the water for several hours at the time. I was not a fast swimmer, but a strong one. I had read in a book that Miss Maude gave me that in a severe storm at sea you might have waves as high as 40 to 50 feet. And winds up to 90 miles plus per hour.

We had a wonderful trip back home, stopping at all the places that we did coming up, and all the people were so nice and we thanked them again. The man who didn’t seem to know just how to take Big Jim actually shook his hand and complimented him for the way he was taking care of his boys.

We arrived at my home at approximately 5:30 P.M. and everyone was glad to be home.

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