

## MANOR HOUSE

### About the War

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Manor House Quarterly

Published Spring 2011

Sit your ass down right there.

Sure, there's fine too. Just get on the damn couch. It's time you listened to some stories. A grandson should listen to his grandpa tell him stories about the war. There are just some things you ain't gonna learn in no history book, and you've got an eye-witness account right damn here. Right here in this gut. 'Cause I ain't gonna tell you about no war like just straight names and dates, no sir. I'm going to tell you about the muck and the blood and the sweat that lets you wear the god-damn t-shirt you're wearing right now.

No, you don't need to help grandma in the kitchen. She'll have dinner ready in an hour or so, and until then you need to hear what I have to say. What? Hold on, lemme turn this thing up – *dammit!* Sounds like when you stomp on a microphone. Come again now? Then what the hell did you come over here for? Put away that damn phone and look at me.

Now. I don't know what you've heard about the war, but it ain't no Tom Hanks dyin' all slow and pretty. Stephen Spielberg made the war look like goin' to Disneyland with the Carpenters. God-damn. You ain't never seen any thing like it. Stuck in the forest, bleedin' out your left eye, shootin' at Krauts around every corner. If it weren't for Sherman burning half of Atlanta, Charlie would have made it all the way to Nagasaki before Big Boy dropped his ass half-way to Moscow.

Now what the hell are you laughing at?

Honey, I'm not losing my damn memory. Get back in the kitchen. Would you tell him to respect his grandpa before you do?

That laugh though... I ain't heard a laugh like that since '63, at Jimmy-Dean's wedding. I ever told you about your great-uncle Jimmy-Dean? Well hell now son, you can't call yourself a member of this family if you don't ever know who's *in* your family. Jimmy-Dean had a laugh like you wouldn't believe – kind of like yours, but not as pitchy and god-damn annoying. He got married out in Oklahoma, to your great-aunt Beverly.

Honey, I know it was Oklahoma. It was not Olathe. I ain't set foot in Kansas since 1948, when that damned farmer tried to blame *my driving* for the fact that his cow was wrapped up in my engine belt, which is just as big a lie as the Ford Administration. No, I'm positive. Keep cooking.

Anyways, Beverly and Jimmy-Dean rented out this big barn, with walls at least fifty feet high and these fine pews they placed throughout the hay to hold their weddin'. The only

problem was there was no fans, and your new-fangled air-conditioning hadn't even been *invented* yet – so it was hotter'n hell in there. Damn Krauts.

But the whole family came out, all the way up from Lincoln, Nebraska and St. Louis and Coshocton, OH and even a few of our queer-hippie folk out in Southern California, droppin' whatever weed-smokin' and animal-screwin' they normally passed their days with to pay some respects. Good folk, just a little off. Old friends from Boston drove out, and I swear Jimmy even had one of those darkies he met in his travels sittin' front row, that's how special Jimmy-Dean was.

We even had Uncle Ralph and his family drive in from Idaho. And let me tell you, his son Willy is better than that old Injun' joke about young Shitting Dog asking his mother if Injun' babies are named after the first thing the mother sees after giving birth, cause that kid Willy was the most furious masturbator I have ever seen in my life.

Good Lord could that kid crank it. In the bathroom. Out of the bathroom. In the yard, at the table, in church. And he always had the most painful expression on his face, makin' a sound like he was squeezin' a watermelon out of his ass, just slappin' away like he was applauding a Broadway premier. His specialty was socks. Just loved 'em. Black or white, knee-high or ankle, that kid was a Jackson Pollack, just sprayin' his art all inside whatever foot-covering he could find.

It probably didn't help that he was a retard too. Kid was more backwards than a China set in a Ruskie parlor. Jus' didn't look right to start with, but when he opened his mouth you just wanted to shove him in front of a bus or jump in front of one yourself. Nowadays they probably would have some fancy word to describe what he was, and maybe they coulda' even fixed some of it, but at the time all they knew was he was a retard, through and through.

What was that? Punchin' the Pope? Ooh, never heard that one before. I like it. What honey? Nothin' honey, just talkin' about the war. How's that casserole coming?

What were we talking about? The wedding, that's right.

Now the most special thing about this wedding wasn't even the family. It was these two dogs. Jimmy-Dean and Beverly each had a dog. Beverly's dog was called Shadow, beautiful black lab that coulda' won a dog show. And was she loyal. When Beverly was still in college, she'd set Shadow outside the buildin' where she had class, tell her to stay until she came out, and that dog wouldn't move an inch until Beverly walked out those doors, sometimes more than an hour later. Other girls would call to the animal, offerin' her treats and belly-rubs, an' Shadow wouldn't ever look at 'em. I'm told once a wounded rabbit limped within 2 feet of where Shadow was sittin', and that dog just yawned.

Jimmy-Dean had a dog too, but it was ugly as shit. God-damn. That thing was called Bird Dog for who-the-hell-knows why, and if it ever saw a wash-pan, one or the other woulda

probably dropped dead. It had hair stickin' and missin' in every which way, I don't even know the breed. Probably an ass-runt. But he and Jimmy-Dean were never parted.

Any ways, durin' the weddin' the Reverend had just started the proceedings and the weddin' party had all walked down the aisle, and then over the hill framed by the sunset was Beverly's Shadow at a dead sprint, lookin' graceful as she ever was, a pillow and the rings tied to her black neck. Just as pretty as a picture. Beverly got a lot of "oohs" and "ahs" too when she came down the aisle, but that dog gave her a run for her money, gallopin' and a runnin' down the center aisle, then sittin' still for the entire ceremony like a stained glass window.

That was the only dog that was supposed to make an appearance, for Jimmy-Dean had tied up Bird Dog a good five miles away at the cabin the two of them were supposed to spend their weddin' night. But Jimmy, in all the hustle and bustle had only tied him to a fence, and when Bird Dog showed up right before the "I do's," he just about took the grandmas with him cause of all the chain-link draggin' behind his raggedy-ass. But once he was there he sat down right next to Shadow, and the two of them just panted quietly in the August heat 'til it was all said and done.

It was probably a good thing that Bird Dog came in when he did too, because I could have sworn that I heard a slappin' behind me and Uncle Ralph whisper "what are you doing?" and Willy yell back "mind your own business!" but before the thing could get really out of control everyone was lookin' at Bird Dog.

After the wedding we had a grand old time. The rain started to come down right before we started dinner, but there were big party tents set up outside for the reception and the rain beatin' down was like a drum-beat to match the band. We ate and danced and drank – I sure as hell never seen my pops, your great-grandpa dance like he did that night! Like his hips was on a gyroscope. There was the first dance, and the daddy-daughter dance, and the money dance...hell I don't know if I danced since, I just got it all out of my system right then and there.

When Jimmy Dean and Beverly got in their car and pulled away, the cans on the bumper draggin' up mud and leavin' big claw marks through the farm, we all took off our shoes and socks and ran-along side 'em, rain and mud and all, just a wavin' and a laughin' and a dancin'. We had to of chased 'em a good half-mile before they finally hit paved road, and then they were off to the cabin and a life together. We then all put our arms around each other and walked back with all hell rainin' down, just happy to be alive and breathin', celebratin' young love and family.

It was such a good time I didn't mind how uncomfortable that drive home was. Thought I'd cleaned off my feet, but I guess I hadn't cause my toes were squishin' and a stickin' to the insides of my socks all the way back to –

What are you laughing at now?

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