Wild Hogs and Briar Berry Vines

It is my considered opinion that the primary reason for the deterioration of the American family is the absence of a front porch or the refusal to use the front porch as the gathering place for the family.

The front porch is where the lessons of life are handed down from father to son and mother to daughter. That is also where one learns where his position is relative to the family. Sitting on the front porch after supper every evening is a ritual practiced by most folks around Damascus in South Alabama.

I learned early in life that to pass judgement or criticize the actions of senior family members was the exclusive domain of the head of the family. To violate this generally brought a quick cuff of the ear for showing dis respect. It only took one episode to acquire that knowledge.

So it was, as we sat in our respective places there on the porch in late August 1948 waiting for the fire flies to appear and the crickets to commence their evening songs. Now and then one could make out the quiet chords of a hoot owl off in the distance or the squabbling of wild turkeys as they gathered on their roost.

The conversation had drifted onto the coming harvest season and the corn pulling on the field down at the Boykin Landing. Some talk about the evidence that the field had been visited a few times as the corn began to ripen. A common occurrence over the years and it was an accepted practice.

Guys running trot lines or pulling fish baskets on the river, which was quite close by, would typically pull a few ears to roast in their camp fires during the nights. It was a good thing.

Suddenly, the solitude was disrupted by the unmistakable sounds of Uncle George’s Nash bounding up the lane to the house. He seemed to relish hitting all the big holes to see how far his car would hop up. Said it was saying hello.

Up to the front yard gate he shot, jumped out and took his usual bow to announce his arrival. Coming through the front gate, he began to announce the purpose of his trip. We all knew he was up to something because Uncle George never came just to visit.

He always had a purpose and it generally required effort from me. As he bent over in his bow, I noticed that he seemed to have lost a lot more hair and the top of his head was quite shiny there in the porch light. He seemed to get a little crossed up as he tried to catch his cigarettes which slid from his shirt pocket and catch his hat all with one hand while he held his car keys in the other. He failed at all three and stopped right there. Bent down and retrieved his things from the dirt. Stood up and opened the gate, and dropped his car keys. Bent down to pick up his keys and the gate came back and struck his behind. Uncle George did not like being laughed at. I laughed, along with my dad and the rest of the family.

Uncle George just snorted and came up the front steps to the porch. Displaced one of my sisters and took her chair. Declared that he held out no hope for a good crop this year since it had not rained enough. Said it was way too dry and being that it was so dry, the dogs would have no trouble picking up the scent of the wild hogs in the swamp down near the Boykin Landing. He said that he’d already talked about it with Uncle Ben and that they wanted to go out Friday evening. Ought to be back way before day light. Said that Dennis Anders was there and he wanted to join us. Dennis had a brand new Browning 22 automatic, that “shoots hollow points real hard” and couldn’t wait to try it out on a big boar hog.

Friday came and as the sun began to set we lit out for the Boykin Landing. We all met at the old corn crib and decided which way to set out the dogs.

Uncle Ben had brought his four best Walker hounds to run the hogs. Off we went to the far side of the corn field toward the Meeting House Creek which empties into the Conecuh River there near the Landing.

In the back side of the corn field, we saw evidence that the hogs had been there and the dogs picked up their scent almost immediately. They circled for a while to find the direction they took when they left and off we went. It was not more than a half hour when we heard the lead dog change his bark and we all knew that ole Jake had come up on his hog.

We all lit out as fast as we could go through the stubble, bushes, underbrush and probably dozens of snakes, but we kept moving. Finally we got within close ear shot of the dogs and Jake had taken charge. He seemed to be circling and the other dogs were all in line behind him. That is how they did it, usually.

When we finally got to within sight of the dogs, we realized that Jake had cornered a sow with three or four piglets. That old sow had four razor sharp tusks at least three inches long and each one had about a one inch curve in it.

Uncle Ben was not one to kill the sow if she had piglets with her. So he cautioned us to not shoot her. Dennis Anders was highly disappointed because he already had that 22 dialed in on that sow. Uncle Ben told him that if he had to take something, take one of them pigs. He did. The pig squealed and that enraged the sow. She began to circle the wounded pig to protect it from Jake and the other dogs.

Uncle George pumped out his chest and declared that he was sure he could jump that sow and cut her throat and we could take all the pigs too. Before any one could discourage him, he whipped out his skinning knife, which was a three inch Barlow and about as sharp as a kitchen butter knife. He opened that knife and charged right into the fray.

Uncle George made a leap for the sow and hell of all hells she just slipped right out from under him. That is when the show really started. As the sow was getting out from under George, he grabbed what ever he could get hold of and that happened to be her tail. She began to circle to turn back on George, smacking her teeth like she was enjoying a fine meal and squealing like all hell. George began to follow her lead just fast enough to avoid them sharp tusks. Round and round they went. George hollering “shoot the hog, shoot the hog”, Uncle Ben hollering “No, no, you liable to hit George”. My dad began to holler “Shoot George” Dennis Anders hollering “hold still, so I can take aim”. I’m looking for a tree to lean on because I am dying from laughing.

George and that sow went round and round for a good long while. They went through a small stand of young sweet gum saplings, then totally beat down a stand of black berry vines about 20 feet square. In the process most of George’s clothes were fairly well shredded. The totally exhausted old sow just collapsed. George staggered off to one side and he collapsed. George was bleeding from the top of his head, his shoulders, his thighs, his arms, he was simply a bloody mess. My dad said, “You got her down now George, what you gone do with her”? George had no clue as to whereabouts of his skinning knife. It was long since lost during the circle dance in the sticker bushes.

Dennis grabbed the dead pig and the old sow never moved a muscle. Dennis noticed that he’d shot the pig in the throat and the thing simply bled to death. We trudged back across the field to the crib and Dennis took his old pick up down to get George who said he could not take another step. Dennis said that when he got to George, he was talking to his self and had wet his pants. Said he was grumbling about losing his knife and his new plug of Days Work chewing tobacco.

Two days later, George began to fester up all over his body so off he went to see his doctor. George said his doctor spent dam near an hour pulling thorns out of him from one end to the other, then “the sorry bastard began to clean me off with alcohol and iodine” It will be a dam good long time before I go see him again”

Uncle George was so impressed with Dennis’s new 22 so he went down to the Western Auto store and bought one for his own. He said that he also bought a whole block of 22 hollow points with it, too. He said he could not wait for it to cool off so he could get after them “big ole gray squirrels in my pecan trees and that stand of red oaks down there at the edge of the field.

It was early in October when Uncle George decided to go on another hog hunt, only this time he wanted to go to a different area. There was a stand of oak trees with a few hickory trees among them on the far side of his field. He wanted to try that area out because he’d recently seen a huge boar out there rooting around.

Late Saturday, around midnight, we set out to hunt the back side of that field. It was not very long before old Jake picked up the scent of a good hog. The dogs began to chase the hog and it turned to run across the field. Uncle George lit out ahead of all of us and he began to gain on the dogs and the hog, which was not running very fast.

George finally caught up with the hog and immediately began to shoot it. He shot that thing until his gun was empty, most of the shots were within three feet. But the hog kept on moving and indeed he was huge. It was a fully grown Duroc and weighed well over 400 pounds. It ran up the Therell Fuqua’s back yard fence and just collapsed right there by the fence.

We seen Therell come out on his back porch and heard him holler at George. By the time we got there, Therell had come down into the yard and he and George were looking at the hog along side of the fence. George said, “just look at the size of that thang. He is the biggest hog I ever shot”. Therell was not a happy man. He just glared at George and snorted. “God Dammit, George, you have killed my brand new brood hog”. I bought this sum bitch two weeks ago at the auction in Castleberry, and now here he is shot by you in the dead of night”. By God George, that hog cost me a hundred & eighty dollars and I figure you want to pay at least that much for him now.” “I ought to charge you a lot more than that, but you will pay that much, at least.”

Uncle George immediately began to try to get the rest of us to help cover his debt. Not one person offered one cent. That is the first time I ever heard Uncle Ben say, “Education takes a lot more than just time and money”. You did it George, you wanted to do it and now you own it. You can’t eat it though because he “ain’t been cut and the meat will be too bitter to eat”.

As far as I know, that was the last hog hunt that Uncle George ever went on and I am sure it was the last time he talked to his first cousin Therell Fuqua.

My dad never ceased to see the humor in that little foray across the field to Therell Fuqua’s back yard fence. George never mentioned it.