



Halloween and Snakes

Halloween was a special time of year, just like it is now. However, there were differences. For example, when I was a young man we did not get dressed up and go out and ring doorbells and get candy because people just didn't give away candy. So we took the opportunity to go out at night and to do things that were ornery and bothersome to people because we weren't going to get any candy or any rewards. A couple things we would do to be bothersome to people would be to take a bagful of hard corn from a farmer or something like that and then hide in the bushes in front of somebody's house and throw a handful of corn up against the front of their house and, of course, when the little kernels of corn hit the windows, it would make a rat-ta-tat-tat sound and the people would get up out of their chairs and come out and turn on the porch light and look and see what was that noise. Or some kids would make a thing called a tick tack.

A tick tack was like a spool of thread without thread on it, and with a pen knife you could notch the edges of the spool and put a stick through it, wrap a string around the spool, and then in one hand hold the spool against the window of a house and with the other hand pull the string. And when the spool spun around against the window it would make a tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap sound. And that would bother the people inside. So most of the time when we went out on Halloween night we would do ornery things to bother people. Usually we concentrated on people that we thought were cranky people, people that we thought were just the kind of people nobody liked because they were always grouchy and unkind to children.

One of them was Joe Corneely up on Church Street in Saxton. Joe had the misfortune of living next door to the grade school that I went to, and he also had a very strong dislike for children. Now that was unfortunate because a man who doesn't like children shouldn't live next door to a grade school, and the playground by the grade school had a huge fence. Oh, that fence seemed to be 20 or 30 feet high. It was as big as the fence that goes around the Lumberjack Stadium in Oakwood, or even higher it seemed like to me as a kid. But when we would play ball on the school ground, if a ball went over the fence into Joe Corneely's yard, Joe Corneely would come off his porch, pick up the ball, and take it up onto his porch and drop it into a great big wooden box, and we would never see the ball again. And he would do that just in clear view sight of all the kids that maybe were playing the game or maybe the kid who brought the ball to the game or something like that.

It really hurt us to think that this man would take our ball if it just happened to bounce over the fence and take it away forever. So obviously in due time we developed a great deal of dislike for Joe Corneely. Well, it was always fun on Halloween night then to go up and torment Mr. Joe Corneely. We would throw corn on his porch and we would tick tack his windows and do everything we could just to drive him crazy. Of course, Corneely, he wouldn't turn his porch lights on because he was too cheap and too tight to turn on the lights, so he would sit in the house in the dark. And every time we'd do something he would run to the front porch and snap on the light. Of course, as soon as the light would come on we would run like crazy down the street and hide. He never caught any of us, and I guess it was just one of those bad nights for Joe Corneely. I often wondered how many balls, how many bats, how many gloves, and how many tennis balls and everything else did he have in his big box on his back porch. I guess I grew up never finding out how many there really were.

One Halloween night I remember there were a group of us got together just after dark and we were going to go out and do our Halloween tricks on people. It was autumn of the year, of course, and we walked down from my house to my friend's house and one of the guys said, "Hey, I know what we can do. Let's get up in Mr. Sanderson's tree because he's got the best cherry tree in Saxton." I thought about it, and it was really a great idea. Mr. Sanderson was an old man who lived on Church Street, and in his back yard he did have a tree and it had the biggest, blackest, sweetest bing cherries.

We decided we would go up and get ourselves a good handful of cherries and then we would go on down to the friend's house and get him and go on about our business. It was a moonlit night, and as the three or four of us got down near Mr. Sanderson's cherry tree, we decided OK, now is the time we will go in, we will be very quiet, we'll get us our cherries, and we'll get out of here before Mr. Sanderson catches us. Well what happened was one of the guys gave another one a boost. I was not good at tree climbing so I said I'll stand down here and watch. And one of the guys gave another guy a boost and got him up in the tree. And in the moonlight of the tree the friend of mine that was up in the tree bumped into something that was up in the branches of the tree.

And he said to me down on the ground, "Hey Allie, look and see what that is. I can't see up here in the tree." And I moved around to where the moonlight was behind me and low and behold in the tree it looked like a dead man's body. And I said to my friend, "I think somebody's up

there...you better get down." And my friend scampered to the edge of the tree, came down the trunk of the tree, and ran out to where I was standing. And pretty soon the three or four of us were standing at the bottom of the tree looking up into the moonlight, and it did look like there was a dead man up in Mr. Sanderson's tree.

Well, we weren't sure if it was Mr. Sanderson or whether it was just an image or what, so we got out of there. We went down to my friend's house and told him about it. He said, "By golly, we're gonna find out." So he got his daddy's flashlight and he came back downstairs and the five of us came out of the house, went back down towards Mr. Sanderson's tree and took the light and shined it up in the tree, and what was up there was...Mr. Sanderson had made a thing like a scarecrow that looked very real. It just looked very real like there was a dead man in the tree. Obviously, he had had a good laugh on us and used it to persuade us to stay out of his cherries.

Well, in my home town there was a policeman by the name of Nick Villa. And Nick was a tough cop. He would chase after kids and make us behave, and he chased speeders, and people who got in trouble were really in trouble with Nick. So nobody played any games with Nick. But we all liked Nick and we liked to tease Nick, the cop. We thought, here is a chance to have some fun. So what we did was we arranged that one of us would go down to the Main Street of Saxton which was only a block or two away. If we saw Nick's car down there, one of us was to go up and tell him that we thought there was some man hung himself up on Church Street, tell him where it was, and then leave Nick to come up and investigate the man in the tree.

We knew we all couldn't go down there—we would start giggling. I mean, if five guys were down there talking to the policeman and one guy told the story, the other four would break out laughing. So one of the guys named Jimmy Grove was designated to go down and find Nick and tell him that he had heard that a man hung himself in Elmer Sanderson's tree. Well, it worked! The other four of us hid near the tree, and pretty soon up the hill came Nick Villa, the policeman, and he had a 1939 Chevrolet coupe with a spotlight on the front part of the window. He drove up, drove in the alleyway behind Mr. Sanderson's, and he shined that spotlight up in the tree, and there he could see what looked like a dead man in the tree. He got out of the car and he had his hand on his revolver. And he kept the light up in the tree and he walked over and he called to the guy in the tree. Nothing happened. He called to the guy in the tree again. Nothing happened.

Then he went up on Mr. Sanderson's back porch and he knocked on the door until Elmer Sanderson came to the porch. I could hear him talking, and then I heard Mr. Sanderson say, "Oh, that's a dummy I put up there to keep the boys out of my cherries." And the policeman got angry and he gave Mr. Sanderson the devil. He said, "You shouldn't do that! I thought that was a dead man in the tree!." He got Mr. Sanderson in trouble for having done that, and we were all about four houses away behind a building laughing and laughing because what Mr. Sanderson put in the tree to scare us turned out to have given the policeman quite a start, and Mr. Sanderson got in trouble for doing it. Anyhow, we got a big laugh out of that. I think we went up the next night and got ourselves some more cherries after the dead man was out of the tree.

Another Halloween story I remember was one that I wasn't involved in, but my older brother Chippy was. I think to this day he is still embarrassed by this story, but I'll tell it to you anyhow on the condition that you don't tell him where you learned it. Down the street from where I grew up there was a man who was president of the bank in Saxton. His name was Mr. Brenneman. Mr. Brenneman was an old, grouchy looking man who never smiled and never spoke to anybody, and he spent most all of his time up at the bank where he was the president. We had a nickname for Mr. Brenneman. Behind his back we called him Spider.

Spider Brenneman, being a very serious and determined businessman, was obviously not one of the favorites of the boys around town. My brother Chip as a Halloween prank one time decided he was going to do something to Spider Brenneman. Well in those days people didn't buy their milk generally in a store. There was a milk truck that would come around from house to house in the community and would put milk on your front porch. So let's say a family wanted two quarts of white milk and a quart of chocolate milk, what they would do was they would put their empty milk bottles (all the milk came in bottles in those days) on their front porch with a note down inside one of the bottles, and it would then tell the milkman who stopped by the house what kind of milk to leave for them for the next day. That was a very common practice.

The milkman came to every house in town everyday. Some people even had like an insulated box on the front porch, so when the milk was put in there cold it would stay cold until the people of the house came and got it off the porch. Well, what my brother did was he wrote up a note and put it on Mr. Brenneman's front porch. And it said to the milkman, "Please leave..." and then he made a list. He wanted a couple pints of cream, a couple quarts of chocolate milk, he wanted a

couple quarts of white milk, he wanted some cottage cheese...and he made up this big list of things that the milkman was to leave on Mr. Brenneman's porch. Well, he put it on that night and the next morning when the milkman came by about 5:30 in the morning he saw the note, and he left everything that was ordered on Spider Brenneman's porch. Well, of course, when Mr. Brenneman and his wife came out to get their quart of milk or whatever they originally wanted, here was all these items on the front porch. He was MAD! He was furious! He was determined to find out who did this.

Well, he might not have ever found out who did it, but because my brother and some of my friends knew about it and talked about it, the word got back to Spider Brenneman that it was Chip Eichelberger who wrote the note and left it on the porch. So about a day later the phone rang at our house and it was Mr. Brenneman calling my mother. His story was he knew who did, and he wanted the person responsible to come up, pick up the milk, get everything off his porch, and pay for it. My brother was just shocked that he found out, but he did the right thing. He went up and he got all the milk and all the cream and all the cottage cheese, and he paid the milkman for everything that was left on Spider Brenneman's porch that Halloween.

While I'm mentioning my brother Chip, I might tell you that when we were growing up he was seven years older than I, and we didn't spend a lot of time together. When I was 10 years old, he was 17. When I was 9 years old, he was 16. And obviously he had older friends and did most of his things differently than I did mine. But one of the peculiarities of having an older brother was he had hobbies that were very different from mine. One of them was he collected snakes. Yea, snakes! He would go out walking in the mountain and he would take a pillow case from off his bed, and if he saw a black snake or a rattlesnake or a copperhead or a garter snake, Chippy would bend down and catch that snake and put him in the pillow case and bring it home. He did this repeatedly, and I was young enough I didn't care. I learned that he had hobbies and one of them was snakes.

He would build, along with his friends, they would work together and they would build cages for these snakes. He would feed them, and after awhile he would turn them loose. Well, it wasn't uncommon for Chippy to have 3, 4, 5, 6 different snakes, and he would have them in these boxes. Amazingly, my mother and grandmother would let him have them in the house, particularly in cold weather. So up in his bedroom on Main Street in Saxton it was not uncommon to go in there and

find all these cages and boxes, some of them three feet long and two feet high and hinged lid and wire and boards and pans of water and things like that all around—straw—and he had these snakes in his bedroom.

Of course, the rule was he wasn't supposed to let them out and let them get loose in the house. Well, he wasn't satisfied just catching the local snakes. He saved his money one time and there was a big reptile farm down in Florida by the name of Ross Allen Farm. Chip saved up enough money to send away for a snake that he saw in a catalog and it was a 7 foot long indigo snake. The indigo snake was a harmless snake. Oh, it had teeth, but it was not poisonous. It was native to Florida. When Chip sent away for the snake, he had already decided if it was a boy snake he was going to name it George. Well, George arrived in the mail in a big box about four weeks after Chip sent the money to the snake farm in Florida. This one required a very, very special size cage. Also came with it were instructions on how to feed it and care for it. Chip was very good about that. He would read the instructions and follow them closely. This snake required two kinds of food. One was eggs and the other were rodents, or rats.

Well, you could imagine, my mother didn't mind my brother taking an egg up to George at night for dinner, but she wasn't very fond of him trying to catch a rat and bring it up there and put it in a cage with George so George could have dinner in the bedroom. But anyhow, Chip kept George for a number of years. He trained him. He would have him do funny little tricks out on the back yard. He could put George on the clothesline, for example, where the clothesline stretched across the backyard. George would wrap himself around the clothesline and work himself from one end to the other. Chip became very good at handling George and the other snakes.

Once he sent away for a green tree snake to the same farm down in Florida, and when the box came to the house it was a small box, and it had a little window in it of course for the snake to get air. Tensie was probably at that time about 13 years old, and she wanted to know what was in the box. I don't know if she thought it was a box of candy or what, but she opened the box up and the snake got out, and she realized the snake was now loose in the house—a green tree snake loose in the house. When Chip came home from school and found out that the snake had arrived and been permitted to escape, he was just furious. Of course, after he had finished telling Tensie where her manners were, we all went on a long search to try to find the snake.

Luckily, it was found hiding on the floor underneath the sofa in the living room, and Chippy was able to reach back and bring him out safely and put him in his new found home up in Chip's bedroom.