

A Halloween Prank

by Frederick Wickert



Main Street in West Conesville of the time period



The open lot to the right where the house once stood. The large building in the foreground is the masonic Hall.

West Conesville is a small hamlet within the township of Conesville, New York in the Catskill Mountains. It is a quiet and peaceful place most of the time. State highway 990V runs through the little hamlet and one road comes in to the hamlet intersecting the state highway.

Both sides of the state highway are lined with houses and a few small businesses. At the time, in 1950, there was a small store with gasoline pumps in front and living quarters in the rear. It was called Gallagher's store and was operated by a lovely retired couple. They had a booth by the window in the front of the store and if so inclined you could order a sandwich with a side of potato salad and a drink. The store sold bottled milk, half gallons of ice cream as well as ice cream novelties, newspapers, a few canned goods and bread, cold soda, cigarettes, pipe tobacco, pocket knives, bandanas, shoe polish and work gloves. It was a typical little country store.

The one road going off from the state road is called Bull Hill Road and is up hill all the way. On the left after entering the road is the Masonic Hall, an open lot, a small house and another open lot before several houses in a row. On the right side of the road are more homes and a lane up into the barn of a farm.

A cranky old man lived in the house past the Masonic hall. He had a teen-aged daughter living with him, whom I had taken a fancy to. She was a very nice girl and a pretty one. Her name was Ethel. I paid a number of visits to Ethel the previous summer, but her father refused to allow her to invite me in, and refused to allow her to leave the yard outside. One thing marred Ethel's beauty and that was a wart on one of her eyelids, which prevented her from fully opening the eyelid. She wanted to have the wart removed but her father refused to allow it.

When summer ended, Ivan determined to send Ethel far away to live with her older and married sister. I knew it had to be better for Ethel because her father was mean to her and did not treat her kindly. He was a bitter man. I never knew whether he did it to get her away from me. I was the only boy who came around because others were either bothered by the wart or feared her father or a combination of the two.

Most people by that time had indoor plumbing, but Ivan's house did not. Water was obtained by way of a pitcher pump on the well. The toilet facility was an outhouse about a hundred feet behind the house. There was a fast running mountain stream about twenty five feet wide running parallel to Bull Hill Road, and the banks of the stream were only twenty five feet from the back of the outhouse. At night, one carried a kerosene lantern when going to the outhouse.

When the October leaves were in their full glory, I had occasion to stop at Gallagher's store on my way home. Home then was only a mile outside of West Conesville. While I was in the store I heard Ivan's voice loudly boasting to someone about some changes he had made in preparation for Halloween night. He declared, "I done put an electric light on the outhouse. I can see clear as can be all the way around her by Gawd! I'd like to see them sons o'b—ches tip her over now by Gawd. If'n they try I'll have a surprise for em."

Because of racks of merchandise between us, Ivan couldn't see me and I resolved to keep it that way. I quickly made my purchases and left while he was still in the back of the store.

I kept feeling a grudge against Ivan, unwilling to forgive him for the way he treated Ethel. Then he had to go and make loud boasts in public about the immunity of his outhouse on Halloween. To a boy my age, just shy of my 17th year, one could hardly ignore a challenge like that, now could he? I mean, it was like a matter of honor so to speak.

Two other boys living in the vicinity were usual accomplices on Halloween in any shenanigans indulged in. One was Ike, who was a bit older than I and the other was Donny, a bit younger than I. Donny always caught the school bus at my house. The next day I explained to Ike and Donny all that I had heard the night before at the store. We all agreed we could not allow the challenge to pass unanswered.

For those too young to remember outhouses, and perhaps you city slickers who never knew about outhouses, I want to be sure you understand what I am talking about. Back in the old days before septic systems and indoor plumbing were common, there were no indoor toilets. There was a small shed type building somewhere in the back yard that served as the bathroom. It was equipped with a wooden box built over a deep hole dug in the ground. A hole similar to the one in your toilet seat was cut in the top of the wooden box. One sat upon the hole to do their business. Paper of some kind, and before that, old pieces of linen, were kept handy to wipe ones self and the wiping material was discarded in the hole. Lime was frequently sprinkled over the contents of the hole below for the purpose of keeping the stink down. Gradually as modern plumbing became available people converted to indoor bathrooms but at least in the Catskill Mountains, a few outhouses were still in use as late as the 1990's.

It was the custom when outhouses were still in use, that on Halloween night the boys tipped over every outhouse they could find. Most people expected and accepted it without complaint. Many the next day with big grins on their faces when meeting neighbors out and about, talked about the pranks of the night before and got a big chuckle out of it. Those who did not have indoor plumbing merely used chamber pots until the men could upright the outhouses and put them back in place the next day. Many took advantage of it and cleaned out the sewage in the hole in the ground before replacing the outhouse. The sewage was spread on the land.

Not wanting to have our other fun on Halloween night curtailed, and knowing we were going to be expected on Halloween, we three boys decided to pay a visit to Ivan's outhouse two nights before Halloween. We made our plans and met on the stream bank behind the house above the vacant lot beside Ivan's house. Wearing rubber boots, we eased ourselves into the shallow water of the stream. Carefully we made our way to the creek bank behind the vacant lot adjacent to the targeted property. We made ourselves comfortable, lying on the bank of the creek in the shadows. We had a clear view of the house and the outhouse and the now lighted area between.

The light affixed to the outhouse was attached to a two by four nailed to the right front corner of the outhouse. It was a naked bulb, shaded by a metal, dark green on the top and white on the bottom, reflector.

We didn't have to long to wait. After about a half hour, Ivan came out of his house, carrying a shotgun. He proceeded to the outhouse, looking around the area as he went. He entered the outhouse and closed the door. We waited one minute. Then we rose to our feet, took aim with a BB gun and shot out the light bulb. We rushed the outhouse and tipped it over with Ivan inside.

We did not stop at just tipping it over. We rolled it over and over to the bank of the creek. Ivan was yelling at the top of his lungs, threatening what was going to happen to us when we got his hands on us. When we got it to the creek we together gave it one mighty push and let it roll over the bank into the creek. We knew the water was shallow enough he was in no danger of drowning, but we expected he was going to be wet and cold for a while.

We all departed then and went on home. For the next few days we listened intently for feedback, expecting it to be the talk of the territory. Surprisingly, we never heard a single word about the incident. The outhouse had been replaced the next day. The light had been replaced in the position it was before. We surmised that not wanting to be a laughing stock after his public boasts; Ivan decided to keep quiet about the entire affair.

Before Christmas, the house had been closed up and Ivan was gone. No one knew where, or exactly when he left. The house stood empty for a few years and was then torn down. No one has ever rebuilt there. As far as I know, no one has ever seen nor heard of Ivan or his pretty daughter Ethel again.