

*He Can't Help It*

*by Frederick Wickert*

Being a small town police chief brings you into contact with a considerable number of people. Some only once, and others you see repeatedly. Among those often seen, there are those you wish you didn't, those you are pleased that you do, and those somewhere in between.

I often came into contact with one particular family of very good people. They didn't have much, but they got by and seemed to be happy. They were good people. The father worked long and hard for low wages. The mother rode herd on the children and did her level best to raise them right.

The oldest boy of the family seemed just a tad odd if you know what I mean. He was a nice boy, out of high school, but for some reason, not working. He talked with a slow drawl and was always in the company of some younger children. Usually the children were all his siblings, but sometimes another one or two were in the group. His mother one day, informed me that he was "a little slow."

I don't mean to imply that he was one apple short of a bushel, but it took him a little longer to grasp a situation than most children, and he sometimes got scraped up just because his reaction time was so slow, so I guess you might say his mother called it correctly, that he was just a little slow.

I felt badly for this family because they were such nice people, and they tried hard but had so little. I decided to try to do what I could to help them whenever I could, without letting them think I was giving them charity. They could be embarrassed by something like that.

A man about town that was a true character, a Hungarian who was rough and tough, owned a couple of bars, a fork lift flat factory and a sawmill, and was a logger, who sometimes was inebriated, and other times just put on that he was. He was a shrewd man, and no push over. Many feared him, many despised him, and some, like myself, admired and respected him.

The man was known about town as Saw Mill Joe, and he had given that name to one of his bars. Unknown to the greater share of the population, he had a tender spot in his heart, though he never wanted anyone to find that out about him. He helped out a lot of people down on their luck. Some knew it was he and some didn't know who their benefactor was. Joe also had a number of sons, and later, grandsons and he loved those boys fiercely.

Joe had his ways about him and it was seldom they were orthodox. For example, he had a chat with me one day. He wanted his oldest boy to have his independence, but at the same time wanted to be sure he stayed out of trouble. He asked me to keep an eye on him, and to pull him over every now and then, just to let him know he was being watched. Not to hurt him or harass him especially, but just to insure he never went too far out of line. His sons were all good boys and never gave me any trouble, but I did pull young Joe over some times, even if only to ask him where his dad was, telling him I wanted to get in touch with him.

One day, much to the horror of the village clerk, Joe came into the municipal building one day, with a bundle of newspaper in his arms, asking for me. The news paper was dripping water all over the floor. When I came out, he greeted me with a grin and told me he had a gift for me, and indeed, he did. The bundle of wet newspaper contained a couple of dozen Black Walnut seedlings he himself had started. He carefully wrapped them in wet newspapers to keep them moist until I could get them home and plant them. I was grateful for the gift.

Joe owned a large tract of land in an area outside of town called Brooky Hollow. He had constructed a dam across the lower end of a ravine where a brook ran, and created a deep pond. On the other property surrounding the pond, he planted many acres of Black Walnut trees, He knew he was never going to live long enough to see them mature, but wanted to leave something behind for the future of others.

Joe also gathered up about forty old men who rarely got out form home every fall for an all day picnic. He built a fire and roasted a side of pork or a quarter of beef over the fire, and he always provided a barrel or

two of fresh apple cider. He had music from the old days, and the old men just had themselves a real good time without anyone nagging at them about drooling or being sloppy or forgetting to button their fly, or whatever.

But I digress. Getting back to the boy who was a little slow, I had taken those seedlings home and planted them on my property. Later on in the summer, my three-acre lawn needed mowing and I didn't have time to do it myself. I asked the boy if he wanted to earn a few dollars mowing grass for me. He was eager to do it and his mother approved, so I took him home one morning, told him my wife was going to serve him some lunch, or any time he wanted a cold drink, to ask her for it.

I took the boy to where the trees were planted. I told him I wanted him to mow around those trees, but to be extremely careful not to get too close and cut off any of those trees. The boy replied, "Oh, I won't. Any darn fool can see them there." I told him okay, but I just wanted to be sure he knew they were there. He assured me they were safe with him.

That evening, I came home to take the boy home and give him his pay. I went out on the property to inspect the job. He had done well, until I checked the area where I had planted the trees. Every one of them had been mowed down. When I asked him after I had shown him the trees and warned them not to cut them, why he had cut them anyway. The boy replied, "I can't help it."

About a year went by. A woman lived on the edge of town with several show dogs. She had to go away for a few days and wanted to know if I knew someone she could hire to take care of her dogs while she was gone. I suggested the boy had time on his hands and could use the money. She took him to her house and showed him what to do, and left the key with him.

He went for the first couple of days and all was fine. Then he only went once the next day. The day after that he didn't go at all. I went to him and asked why he had not been taking proper care of those dogs? I told him I had recommended him because he had the time, needed the money and I thought he was trustworthy. He replied, "I can't help it." I then got a girl in town to do it, and she did a great job and was hired to do it a number of times thereafter.

The county fair was coming soon. A security agency had been contracted to provide security guards for the duration of the fair. The boy was hired to be one of them. They provided him with a uniform and a two-way walkie-talkie radio, which they showed him how to use. He was so proud when he showed me his uniform and told me all about it. I later learned the security agency had positioned him at a place behind some buildings, to walk up and down a chain link fence after dark until the grounds closed for the night. A number of young men climbed over the chain link fence to get into the fair without buying a ticket. The boy stood there and watched them, but never lifted a finger to do anything about it. He didn't challenge them and he didn't call anyone on the radio. When I asked him why he just stood there and did nothing, he replied, "I can't help it."

After the fair was over the security agency put him on patrol in a shopping mall. In a couple of weeks he was back on the street in town. I asked him what happened to his job in the mall. He said they let him go. I said maybe you weren't doing your job like at the fair grounds. The boy replied, "I can't help it."

Over the years I have often wondered what ever became of the boy. His family moved away from town and he went with them. His family supported him and made excuses for his shortcomings, and they did all they could do to help him, but as long as I knew him, he never amounted to much. I guess he just couldn't help it.