

Mountain Justice

by Frederick Wickert

"I want everybody to take a real good look at that stick. Nobody is to touch it. Is that clear? That stick has to stay right there. Don't you dare move it from where it is." Those were the words of a farmer in Guinea, a part of the town of Gilboa, New York.

The town is situated in the heart of the Catskill Mountains.

The time was around 1915 in mid November. The farmer had ordered his large family to come with him to the firewood pile. Firewood for most was the fuel used for both cooking and heating. The farmer and his family worked hard every year to cut with a cross cut saw, the wood needed for the winter supply. It was brought from the woods by horses and wagon. A huge pile of it was all cut and split, and stacked in long rows some distance from the house. Every member of the family was required to carry armloads of wood from the pile to the house until the wood box was filled. That provided enough firewood until the next day.

The old farmer had some neighbors who were a little on the unsavory side. They had a reputation for being lazy, and for stealing from other folk's gardens, stealing a chicken now and then, or poaching deer. The farmer had noticed they did not yet have much of a woodpile. Anyone living in those mountains knew it was unwise to begin the winter without a good supply of firewood piled up.

The farmer had also noticed his own woodpile seemed to be shrinking faster than it should. He was certain the neighbors were using his firewood to heat their house. There being no snow as yet, there were no tell tale tracks. Therefore there was no evidence, but he had been watching the pile for the last few days and was convinced there was more wood being taken from the woodpile than his family was using.

The farmer selected a piece of limb wood that was going to be easy to identify. He took it in to his workshop and drilled a hole several inches into one end of the stick of wood. He then carefully inserted a quarter of a stick of dynamite into the hole in the end of the stick. He had prepared some mud and used it to fill the indentation of the end of the hole and covered the end of the stick with the mud. This concealed the hole with the dynamite. He let the mud dry hard and then placed the stick on the woodpile.

He gathered the entire family at the woodpile and gave strict instruction not to touch that stick under any circumstances. He knew that if he told them, no one dared touch it. He was a stern taskmaster and his family all knew better than to disobey him.

Three days went by without incident. Then about 10:00 A.M. one morning there was a small explosion at the neighbors house. The wood stove used for heating was completely destroyed. The room was a terrible mess of blackened soot, and flames flickered around several spots where burning coals rested on the floor of the room. There was a scramble to douse those hot coals and the flame around them.

Nothing was ever said about the incident. There was never any discussion about it with anyone. The neighbors had to acquire another stove for heating. Firewood no longer vanished from the farmers' woodpile. Justice was done.