

Old Man Brown

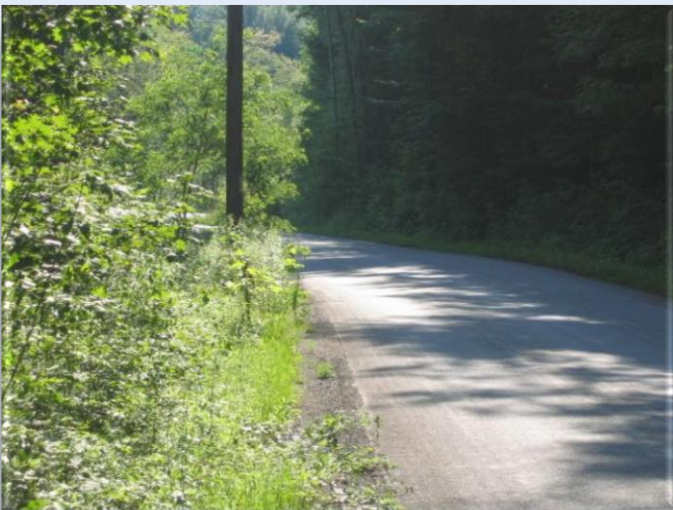
by Frederick Wickert



Paddy Hole section of the road. It is currently posted with 15MPH signs. The guard rails did not exist at the time of the story.



Road where Old Man Brown flagged down the car.



Telephone pole is the area where Old Man Brown disappeared.



Remaining ruins of Old Man Brown's former home.

"Hey, look out," cried Tae.

"I see him," I said.

"What's he trying to do?" she asked.

"He wants me to stop. I wonder what he wants. Probably a ride somewhere."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes," I replied. "That's old man Brown."

I stopped the car and rolled down the window, trying to avoid the rain coming in.

He still sported the same old gray felt hat, plaid jacket and gray baggy pants. His hair was a faded white, and the ends of his walrus mustache were stained with tobacco. His eyes were watery blue, and his mottled cheeks were laced with tiny blue veins, giving the flesh the vague appearance of a road map.

"What's up, Frank?" I asked.

"You can't go this way. The Paddy Hole just went out," he shouted.

"Gee, thanks for stopping me. How bad is it?"

"It can't get any worse, she's gone all the way," he drawled.

"You haven't been on the bottle a little have you Frank? You can't see the hole from here. It's around a turn and then a quarter of a mile on the other side of the knoll."

The old man became indignant. "You know anybody knows that hole better than I do? You know anybody that lived near it as many years as I have?"

"No, you've been here a long time."

"You bet I have, and I've walked that hole more than any other man. I guess I know when she's gone out and when she ain't, and I ain't had no durn drink neither!"

"Okay Frank, I'm sorry. Thanks for warning us."

"You bet. Behave yourself," he said with a wave.

I turned the car around and drove back the way we came. I looked in the rear view mirror to see what he was doing, but couldn't spot him. He must have ducked in out of the rain.

"What's the Paddy Hole," asked my wife.

"It's a horse shoe shaped curve in the road," I explained. "Every now and then there's a mud slide there, that takes out the road. When the clay underneath gets full of water, it becomes like a slurry, and it's a seven hundred foot drop off the edge. Every time it goes out, they dump logs and dirt in it and pave over it. The repair usually last's a few years. A bridge would solve the problem, but it would be too costly."

"What will we do now?" Tae wanted to know. "We'll just have to go another way," I told her. "Don't worry."

I decided to try Back Road. That was a disaster. The dirt was so soft from all the rain and snow melt, that my wheels sank repeatedly in the mud. I was forced to back out and turn around.

This time I took the Kaiser Kill road from Broome Center. It would take us to Breakabean, where I could turn left on Route 30. The road was in good shape and we made it easily. Turning on to the state highway, I stepped on the gas.

I had just come home on leave after a five year overseas tour. Tae, my new Japanese bride, was a big city girl from Tokyo. The little town of Gilboa in the Catskills was my home. I had decided to take my bride on a tour of the area, but the rain had spoiled my plan.

As we drove, Tae asked me about the old man who warned us about the Paddy Hole. I explained that he lived in an old house down a steep bank, near the spot where he flagged us down. His family didn't like it, but he was an independent old cuss and insisted on living alone. His grandson had a toilet installed for him, but being set in his ways, he still used the old out house. That's the way he was. He was often seen walking the road, carrying a kerosene can or a bag of groceries. He chewed tobacco and nipped from the bottle now and then. The old man had a Model "T" Ford that ran pretty well, but his family had to take it away from him. His eyesight and reflexes gone, he was all over the road and sometimes in the ditch.

"The rain is coming down real hard now," I observed. "The sooner we get home, the better."

"Well, be careful," Tae said. "We haven't seen any cars and this road is like a snake. Don't go too fast. It's hard to see."

"Darn it," I exclaimed, hitting the brakes. "Doesn't that take the cake." The Schoharie Creek had flooded over the banks and the road was under water as far as I could see. "Now what do I do? I can't go to Middleburgh. I know darn well that will be flooded too."

Tae looked worried, nibbling her bottom lip, but she didn't say anything.

I thought for a minute and then had an idea. I said, "We can go back up the mountain where we came from. We could park and spend the night up there."

Tae shook her head, "You'd better think of something else. We'll be cold and hungry."

"I've got an idea," I said. "I've never gone that way but I'm pretty sure there is a road going down the other side from Broome Center to Cooksburg. If we can get to Cooksburg we can take Route 145 to Potter Hollow mountain and go up that way. I just hope we have enough gas. It's quite a ways."

It worked. We arrived home, tired but relieved. The rain was still coming down hard.

Over supper, I told Mom and Dad about our adventure. They glanced at each other questioningly. As I talked, they watched me with a strange expression on their faces.

Dad looked at me and asked, "Are you absolutely sure that was old man Brown that stopped you?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've known him for years. Why wouldn't I be sure?"

"Because," he said, "Old man Brown died three years ago."