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THE SYCAMORE CLUB

FROM THE  
BEULAH GLOVER FILES

By Beulah Glover

While the Sycamore Club meets daily it has no official hour for opening. It is a matter of convenience of the members. The business of the day actually begins when as many as two arrive. As the day wears on, the two benches under the trees gradually fill and, by noon, the roll call is complete.

On warm days Uncle Si Davis is very likely to be among the latecomers since he lives quite a distance. His home is in that section of town known as Hickory Valley. A cyclone some years ago did terrible things to Hickory Valley and uprooted all the trees-but the valley still remembers. The Sycamore Club is on the court square, as befits its purpose and a long mile from Hickory Valley.

Strangers can identify Uncle Si by his palmetto fan which he uses unceasingly as he makes his slightly wobbled way through the main street. He protects himself from the heat of the sun by a large umbrella which he closes as he reaches port, somewhat out of breath but the fan like the fabled brook, goes <sup>in</sup> on. It moves in gentle rhythm with the conversation of the club, but accelerates its speed as the arguments get warmer. Only a sturdily built palmetto could stand election summers. Uncle Si is a bit superior in manner to the other club members and he has won that right for he is the only member of the club to attend a national reunion of veterans and although more than three score and ten he is planning to attend the next reunion.

No one actually remembers when the club was organized. Perhaps the

founder of the village, feeling that he had served his country well when he selected a spot safe from malaria, and where one could live in comparative ease with little manual labor, demonstrated this fact by organizing the club and electing himself its first president. Most of the present membership have earned the right by reason of years to retirement from active life and others keep the traditions of the club and labor not in or out of season.

One dark hour in the club's history it was threatened with extinction. The old supervisor went out of office and the younger man who took his place feeling that this daily loafing on the bench detracted from the dignity of the court square issued a decree that the club must move and to better enforce his edict he planned to trim the branches of the sycamores so high as to do away entirely with the shade of the benches. But fortunately, before he could carry out his plans he had become such an enthusiastic member of the club that nothing more was heard of closing.

Unkind critics do say that the club is the starting place of all the village gossip and Seth Barton, a non member, says that he would more closely resemble the virtuous monkeys who see no evil, hear none and speak none, but for his father-in-law who brings home juicy morsels from the club each day.

In its way the club is a busy place for here land is broken, crops planted and harvested and the money spent. Men are put into office and out of office, according to, the mood of the day and the attendance. The daily papers furnish much in the way of topics for discussion. All the better if the members do not agree, arguments are the life blood of the club.

At times a street preacher livens things up as he takes his stand near this ready made audience and opening the Bible at Exodus selects a passage from the New Testament. The club stops arguing to listen intently and at the proper time bows in reverent prayer. Then as the purpose of the service is revealed, trembling hands dig deep into pockets and moving aside

lucky pieces such as rabbit feet, buck-eyes, petrified potatoes, the latter for the cure of rheumatism and the former for luck, a small coin is located and tossed into the waiting hat. But it all helped to pass away a morning and no members begrudge the price paid.

There is no dull moment during election summers. Excitement brings the members earlier than usual to the benches and adjournment is later. The county's fate seems to rest in the hands of these men whose blood pressures vary to an alarming degree.

The hottest election year in the memory of the club and one often referred to in daily meetings was the year when Uncle Joe Duncan had a grandson in the race. The political arena was Uncle Joe's playground. When advancing years stopped his own entry into politics he put his sons in and then his grandsons. Uncle Joe's advice to his grandson was to quell his opponent with just one potent word "Bah!" The opponent, it seemed, was known to have taken sheep which were not of his pasture.

In those days it was necessary to keep at least one eye on the voter especially if he had been paid in advance, which he seemed to prefer. On one memorable occasion an important vote was lost because the voter mixed candidates as well as drinks and voted for the wrong man. When taxed with treason he indignantly exclaimed, "I don't know how I voted but I voted."

Next in age to Uncle Joe is Uncle Ab Perry. In the village when a man gets a certain age he becomes "uncle" regardless of blood relationship unless he has acquired a military title from respect or service. And one carries as much honor as the other. Uncle Ab's boast is that he can call the roll of the old regiment from memory. But of late he has become annoyed and increasingly uneasy over his failure to supply a name. When this happens he becomes very quiet and wears a worried frown. The other members know the signs and are very considerate with him on these occasions.

Memorial days are the big days for the members. Dinner is served for the veterans and speeches are made. Uncle Ab's face takes on a pink tinge of excitement and <sup>he</sup> wears all his medals. He never hesitates to interrupt a speaker for he knows as one present that he speaks with authority. Then as the sun sinks in the west the visit to the graves <sup>of</sup> their fallen comrades is made and a wreath placed thereon by the survivors of that never forgotten war.

But the club member best known and feared is the coroner. He assumes full command of the bench as an office holder and still in active life, the nearing eighty. If a dusky negro sits on one of the bench <sup>to</sup> down will come his walking cane with a whack never forgotten by the culprit.

The coroner's office being in the court house he need never be long absent from the club. For many years he has held office without opposition. When women aspired for public office he remained calm. "Thank God," he would exclaim "I have one job they won't want."

His most prominent feature is his nose and as he walks with a slight stoop it gives him the appearance of literally following his nose. On one occasion he was a visitor in another town and some boys made a remark about the length of his nose which his keen ears caught. Politely pulling his nose to one side he said, "Now, boys, you can pass."

He is a law unto himself with regards to his office and one of his fixed rules is never to attend to business after night. If an inquest is asked for he just ignores the call until next day.

The club has one school teacher on its roll. Professor Aaron can only attend sessions during the summer. "While his system of teaching is in no sense modern yet no pupil whom he coaches ever fails to pass a test. Nearly every person in the village has been taught at some time by the professor. One time he got his name in the Farmville News for having donated a set of Encyclopedias to the village library. The editor privately offered

a reward to any person who could find the word "radio" on its pages but the reward was never claimed.

Professor Aaron is a "ladies' man" and it is said of him that even if death drew near he would never do such an ungallant thing as to become unconscious of a lady's presence.

Since some of the men belonging to the club are veterans of the War-Between -the-States and some are not it makes a class distinction and the same privileges are not granted those having been born too late to share this glory. Ned Pye and Josh Grant are among those born out of season and limited to privileges but they are sufficient unto themselves. They are devoted friends but seldom meet without a quarrel. Club bets are placed heaviest on Josh who manages to have the last word.

A bone of contention between them centers around a coon story which the other members encourage the oft retelling. After months of planning the cronies decided to go on a coon hunt. They were both too old for such active sport but this fact was ignored. The early part of that dark night was spent in stumbling around in the woods trying to get bearings. At midnight, with nothing to show for the long hours but bruises and aching limbs, they decided to return home. But in which direction was home? One argued, east the other, west. They traveled in circles always returning to the starting point.

At last Josh gave up and said he was going to build a fire and stay where he was until daybreak when the mill whistle would blow giving them an idea as to direction. Ned reluctantly joined him and the remainder of the night was spent in arguing as to which one was responsible for this "fool hunt." Morning came and with it the sound of the mill whistle. As usual it proved Josh right and they departed for home sadder, if not wiser.

Ned was a chronic complainer, receiving little encouragement from Josh. "O, Josh" he would moan, "I feel so terrible I believe I am going to

die." "Nonsense" Josh consoled "it's nothing but that catfish bone you swallowed". For in an unguarded moment Ned had confided that he had swallowed a catfish bone and since that time every pain he had Josh would lay to the catfish bone.

Another time he was sick and sent for his old friend to share his last moments on earth. "Ole pal," he groaned, "I am leaving you this time sure." "Maybe you are just getting paralyzed" comforted the friend of his bosom."

When the crowd on the bench made the tale worth telling Josh would relate Ned's behavior on the night of the earthquake. With his hat pushed back and his legs stretched to full length he would begin with relish:

"Yes" he would begin " Ned returned to his little shack that night and tied his horse, Wheeler, to the corner of the house. In the night he was awakened by a violent shaking of the building. "Whoa, Wheeler" he yelled, "do you want to shake the place down on me." The rocking grew worse and when Ned in his wrath went out to remonstrate with Wheeler face to face he found that the horse was in no way to blame but it was altogether the Lord's doings."

Ned sometimes plucked up courage to relate Josh's behavior on the same night. Josh was in Charleston, the center of the earthquake and fearing to remain within doors he rushed out on King street only to be a target for falling buildings. Turning he would rush back, always in the path of danger, so the night was spent in a foot race up and down King street.

The club had another member who was a source of joy but he moved away and his experiences became traditions. His name was Bill Bailey and his ambition was to marry a rich widow. At one time hopes ran high. He was certain that luck had at last smiled on him. So certain was he that he boasted audibly of his future plans to dispose of the widow's property and transfer the proceeds into his own pocket. Unfortunately the widow learned of his plans and the wedding day never arrived.

His small farm was worn out and so was his horse. One day he put the little negro boy in the field to plow and the horse from weakness lost his footing and fell into a ditch, breaking his weary neck. The boy was terrified but his master was generous and forgiving. The entire matter would be forgotten, he promised, if the boy would bring him a chicken in payment. With only the stars to witness the transaction a chicken was secured and the debt satisfied.

Despairing of finding any more rich widows he packed up and went to share the remainders of his days with reluctant relatives.

The sycamore leaves turn from green to brown and losing their grip drift slowly to the ground. The days pass for the members of the club. Yesterdays are reviewed and tomorrows prophesied. ~~They wait and wait~~

Together they sit and wait.