

**The Fried Apple Pie**  
by Tony Cox

“It's darn cold,” I muttered to myself and tucked my chin deeper into the upturned collar of my sheepskin coat in a futile attempt to escape the frigid wind. I was walking across a frozen Dewey County wheat field in Oklahoma Territory, but it felt more like I was next door to the North Pole. I leaned into the wind with one hand pressing the brim of my hat tightly against my face to protect it from the cold. With my other hand, I held the wire bail of a galvanized bucket of milk. The milk was fresh and still a bit warm.

It was the last bucket of milk I'd stripped from Mister Johnson's three cows, partial payment for helping my neighbor do his chores. Several hours earlier, before daylight, I'd made my way across the field that separated our farms, crunching through an icy crust that glazed the thick blanket of powdery snow. Under the snow lay green winter wheat, frozen and dormant, waiting for warmer weather. Now, returning home almost cold to the bone, I wanted some warm weather, too. According to Pa, it was lots colder in Kansas where we used to live. I don't know, I was only six years old when we moved here nine years ago in '95. I have few memories of Kansas and none of them are about cold weather. Mister Johnson says so much has happened since I came to Oklahoma that all those early memories were crowded out of my head. He might be right, the days have been pretty crowded, particularly since Pa had his bad stroke.

The wire bale of the bucket was starting to bite into my hand. I stopped and set the bucket down so I could trade hands without losing my hat to the wind. I had to be careful with the milk because it was in short supply at home. Our lone milk cow had recently gone dry. “Oh well,” I muttered into the wind as I trudged along, “at least I won't have to milk her too.”

It's not like we need much milk with Ma and Lodie gone and me eating some of my meals with Mister Johnson's family. I've worked for the Johnsons nearly four years now, ever since the summer Pa worked too hard at sod busting and suffered a heat stroke. That stroke paralyzed his left side, making his left arm and leg nearly

useless, and now folks can hardly understand what Pa says. That's what bothers Pa the most, when people can't understand him. It puts him in a bad mood. Now mind you, he always had a fierce temper, but since the stroke, it can get white hot and really nasty. I reckon that's part of the reason Ma took the job in Cestos and moved to town. She took my younger sister Lodie with her and left me to take care of Pa and the farm. I guess, though, if she hadn't got the job in town, we'd lost the farm by now.

I reached the edge of Mister Johnson's wheat field and crossed the barbed wire fence that separated the two farms. From here, I could see the sod-covered top of our house, just a dim shadow in the early morning light. There was no smoke coming from the chimney. This worried me because it meant Pa wasn't feeling well. On his good days, he usually had a hot fire going by now. I really wanted today to be one of those good days.

Last week, the Johnsons invited me to go with them to a box supper. The Trail Creek School was having the supper tonight. They hoped to raise enough money for sacks of treats to give away at their Christmas program. The school was a good six miles from our place and not our school, but the Johnsons were going because Missus Johnson's brother was the president of the Trail Creek school board. I looked forward to the supper because I hoped to buy Molly Johnson's box. Molly was the oldest daughter and just a year or so older than me. She was a fine looking girl. But, if Pa was sick, I'd probably have to stay home.

I picked up my pace and hurried along. Sam, our old half-blind hound, must have heard me because he howled a warning bay. "Hush, Dog!" I commanded and Sam, recognizing my voice, was soon beside me sniffing at the pail of milk. I ignored his silent pleading and continued through the yard to the house.

"Pa, I'm home--are you OK?" I called as soon as I was inside. He answered with a weak voice saying he was fine. It was so cold, he decided to sleep in and let me build the fire. Relieved, I set the bucket down and stomped the snow from my shoes. Stepping over to the washstand, I used the handle of the dipper to break through the crust of ice that formed overnight in the water bucket. I dipped several inches of water into the red and white enameled basin on the washstand beside the bucket. Carefully soaping my hands, I washed

them in the basin and wiped them dry on a towel that hung from a nail on the wall nearby. Using the dipper again, I took a long cold drink. Next, I checked the remains of last night's fire in the old Monarch cookstove that provided the only heat for our dugout.

Ma never liked me referring to our house as a dugout. She called it a log cabin and it sort of was. At least, the front and two sides were made from cedar logs, cut and dragged up from the canyon below. The north side of the cabin was dug into the slope of a hill, just below the crest. Inside, we had three log walls and one of dirt. The single room of our dugout was separated into two areas by a muslin sheet hung across the corner opposite the stove. Ma and Pa's bed was in that corner, behind the sheet.

In the cookstove, there were a few live coals glowing red among the white ashes, so I tossed in a few dry corncobs and soon had a good blaze going. The cobs were followed by some chunks of firewood and now I could feel the heat radiating from the fire. I pulled off my coat and hung it on a peg by the door. I returned to the stove and pulled up a chair so I could prop my feet against the firebox while I was warming my hands.

Once I'd thawed out some, I started several thick slices of bacon sizzling in a skillet and put water on to boil for cornmeal mush. Almost before I knew it, Pa was up and breakfast was over. I pulled on my coat and went outside to do our chores. First, I let out the chickens we kept up at night to keep them from the varmints. Leaving the hen house, I went down to the barn where I fed our two horses, our dry cow, Bess, the two heifers, the old sow and her six little pigs. Finally, I returned to the hen house to scatter some grain for the chickens and check for eggs. There was only one today. In the cold weather, the hens weren't laying much.

With one thing and another, it was past noon before I finished the chores and returned to the dugout, leading a saddled horse. Inside, Pa sat in his chair beside the stove. We didn't talk much; I'd reminded him over breakfast I was going to the box supper with the Johnson family. I don't think he liked it, but Pa knew I'd promised the Johnsons I'd ride with them to help in case the wagon slid into a gully or something. Pa knew that Mister Johnson, with seven young daughters and no sons, would need some help if he got stuck in the snow. I was taking the horse to ride back because the Johnsons

planned to spend the night with her brother who lived in Vici. Since Pa was feeling okay, I knew he wouldn't need my help making his supper. I silently cleaned up and put on my best clothes. My money was in a rusted snuff tin that I kept hidden in a crevice where one of the cedar logs butted into the back wall of the dugout. I counted it one last time before slipping the coins into my pocket. Six quarters, three dimes and a nickel. If Mollie Johnson's box dinner went for under a dollar and eighty-five cents, it was mine.

I was ready early and with nothing better to do, I rode over to the trail to wait. The wind had died down, the sky was clear, and though it was still cold, it felt good to be out soaking up sunshine. It was mid-afternoon when the Johnstons finally showed up in their wagon. Missus Johnston and the girls were in the back, nice and snug under several layers of quilts. I bet it was comfortable too, because that morning before I left their farm, I'd filled the wagon half full of prairie hay. I tied my horse to the back of the wagon and climbed up to sit beside Mister Johnson. Soon we were on our way to the school. The trail went due west along the crest of a ridge. Fortunately, last night's wind had stripped the ridge of snow, so the going was easy and we made good time.

We had barely gone half way when Billy Marler overtook us. Billy was two years older than me and lived several farms over further east. He reined in and walked his horse beside the wagon to talk to the girls. Billy had an easy going nature and a gift for gab. He soon had the Johnson girls giggling loudly, Molly the loudest. I was relieved when I heard him say he was going to the box supper to court his new girlfriend Mary. After a while, Billy ran out of words and grew tired of our slow pace. He kicked up his horse, and left us behind.

We were a little late getting to the school, but I guess everyone else was late too because the supper hadn't started yet. By the time we got there, the yard was filled with wagons, horses, and over-active children. We circled around until we found a good place to leave the wagon and horses. Mister Johnson and I helped the girls down from the wagon. While I was at it, I sneaked a good look at Molly's basket so I would be able to recognize it during the auction. After I was sure the horses were securely tied and comfortable, I worked my way into the crowded schoolhouse.

The business part of the schoolhouse was a single large room with walls and floor made from sawed cottonwood lumber. Across one end was a raised wooden platform where the teacher had her desk. Beside the desk was a lectern where the teaching was done and, I guess the preaching too, since this place doubled as a church on Sunday. Rows of desks filled the rest of the room, except for a space in the center where a flat-topped iron stove was located. The room was lighted in the daytime by sunlight coming through the three windows on either side, but now, since it was almost dark, the light came from a half a dozen kerosene lanterns that swung from hooks on the exposed rafters. The schoolhouse was crowded. I think half the county was here.

The platform was covered with all sorts of baskets, boxes, and tin buckets. I pushed forward until I spotted Molly's basket. It was on the teacher's desk along with the other late arrivals. Molly was across the room talking with Johnny Brown. Johnny had just turned twenty-one and I'd heard he'd taken a relinquishment claim north of Bloomfield. Johnny's parents lived a mile or two south of our homestead, but I didn't know Johnny very well, since he was quite a bit older than me.

While I was pondering this, Missus Johnson's brother stepped up to the lectern, welcomed everybody to the box supper, and started the auction. He had a good voice and was able to do a reasonable job of the auctioneering patter. He began with the suppers on the desk, so it wasn't long before Molly's basket was up for bidding. In my eagerness to get the basket, I immediately raised my hand and stupidly bid everything I had. "A dollar eighty-five," I blurted out. Everyone started laughing. Molly shot me a stare of pure disgust, and Johnny looked really irritated.

"And a nickel," Johnny called out, and the crowd's attention moved on while I pulled back from the front, my face burning with embarrassment. How was I to know that Molly had found herself a beau? I couldn't believe I started the bid so high. I knew better than that! In my eagerness, I'd really made a fool of myself. This box supper sure wasn't going the way I planned. I slipped to the back of the room, to watch, listen, and keep my big mouth shut. I still needed to buy a supper box so I won't go hungry tonight, but that could wait until later.

I was more comfortable back here with the old men, anyway. The discussion varied from the crops; they agreed the snow would make the wheat crop this spring, to politics; they were ready for statehood, but some thought it was a mistake to ally with the tribes in the Indian Territory. We routinely had nervous dealings with the local Indians, those on nearby reservations. But on the other hand, I knew some Indians, like Mrs. Riley for example, who were the nicest people you'd care to meet. The old men were in the middle of a heated argument about whether the new bridge planned for the South Canadian River north of Taloga would be high enough to withstand the spring floods when I realized the auction was winding down. I had to do something soon or I'd be going home hungry.

I could see Molly across the room. She was sitting on a bench with Johnny and her basket was on the floor beside them. Looking around the room, I saw that most people were busy eating and that there were just a few box suppers left to bid on. I gathered my nerve and returned to the front of the room. The auctioneer had just picked up a tin bucket. Glancing quickly at the remaining suppers, I noted the one he held was probably the best one left. When he called for bids, I spoke up, "Two bits"

From the back of the room came a counter-bid, "four."

"Six bits," I promptly responded to show the other bidder I meant business. I guess he realized I was serious because he kept quiet, and I bought the bucket for seventy-five cents. I paid for the supper, pleased that I would get to eat and still take most of my money home.

As I was paying, a girl appeared at my side. She was the owner of the bucket. I'd seen her earlier with Billy and his girlfriend. I'd speculated at that time that she might be a younger sister of Billy's girlfriend because the two girls looked so much alike. My supper partner was a year or so younger than me and very bashful. I smiled at her, admiring her light red hair and the faint line of freckles that stretched across the bridge of her nose and onto both cheeks. She had the prettiest blue eyes I'd ever seen. I said, "Hi, my name's Chester -- I'm one of Billy's friends."

She nodded as if she already knew that and replied quietly, "I'm Susie."

I picked up the tin bucket, and we walked together to an empty desk. The student desks were long, with plenty of room for two. We

sat on the wooden bench with the dinner bucket between us. Raising the lid, Susan uncovered a nice mess of fried chicken and biscuits. I dug in, selecting a large drumstick. She picked up a biscuit and commenced nibbling on it. In short order, I ate my share of the chicken while she continued to work on that biscuit. Susan said she wasn't very hungry and wondered if I wanted more chicken. So I ate her share, too. While I ate, I studied her. She was nice looking, at least as pretty as Molly. I liked the way Susan's red hair glistened in the lantern light. It was pulled back and twisted into a bun, but a number of strands had escaped and now dangled on either side of her face. She was really shy and spent most of her time looking down at the bucket.

I finished the rest of the chicken and biscuits. While I was wiping my greasy fingers on a towel, I looked at her and said, "I declare, Susan, I believe that's the best chicken I've had all year." I meant it too. Pa and I don't get tasty fried chicken very often. Susan tilted her head to look directly at me and shot me a big smile. I felt it clear to my toes. That smile and the humor that sparkled in her blue eyes took my breath away. Suddenly, I was the one who was bashful and couldn't talk.

We sat for a moment, silently looking at each other. Susan, digging into the bucket, said with a sweet smile, "There's a fried apple pie in here -- want to share it with me?"