

Growing up in small town America.

Blue Mud: The Story of a Town

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FOREWORD

Ponds, by design, are small and self-contained, with no fresh water supply. The bottom of a nearly dried-up pond, a blue mud pond, is a dangerous thing. Blue mud is a lot like quicksand; the harder you try to get away, the more it pulls you down; the more furious you become, the more desperate the circumstance.

Small towns never leave you, or is it you never really leave a small town? Clayton, although easy to make fun of, is a good place for kids to grow up. Lying roughly halfway between Cincinnati, Ohio and Lexington, Kentucky, Clayton exists a little like the tree in the forest. Among all these larger cities sits Clayton, the little iconoclast, which is nothing like its bigger counterparts. All in all, Clayton is just surviving.

The newer Clayton, after school consolidation, is quite different from the Clayton in which I grow up. In the old Clayton, we don't lock the doors; kids only get in the trouble kids get into. In the new Clayton kids can't go out without a chaperone. Now, everyone lives in fear behind locked doors. Before, Mom flips the porch light off and on and we know it's time to go home. And even if we don't see it, everyone in town knows what it means, so we'd find out soon enough from a passerby, "Your

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mom wants you.” Like it or not, everybody knows what everybody else is doing.

That’s just the way it is in a small town.

I suppose there are other little cities in America, but they are becoming the exception. Clayton is one of those cities. When Mr. Layton buys the old school to turn into apartments, Clayton changes forever. As long as the school is there, there is a chance it could reopen. School consolidation is easier on the administrators but losing your school is especially hard on a small town. No more Clayton Cougars, Falcon Wildcats or Marshville Jaguars. With the stroke of a pen, the school consolidation for the entire county is into one high school, one junior high, or middle, school and two elementary schools.

Mt. Agnes, Grambling, McNeeseburg and almost all the cities in the county lose the last thing around which they could rally--their school. It’s of no help that three of the four new schools are in the same city. And it’s hard to promote a school whose initials are PMS. As little kids, we don’t get the joke. (“I love PMS.” “PMS is for me”). Now I know why the Sam Houston Institute of Technology changed its name (and Ball State used to be Ball University--it’s so rare when Student Governments get to laugh).

What’s in a name? A rose, by any other name, would...still have an odor: for instance, nicknames. Jimmy Greene rides his bike around Clayton, that is, when the older boys haven’t hung his bike on a telephone pole. Not so much anymore, but telephone and electric poles used to have spikes driven in the side so repairmen could climb them. It’s nothing to

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come out of the drugstore and see Jimmy's bike six feet off the ground on a telephone pole. To his discredit, Jimmy is obnoxious, kind of like Danny Bonaduce, in both appearance and demeanor, but not nearly as clever. For some reason, they call him "Pootus". It's a nickname. Sometimes nicknames make sense, sometimes they don't. I'm called "Woodrow" because I wear little round glasses like President Wilson, so I understand that. But I don't know where "Pootus" comes from or what it means. We still call him "Pootus" even if we don't know why. Maybe because it sounds dirty.

Helen Greene, Jimmy's mom, chastises us for picking on Jimmy. One day she goes stomping by the house and my oldest brother says, "There goes Helen Greene."

"Doesn't look good in red either" is my mom's response.

It is years later that I get that joke.

Funny what kids remember. I don't remember the story; I remember my uncle laughing so hard he almost couldn't catch his breath. I remember a joke I don't understand at the time; Grandma's green beans and her banana pudding. Of course, I remember my pets, especially my one-eyed cat, Minerva, the unsexiest thing to ever come down the pike but she had the three prettiest kittens you've ever seen--a calico, a Persian and a tabby.

I remember doing all the stuff our parents say not to. And the sterner and more opposed to something, the more likely we are to do it. Now it

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all seems so tame. The worst thing I do is shoot a fat woman with a slingshot, mostly because of her saying, “Don’t you dare.”

In a big city, a much smaller percentage knows of your screw-up. But in a small town, 90 percent or better know about your mistake. Whether a big or little error, count on everybody knowing about it.

ISMS
Or
WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Oftentimes, it's hard to understand a story if you don't know the vernacular. The South in general and small towns in specific have a language unto themselves, generally passed from grandparents to grandchildren. The following contains words and phrases and their equivalent meanings. Some contain additional information with respect to origin or expanded meaning.

A busybody or know-it-all,

“That’s the way I’d cook an elephant; but I’d use more salt.”

If you want to be left alone or want to do something yourself,

“Who’s killin’ this cat?”

Warning,

“Don’t make me come over there.”

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If you don't approve of the way someone is doing something,
"That's a hell of a way to run a railroad."

If someone doesn't understand you or your speech pattern,
"You ain't from around here, are you?"
(The quickest way for someone to identify a stranger is by a speech
pattern different from one's own.)

If someone doesn't get upset under any circumstance,
"He's got the patience of Job."
(From the Bible, and the reference to Job's willingness to endure all.)

If someone is physically warm,
"I'm hot as fire."
or
"I'm hotter than blue blazes."
(The hottest in degrees of a fire are the flames that appear blue in color.)

A post-meal declaration,
"Good thing I ate when I did, 'cause I ain't hungry now."

If someone is quite determined,
"He's hell-bent for leather (election)."

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If someone wants to be listened to,
“I’m serious as a heart attack.”

If someone has a veritable plethora of something,
“He’s got more of that than Carter’s got liver pills.”
(In reference to the company that made Carter’s Little Liver Pills.)

An unexpected arrival,
“Big as life and twice as ugly.”

Public disclosure,
“In front of God and everybody.”

An unattractive person,
“She looks like she ran through an ugly forest and hit every tree.”
or
“He looks like he’s been beat with an ugly stick.”
or
“She’s as ugly as homemade sin.”

When cautioning someone,
Women “Now don’t get your panties in a wad.”
Men “Now don’t get your shorts in a bunch.”
or

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“Keep your friends close but your enemies closer.”

When something is without positive attributes,

“Useless as teats on a boar hog.”

(Since they are not used for nourishment or reproduction, why are they there?)

or

“That ain’t worth a tinker’s damn (fiddler’s darn).”

Hatred,

“I wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire.”

Occupying a lowly social station,

“He ain’t fit to pack guts to a bear.”

(When farm animals are slaughtered, the entrails are taken in a bucket and dumped far away to keep wild animals from the farm so if someone isn’t even qualified for that....)

Preparing,

“She’s fixin’ to do that.”

A solemn vow,

“‘Pon my soul and dyin’ honor, that’s the ugliest hat I ever saw.”

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(From the belief and fact that Southerners have a proclivity toward elongating vowels.)

When you are shocked,

“You could have knocked me over with a feather.”

(When someone is surprised, his or her defenses are down.)

When you are really tired,

“Even God got a day off.”

[From the Bible (...and on the seventh day He rested).]

or

“I feel like I’ve been rode hard and put up wet.”

(If a horse is ridden hard enough to break a sweat, and is stabled without being wiped down, that horse is more likely to develop pneumonia.)

A decision to begin a difficult project,

“Well, can’t never did nothin’.”

Wealthy,

“He’s been walking in high cotton for quite a while.”

A good happenstance,

“That’s the best thing since sliced bread.”

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If you have an unnatural abhorrence to something,

“She’s deathly afraid (afeared) of it.”

or

“They were sore afraid. And when you’re sore afraid, you are down and out scared.”

[From the biblical account of the birth of Jesus (...and the shepherds were sore afraid).]

If someone isn’t being believed,

“You’re so full of shit, your eyes are brown.”

or

“I knew he was lying because his lips were moving.”

If someone appears to be in a state of bliss,

“He’s in hog heaven.”

If someone is very lucky,

“That’s akin to a blind hog stumblin’ onto an acre.”

If someone has an incredible grasp of the obvious,

“Ain’t no flies on you, are there?”

If someone thinks they are socially superior to everyone else,

“She thinks her shit don’t stink.”

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If someone is rambunctious,
“She’s full of piss and vinegar.”

If someone is infuriating,
“You’d make Jesus Christ cuss.”

If someone is disoriented,
“His mom shook the living daylights out of him.”
(A person loses their bearings following being shaken.)

Inquiring whether a person moved to or was born in a town,
“Now is she a come here or a from here?”

If someone does something untoward,
“You ain’t got sense God give a goose.”

An approval,
“If you’re waitin’ on me, you’re backin’ up.”

A cry of futility,
“Well fuck a duck!”

or

“Screw a guinea!”

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If someone must deal with the ramifications of an act,
“That’s your little red wagon, now you pull it.”

When addressing a captive audience,
“Let me tell you something, my little friends....”

Response to anyone who asks for a repetition of facts,
“Huh, hell. Pay attention.”

Response to someone who is condescending,
“I was born yesterday...but I’ve been up all night.”

About a health fanatic,
“Look at that. I wish I had time to get out there and run up and down the road.”
(A derogatory remark about jogging.)

A land measure, about a mile,
“You turn left and go a right smart piece.”
(A nonspecific way of giving directions.)

A measure of degree,
“A little pregnant? That’s like being a little dead.”

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If someone is mentally unbalanced,

“She’s as crazy as a loon.”

(Based on the often erratic flight patterns of the loon.)

If someone is physically large,

“He’s as big as a house.”

If someone is quite hungry,

“I could eat a horse.”

If someone is in need of water,

“My mouth is dry as cotton.”

On profanity,

“He can make a sailor blush.”

(Oftentimes the language of seamen is quite coarse.)

or

“She turns the air blue.”

(Language that is profane or off-color is often called “blue”.)

If something is painful,

“It just don’t take me long to look at a pan.”

(Generally in response to a burn after being warned against it.)

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If someone obstructs another's view,
"You make a better door than you do a window."

If someone appears physically harried,
"You look like hell."

If someone is feeling ill,
"Right now I couldn't whup a sick kitten."
or
"I'm feelin' a might poorly."

If someone is uncomfortable in a situation,
"She's as nervous as a whore in church."
or
"He's as jumpy as a long-tail cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

A response to a challenge,
"You better pack a lunch and start early, 'cause it's gonna be an all day
job."

(Implying that something can't be accomplished easily.)

or
"You better jump a fat hog or somethin' you can eat."

(Meaning someone would be more productive doing something
personally worthwhile.)

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Almost,

“He’s pert near done.”

Go with,

“Carry her over there.”

or

“Can you run me over to the store?”

Unless,

“Good Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise.”

or

“Good Lord willin’ and the devil don’t interfere.”

Inundate,

“He’s all over her like a cheap suit.”

or

“She’s all over him like ugly on a ape.”

or

“They’re on him like a bunch of flogging hens.”

or

“He’s on her like stink on shit.”

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Without value,

“That ain’t worth two hoots and a damn.”

Overwrought,

“It wasn’t much but she had a bad spell over it.”

If it’s frigid outside,

“It’s colder than a witch’s tit.”

or

“It’s cold as a wedge out there.”

or

“It’s colder than a well digger’s ass.”

If someone has passed away,

“She’s as dead as a doornail.”

or

“He’s cold as a wedge.”

or

“Time for pennies on his eyes.”

(Generally, people die with their eyelids open. Coins were used to close the eyelids prior to a public viewing of the body.)

If someone is interminable and not moving very quickly,

“You’re as slow as Christmas.”

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or

“She’s as slow as molasses.”

Paramount,

“You’re the dumbest person what ever come down the pike.”

(“Come down the pike” is generally used with ever and -est.)

Naiveté,

“Did you just fall off the truck?”

Response to an overreaction,

“For a growed-up person, you’re a sight.”

Annihilation,

“It’s smashed flatter than a flitter.”

or

“It’s knocked down flatter ‘n a pancake.”

If someone has exceptional height,

“Well, he’s a tall drink of water.”

A lot of snow,

“It’s knee-deep (ass-deep) on a nine foot Indian.”

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Peculiar,

“He’s an odd duck.”

Inevitable,

“She’s coming over here as sure as who tied the cat.”

(Loosely based on the fable of the mice tying a bell on the cat.)

Fast,

“He’s in and out quick as greased lightning.”

A small room,

“You can’t cuss a cat without getting fur in your mouth.”

A traumatic or otherwise unfortunate experience,

“Well, that’ll leave a scar.”

Ultimate,

“She’s the meanest woman what ever drew a breath.”

Poor,

“His socks are wore so thin you can read The Lord’s Prayer through them.”

or

“She ain’t got two pennies to rub together.”

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or

“He ain’t got a pot to piss in or a boot to pour it out of.”

A social circle that is headed by your mother, may or may not include family members,

“How’s mom and them?”

Additionally,

Ground beef is “hamburger meat”

Detergent is “washing powders”

Whole milk is “sweet milk”

“Regular” or “Sweet” iced tea is tea with sugar

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