

Our Friend Tom

By Esther Chrisman

In the late 1950's the best road to our cabin was the North Fork truck trail inside Glacier National Park from Belton to the Polebridge Ranger Station, then across the Pole Bridge and up the North Fork Road on the County side. The only indications the area was inhabited were the sparse mail boxes along the way. It took years to meet all who had mailboxes along the road. Our neighbors had dropped comments thru the years so we were aware of most of the traits of our neighbors. It is called gossip.

Tom Reynolds lived about five miles north of our mailbox. He had been portrayed as an Englishman who did not welcome guests. His notoriety came from the fact that he came to the North Fork as a friend of Billy Kruse. Billy Kruse was shot at what was referred to as the "Madame Queen" cabin. This cabin (house of ill repute) was built on five acres of the homestead that our friends, the Foreman's, purchased from Ed Peterson. We met Ed. He was a mild-mannered gentleman who had homesteaded and lived there with his brother Emil. What a shock to learn he was the man who shot Billy Kruse. He was cited, not for shooting Billy, but for leaving him there to bleed to death. As far as I could learn, Ed was never prosecuted. Homesteaders were needed up there.

Spring high water had washed a portion of our road into the river. It was necessary to find a new way in. It involved buying a right-of-way from an adjoining land owner that happened to be Tom Reynolds. The transaction was done entirely by mail and we never met him during the process. The road was punched in by a neighbor who owned a "cat." Unfortunately the road was not completed by the time we arrived. We were traveling with a camp trailer that had kitchen and bathroom facilities which we used with our homesteader cabin each summer. It was quite comfortable for us, our two children and our dog Whiskers. Since the road was not completed, it was necessary to park and spend the night a ½ mile from our cabin. We noticed a wood cutter in the area. My husband Baird went out to introduce himself. It was Tom Reynolds. Baird invited him to come have a cup of coffee. We had a very pleasant chat. As he left, I remarked "You must come in and see what we have done at the Monahan place."

Early our very first morning at the cabin, we were awakened by a sharp rap at the door. Tom had come to see what we were doing at the Monahan place. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Through the years he charmed us with his life story. His wicked stepmother had put him in the British Army at age 14. He was a musician and his travels took him to India and Australia. After his service he immigrated to Canada where he worked for a logger in Alberta. The first time he came to the United States he crossed the border illegally. After boasting about it in a tavern, he was incarcerated in the jail in Havre. The first thing he noticed was the inmates had no fabric in the seat of their pants. They had been there long enough to wear them out on the iron benches. To escape that fate he wrote his former employer in Canada and pleaded with him to bail him out and promised to work for him long enough to repay him. He came back to the U.S. legally and was a sheepherder in the White Sulphur Springs area.

He accepted all our invitations for dinner, always inquiring "What time? Your time or my time?" He was on railroad time which meant he usually arrived an hour before we expected him. We had been out early in the spring one year but returned to Illinois and came out at our usual time in early July. While home I had my hair cut very short. When we returned to Montana, Tom dropped by one day. As I opened the door, Tom took one look and questioned "What did you do to your hair? It looks like Hell!" With Tom there was no façade. You knew exactly where you stood!

My mother-in-law was the family pie baker. She had made a cherry pie for dinner. Fishing for a complement she asked "Tom, how do you like my pie?" Tom thought a minute then responded "I like mine better!" He charmed us with his honest remarks. We were going to town one time. Whiskers had been injured by some unidentified animal and needed to see the Vet. We were invited to the Holcombs in Kalispell for dinner that evening. As usual we canvassed the neighborhood to see if we could bring any needed item from town. Imagine our surprise when Tom said he would like to go with us. He hadn't been to town in years but he needed a driver's license. What a delightful trip with Tom telling his amusing tales all the way to town.

At the first stoplight Tom inquired "Why are we stopping here?" Baird called his attention to the traffic light on the right. A few blocks later another light and the same question and answer. We came to a 4 way stop and Tom asked again why we were stopping. Baird pointed out the stop sign. After a brief silence, Tom announced "Now I know why Matt Brill (his friend) said that the last time I was in town, every time he saw me I was running a stop sign."

My sister-in-law Garnett bought "Madame Queen's" cabin which she enjoyed in the summer with her daughter and her mother. Tom called on all of us often and was developing a real social network. We still never encroached on his privacy without good cause. We discovered that even though he extended his hospitality to our family, it was not to everyone.

One day when Garnett asked if he needed anything from town, he requested two wooden straight chairs. She filled his order at the secondhand store. When we visited him next we discovered he had cut 2" off the front legs of each chair. "It was to keep people from staying too long," he explained. Tom lived to the age of 90, very social and much cherished in the North Fork.