

June 11, 2017

# Happy Father's Day!

He walked into the bank apprehensively. He was tempted not to go through with it. It was a busy afternoon, the middle of the day.

After a moment's delay in which he debated with himself one last time, he made the decision.

It was time to act.

A moment later, a dozen business owners from up and down the street were poised in their doorways, rifles and pistols aimed directly at the doors of the bank. Bank patrons panicked, wondering if they were about to become the next victim of Baby Face Nelson, John Dillinger, or Machine Gun Kelley.

Dad pressed his palms to his ears to stifle the screeching alarm. His father, the bank manager, didn't have time to be scared; he was too busy being mortified. Dad was only five, and he hadn't been able to resist pressing that big red alarm button.

This was 1920s Ohio, a time when (as Dad told me), if a plane were to fly over, everyone would run outside to see it. Ice was delivered by horse and buggy and placed in a real "ice box" to keep their cold food cold. There was no TV, so Dad and his three brothers sought entertainment elsewhere. Like, for instance, pressing the alarm button at their dad's bank.

Or accepting gratefully the gift of two white rats, Frank and George. To house their new pets, the boys built a large, rickety cage. It wasn't long before they realized that "Frank" was actually "Francine". Within three weeks—much to the delight of the boys—they were entertaining a family of 12. Three months later they had enough white rats to take over a small town. Which is pretty much what happened.

When told by Grandpa that they had to rid themselves of the rodents, Dad and his brothers made a deal with a local pet shop. (They thought their pets would be sold to loving owners; They couldn't have known that the store's snake population was eagerly licking their lips and wearing brand new bibs.)

The four brothers each grasped a corner of the rickety cage and began to lug it down the street. *One block ... two blocks. Three more to go.* Suddenly Dad heard a strange creaking sound. His brother Clyde heard a loud crack. Then Paul heard one of the rats telling the others, "Ready yourselves! Freedom is at hand!"

With one more loud creaking groan, the cage disintegrated into a thousand pieces of wood and chicken wire. A carpet of rodents poured from the cage, running in all directions.

Grandma was at home gathering ingredients for a rhubarb pie when the first call came. It seems that six-year-old Edna Johnson had run to her mother screaming after being chased by a "giant white mousy" in her yard. Another call came. Howard Bushell said that three of the rodents darted into his house and tried to carry off a leftover baked chicken. Howard retrieved the chicken, but not before the rats made off with a thigh and a side of mashed potatoes.

Melvin Watts, the owner of the mercantile—who only a few years earlier nearly had a heart attack when a little boy had tripped the alarm at the bank—told Grandma that dozens of the

little rats had snuck into his back store-room and depleted the entire stock of hard beans. And that wasn't the worst of it. As they finished eating their beans, the little things took to "tooting," creating a malodorous environment during which "no one could walk in the store without turning green."

I don't recall the end of the story. Perhaps there isn't one. I would guess that the descendants of those original rats still haunt the little Ohio town.

Finally (but not final) there was the rock throwing contest. It was held next to a fenced-in electrical utilities area. The target? The boys didn't know *what* it was. A big white box with wires attached. They only knew that when one of the brothers struck it dead center, there was a loud pop, followed by the entire town going dark.

Like the rat story, I'm not sure how this ended for the boys. I do know that the brothers became notorious throughout 1920s and 1930s Ohio. Interpol even has a file on the four kids. Due to their misadventures, Interpol has vehemently refused numerous requests to have the files expunged.

When World War II came around, Dad served in the Navy as the officer on board a transport vessel in the north Pacific. The oldest brother, Clyde, became a colonel in the Air Force, serving in each war to follow, eventually dying of Leukemia brought about by his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Another brother was a paratrooper. A fourth would liberate a Nazi death camp.

Later, Dad and Mom would begin sponsoring refugees who lived in our home. And Dad would volunteer with Hospice, spending several years being a visiting friend to people who were in the last stages of life.

Most challenging of all for Dad were those brief few years that his four kids were all teenagers. Yes, that's what I said: He had (insert thunderclap here) **FOUR TEENAGERS LIVING IN HIS HOME. Shudder.**

At 92, he treads slowly. They say his body is having to work much harder to keep his heart pumping. When your heart's as big as his, no wonder it's hard for his body to keep up.

Thank you, Dad, for being the greatest father a kid could hope to have.

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