

MISS MIMI'S LEGACY

Remember: you're not just selling chicken; you're selling your story. That's what Daddy used to tell us around the dinner table on Sundays while we were eating his product. And looking back, maybe that's why I wouldn't have been too successful in the family business even if I'd done what he wanted and tried to be. Because I never have been all that sure what my story is. He didn't have any doubt about his and could tell it to you in a few words: how he rose from nothing, a fatherless boy in a shack, to become the King of American Chicken. That's the short version, anyway, trimmed and dressed and set out on a chilled shelf for sale. There's a longer one, though, and it's a bit more complicated. One only somebody close to him, like I was, can tell.

Jim Dawson was born in Bootlegger's Hollow in East Tennessee and raised by a man who made his living selling moonshine. A man who sometimes had his eldest son help him out with deliveries. That might seem like a liability for a future business tycoon but just the opposite is true. Because there's nothing more marketable to the American public than a respectable man who got his start doing something roguishly illegal. It doesn't hurt much either that his daddy was shot to death during one of those transactions; that just adds the bit of tragedy as necessary to a great man's story as the first frost is to a ripe persimmon. The way he always told it, he had no choice then but to step up and be a man. He had a mother and sister and brother who were depending on him. That moment when he grew up was forever etched in his memory but what's interesting is it wasn't the moment you might think it would be. It wasn't the sheriff pulling up in front of the shack in a patrol car to tell him his father wasn't coming home anymore, and it wasn't his father's body being lowered into the grave. It came after, when he had to kill his favorite chicken, Miss Mimi, so his family would have something to eat for what otherwise would have been not only a mournful but hungry Thanksgiving.

What he never told anybody but did tell me once when he'd had too much to drink, was how he chased Miss Mimi three times around the shack, crying every step of the way. How her white feathers flew up in a cloud when he caught her. How she cried out in terror like it was somebody else who had a hold of her instead of her trusty Jim. How he could barely see through his tears as he stretched out her neck and cut it in two with an axe. How her blood spurted all over his face and hands. How when he let her go, her body tried to make a run for it and the eyes in her head on the block looked up at him like they were looking at Judas Iscariot, not with hate but with a sad love that said she understood why he'd done what he'd done and forgave him for it. But that part of the story never was meant for public consumption. The most he would say was that it was then he found his balls and his calling, that it was then he first imagined founding the empire later known as Tasty Bird Farms.

It wasn't anything like an empire in the beginning, though. It wasn't much more than a dream. He got his start in the late 1930s, driving a few live chickens to local markets in a stake bed truck, the same one his daddy had used to run moonshine. I remember that truck because it was still around when I was little, sitting in the yard beside our house like a monument, the cab up front dark and spooky, the back a cage made of oak planks with gaps in between them. My sister Sam and I used to climb all over that vehicle, even though Momma kept chasing us off, saying it was a nest for snakes. Sometimes, we would pretend it was the German prison where Daddy spent a few months before the end of the war, other times that we were along for the ride on one of his by-then-

legendary chicken runs, the cage filled with live birds that squawked and flapped their wings all the way to Kingsport or Johnson City or Knoxville, what later came to be known as the Tri-Cities.

At first, that was about as far as he could get, given that the birds liked to die of thirst along the way, but it didn't take him long to devise a system for watering them enroute using a ten-gallon drum hooked up to a rubber hose poked full of tiny holes, which dripped a little every time he went over a bump in the road. That brought places like Winston-Salem and Chattanooga into range and, once he'd improved the design a little, Atlanta. By then, his brother Ed and sister Myrtle had joined the business, and they'd made enough money to move Grandma out of the shack in Bootlegger's Hollow into a fine little brick house in Corinth where she lived until she went to a nursing home.

Myrtle raised some chickens herself but bought most of them from farmers around the region, while Jim and Ed split the country in two with their deliveries. Jim took what he called the Mason side, north of the Tennessee line, while Ed took Dixie. I still remember Daddy telling me how one time he ran into some thieving off-duty police officers on the Cincinnati side of the Ohio River, how they tried to confiscate his birds by reciting some made-up poultry law, how he chased them off with a pistol he kept in the glove compartment. I guess it was stories like that one that had me, growing up, thinking of him as some kind of outlaw hero like Robin Hood or Clyde Barrow. If I'd been born then maybe I would have followed in his footsteps like he always wanted me to because that part of the business sounded like fun, but I didn't come along until later.

Things went on like that for a while. He kept buying and moving more chickens, every few years figuring out a better way to feed or water or deliver them. It wasn't long before he and Ed weren't doing the driving anymore; they hired other folks to do that. Instead, they spent their time improving production, lining up growers and feed dealers and financing, anything they had to do to keep hens moving along the line. The first big change came when they decided to start New York dressing the birds before shipping them out. From then on, the chickens were slaughtered and defeathered before they ever left East Tennessee, packed in ice with their feet still attached because that was how the butchers wanted their customers to see them. That opened markets as far away as Philadelphia but if you ask me it took some of the charm out of the business. After that, the story isn't about a boy driving truckloads of live chickens across the South to make money to feed his poor family, talking to the birds along the way to calm them down through the long night. After that, the story turns a bit grisly, full of ice trucks and dead, naked bodies. Yes, I do know the chickens died either way, but I can't help thinking it was along about then that the business lost its innocence.

At the same time the whole country was losing its innocence because that was at the start of World War Two. Jim was drafted and sent off to Europe, while Ed stayed home thanks to a clubfoot and kept Tasty Bird going. Uncle Ed never was the businessman Daddy was, even he would tell you that, but due to some happy circumstances he not only preserved what his brother had started but grew it. What happened was that during the war the government didn't ration chicken like it did beef and pork and set a price far higher than the cost of what it took to get the birds to market.

Thirty cents a pound, Ed would recite with glee long after that number seemed like he must surely have misremembered it, especially to those of us who grew up in a different era. What helped the most, he said, was President Roosevelt telling everyone on the home front they ought to eat chicken, thereby saving what he called the "better protein sources" for our boys overseas. Buying

Tasty Bird's products, Ed would tell us, grinning like a schoolboy who'd gotten away with something, became nothing less than a patriotic duty.

It was after Daddy came home that business really took off, though, and the way he told it those two things were related. Being in the Army, he said, taught him everything he needed to know about mass production because that was how the officers turned hundreds of thousands of boys into soldiers. Once he got back to Tennessee, he applied what he'd learned to the raising and selling of chickens. The barracks where he was housed in boot camp turned into state-of-the-art coops back home; the vaccines they gave him into the systematic inoculation of birds for Fowl Pox; and the troop landers they used to deliver his platoon to Omaha Beach on D-Day into harvesting trucks that moved chickens from local farms to his new processing plant halfway between Nashville and Knoxville.

That period right after the war, from 1945 to 55, while business was doubling and doubling again, was when he married Momma and had me, then two years later Samanatha. We were what folks would later call "baby boomers," and it was a given that one day we'd take over not only Tasty Bird Farms but the world. Though that wasn't something we thought about much in the beginning. We were too busy having a happy childhood. The processing plant, in those days, was just someplace Daddy went off to every morning wearing a white shirt and red tie. It wasn't until fourth grade that I even knew what went on there, when Billy Henderson taunted me all the way home from school one day, saying my old man ran a slaughterhouse. At first, I swore he did not, but after I found out it was true I had to resort to something other than denial. I told myself that "Billygoat" Henderson was just jealous because we lived in Bellaire, the swank part of town, while he went home every night to a trailer on the other side of the railroad tracks.

Over the next few years, while Sam and I were growing up, the business was growing along with us. Daddy started freezing chickens and selling parts as well as whole birds, which created new markets all around the country. Myrtle finally got married and moved to Savannah, taking a very generous buyout of her share of the company as a nest egg for herself and her new husband, Preacher Joe. Later, when Tasty Bird started breaking every sales record there ever was, the two of them wanted back in, but that's another story. Uncle Ed died of a heart attack at an age when most men are just getting started and all of us took the news hard, especially Daddy, I think because he'd always prided himself on being able to take care of his family. He had this notion that he could protect us from anything, even death, and Ed's passing was a reminder that he couldn't. He was alone in the company then, the only one left named Dawson at a time when there were competitors like Tyson and Holly rising to challenge him. It must have been along about then that he first started talking business at the Sunday dinner table, worrying who would keep Tasty Bird Farms going after he was gone.

For years, I thought he was talking to me at that table and I'm pretty sure he thought he was, too, but it turns out he was really talking to Samantha, my pig-tailed, blonde-haired, eager-eyed little sister. What he and I both found out, in time, is that while the person doing the talking is certainly important, what matters just as much—maybe more so—is who is doing the listening. It was Sam, not me, who started going into work with him; Sam, not me, who started touring the factory; Sam, not me, who went out into the field, meeting all the people in the different yet integrated parts of the business: feed dealers, chicken hatchers and handlers, drivers and buyers. For a while there, I called her his "Loo-tenant" because, as I told her, she was spending all her time in his shithouse. Which makes it sound like I was jealous, I know. Maybe I was. I don't think I ever seriously thought about

trying to take her place, though (or rather, take my place back from her), because I always knew in my heart that no matter what, the story of Tasty Bird Farms was Daddy's and nobody else's. Besides, it was a story that was becoming less interesting as I got older.

Part of the reason, I suspect, was that it seemed he never talked about chickens anymore, at least not like they were live animals. What he talked about instead were things like the price-per-pound, or how many tons he was shipping to Mexico, or how to further streamline the production line, or new Federal regulations for working conditions, or "god-damned Union Organizers." Somewhere along about then, too, thanks in no small part, I suspect, to Samantha's growing ambition, suddenly Tasty Bird wasn't just selling whole birds and parts but what were called "nuggets," plugs of hormone-laced frozen breast meat that were shipped to fast-food restaurants in plastic bags like they were pharmaceuticals, pills created to satisfy what Time Magazine called "America's Chicken Addiction."

Daddy's last few years were spent fighting off an attempted merger, one that started friendly but turned hostile as soon as he said no to a company that forever after he referred to as "Stalker Chicken." Eventually, he was able to hold Stalker off, but it took so much out of him that both Samantha and I thought—still think—it had a lot to do with him dying early, on the doorstep of his seventieth birthday. At least he died knowing he'd reached the mountaintop, that he'd climbed about as high as a man possibly could in the chicken industry. Tasty Bird's net worth, they said in his obituary, was measured in billions. And there beside his picture was one of Samantha, looking corporate, with a caption identifying her as his heir apparent. I was there in that column, too, without a photo, my name attached to a quote from one of our neighbors calling me the "profligate son" who had gone off to college to major, as far as she could tell, in smoking weed, who since then had done his level best to tear down what his daddy had spent his whole life building.

After the funeral, I helped Momma go through the things in his office at the processing plant. In the top drawer of his desk, we found a picture of him and Miss Mimi. In that black-and-white photograph, he's standing in front of the family homestead, that shack in Bootlegger's Hollow. He's wearing overalls and a big, gap-toothed grin on a face so freckled it looks like it belongs to somebody else. In his arms, he's holding his beloved chicken. That was the only photo we found. There weren't any of Ed or Myrtle or even Momma, and none of us kids. Just him and Miss Mimi. Later, that picture found a place on the wall in Samantha's office and it's been there ever since. It looks different now, though, inside a fancy frame. Daddy looks different, too. In some ways it's like he isn't real anymore, like he's turned into his own legend.

That's his story then, at least from my point of view, and I think I've always envied it. Not because I wish I'd lived it but because it's whole, because there's a beginning and a middle and an ending. Mine, on the other hand, has never been all that pure, which is why it probably never will be useful for selling anything to anybody. Not that I ever wanted that. All I ever wanted was to tell my story straight-out to somebody and have it mean something to them. Maybe you aren't quite the one I was expecting or hoping that person would be but at this point I suppose you'll have to do.