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West Virginia Squatters

by
Tom Holbrook

While out on the golf course the other day I was expressing my thanks to the good Lord above that there is such a game a person can enjoy even 20 or 30 years beyond my current age. Whilst thinking on this, for some disjointed reason, my mind then went back 50+ years into my childhood and my head was filled with images of my dad and his friends enjoying each others company in the front yard of my grandma Holbrook's home during one of our many visits to Punkin Center, better known to most as Auto, WV. These guys wouldn't have even thought of going out on the golf course, unless it was while chasing a coon at night. They didn't have golf as a pastime where they lived... fishing and hunting were their normal things to do when not working in the hay and wheat fields or milking the cows. But when they weren't doing that you could usually find them on their way or coming back from that ever present moonshine still in the deep of the woods, or in the shade of the front yard, squatting in a semi-circle doing what men do while squatting.

Besides seeing who could tell the most bodacious lies I remember one of dad's friends, Ken Byers, would be whittling whistles out of a small, green maple tree branch for us kids who would be hovering around. Ken could whittle like no one else I'd ever seen. Besides the whistles, he would also carve miniature guns for us as well. If I remember correctly Ken only had about four or five of his own teeth left but he laughed more than any of the others showing off his empty mouth. Of course after a few pulls off those quart jars of "water" they all seemed to liven up quite a bit.

Every now and then they would spit 'baccy juice off to the side or over their shoulder. That action plus a free roaming chicken or two made us kids be mighty careful as to where we would sit on the grass. Come to think of it, maybe that's why everyone squatted instead of sitting down. As a kid the truly amazing thing about the whole affair was not the lies, or the whittling or the spitting, but the squatting. I use to marvel at how these grown men could squat for hours at a time and never fall over. I suppose my amazement was spurred on by my own non-squat-ability... I was ashamed to let it be known that I couldn't squat... not even for a minute. My legs just wouldn't cooperate and allow me to join in. The other kids could and I thought maybe it was because I was just the city kid visiting and only country boys were blessed with this God given talent. I would ask my cousins how to squat and they would laugh and say, "Just sit your butt on your feet and lean back on your heels." I couldn't even visualize me trying to put that instruction into practice? It just wouldn't happen.

Even back in my hometown of Belle, WV, I later found my non-squat-ability would shame me at our local skating rink. Simms Skating Rink would have Saturday afternoon races with a boy or

girl squatting way low while another girl or boy pushed from behind. When a girl would ask if she could push me in the race I would hang my head and quietly tell her I couldn't squat. I would then offer to be her pusher but, of course, none of them wanted to be teamed up with someone who couldn't squat. I would see her later whispering to the other kids over by the rail, pointing in my direction and all of them laughing. Then they would all get their partners who dutifully squatted down and away they'd go around the rink... looking and laughing at me all the way. As I recall my brother Rudy was also a proficient squatter but those genes didn't get passed down to me.

Even the girls could do better than me, but I justified that situation by reminding myself that girls were born squatters and practiced it all the time. Judy, who grew up with me in Belle, said she can remember me being a squatter and not a pusher but I know she was mistaken... or maybe just trying to make me feel better and lift my spirits. This freakish malady has bothered me all my life and now, in my autumn years, I felt it was time to come clean before the world and confess my non-squatability to help free myself of all this stored up angst. I appreciate you letting me vent this way.

Ever wonder where the word squat came from... no, of course you wouldn't? My in-depth research only came up with a definition of "*a den for hares*" and the only other reference I had were those "*land grubbing, water spoiling, sheep herding squatters*" who were the perennial victims in Grade "B" Westerns when I was growing up. I'm sure you're familiar with those poor homesteading souls who risked their lives to come west to carve out a piece of the frontier for their own "spread," only to be shot, drowned, hung, or wrapped in their own non-cattle friendly barbed wire by the rich, evil, "no amount of land is ever enough", meat eating, cattle barons who were willing to do anything to protect their open range. These farmers would "squat" on the land and stay there long enough so it would be declared their land by the government. However, if you look real close in those movies at those cowboys gathered around a campfire I bet you'll see the real squatters, telling lies, spitting 'baccy juice, and whittling a whistle for some kid somewhere.

For those of you out there whose squat-ability has never been a challenge, please understand and be sensitive to those of us around you, hiding in the shadows, who could be hurt very deeply by the phrase, "Come on in and squat a spell," or "Squat down and take a load off yourself," or the really hurtful, "Let's face it Holbrook, you don't know squat!"

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