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That Cold Spell of '33

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After the rest of us had taken a serving from the beef, Medford forked the remaining three pounds of roast onto his plate, poured the remaining gravy over it, scooped mashed potatoes on top, and grinned sheepishly at Mom. He ate every morsel.

Medford was born in Illinois in 1905 and came to Tyrone with his parents one year later. His father had been a championship boxer in Illinois and ran a hardware store in Tyrone. An only child, Medford was known as a bookish, lonely boy who was teased for being a Mama's boy. He remained a loner all his life. He kept to himself, seldom leaving the house except to work and get groceries once or twice a month.

After graduating from Tyrone High School in 1924, he attended Panhandle A & M College at Goodwell. He taught school in the area four years, was a clerk in the First National Bank of Tyrone, and peddled coal during his younger years.

Medford, or M. H. as he liked to be called, lived in an old weatherworn house on the edge of town. The windows were all boarded up, and the yard was overgrown with weeds. The place looked as if it had been abandoned years earlier. There was no running water. He caught rain water in barrels for his laundry and gathered drinking water in five-gallon cans at our house. He felt being hooked up to the city water was an extravagance.

Those people lucky enough to be invited over could sort through and buy his antiques. Dad had bought several things and was asked to bring my brother Don and me over. While Dad drove us over in the pickup, he explained that we needed to learn the basics of bargaining to get the best buys. I was determined to show Dad I knew how to bargain with the old man.

Dad honked as we drove into the weedy

driveway. As we pounded at the weatherworn door, Medford peered out behind the old dusty crocheted curtains. My brother and I waited with apprehension as he clicked open the seven locks. Seven locks on a door was very odd at this time as many people in town still never locked their doors. We were both "pretty spooked" about going into the local "haunted house." But being 15, I felt I should appear brave in front of the 12-year-old. After all, he was just a kid.

As we stood in the dimly lighted kitchen, Medford clicked shut the seven locks and replaced the knife he kept wedged in between the door and facing. It was hard to see by the feeble light produced by one small bulb, but M. H. didn't believe in wasting anything. Especially electricity. When leaving for work he turned off all the electricity to the house at the breaker box.

In the dusty parlor were his antiques and bookcases full of dozens of old books, many of which are dated back to the 1890's. I was fascinated by these and gingerly leafed through several. There were volumes on philosophy, religion, history, vitamins, and self-improvement. I asked if the books were also for sale.

"No. That would be like selling my friends. I still read them over and over again," he replied. He was a very intelligent person.

In one corner of the room was a magnificent grand piano with its ivory keys and immaculate condition.

The antiques were arranged neatly on an assortment of old tables. Almost everything on the tables was in the original boxes. A colorful sugar bowl and creamer caught my eye, and I asked casually (so I wouldn't appear too interested), "How much for these?" "How much you want to offer?" Medford's eyes began to glisten.

He dearly loved to haggle over prices.

"Oh, I don't know. I couldn't go over three dollars." I was certain he would want much more. Boy, was I going to get a bargain!

"Sold! Three dollars!" Medford grinned broadly and laughed. "Dick, you're going to have to teach the girl how to buy antiques. Three dollars! Sold!"

I was embarrassed. Dad and Don were beginning to snicker. I could only hope the faded, worn carpet would swallow me up. As I paid for the sugar bowl and creamer, Medford teased me about my red face and laughed again about the "bargain." Later Dad confessed the old man had set the price on the set earlier at \$1.50.

Years later Dad told me Medford often asked if I still had the "high dollar tea set." The old man seemed to get a chuckle every time the subject came up.

Medford died in October of 1977. Dad dropped by to check on him and found him dead sitting in his favorite chair. His handwritten will, which named Dad as executor and mentioned the existence of some government bonds, was nearby. My parents searched the house later after the funeral and found a locked metal box in the back of a closet. Inside this box was a smaller locked box. Upon opening the last box, they were astounded to find stacks of old government savings bonds amounting to \$83,000.

As the will stipulated, the bonds were left on deposit with the U.S. Treasury Department and the interest is sent to the city of Tyrone. Medford's house, personal belongings, and lots were sold for over \$12,000, which was put in the city treasury. Medford left all he had ever owned to the city of Tyrone — basically to a town of strangers he had never met. Indeed, Medford H. Johnson was quite an old gentleman.

THAT COLD SPELL OF '33

— by Idena McFadin Clark

Once, in a springtime long ago,
These Chinese Elm trees along the walk
Were almost too young to cast a shade.
But I remember how brightly green
Their young leaves were
In the spring of '33.
That was the year a cruel wind
Blew down upon us from the frozen north.
(That springtime storm was fiercer
Than many a winter gale.)

Next morning, all the new young leaves
Hung limp and dark upon the trees.
Their brittle forms looked like something
Hammered out in ancient times

From a strange and star-born bronze.

But finally, the sun found a way to shine again.
The fragrant, warming air
Was soft and sweet. Tulips grew
And bloomed. The iris, too.
And all the trees were green again.
(The small dead leaves
Lay forgotten in the dust,
But the trees, themselves, had lived.)

Fifty years have passed since then.
And all the elm trees are green once more.
But I pray to God there will never be
Another cold and frightening storm
Like the one in '33 — when we were young.