

Excerpts from Lou's Dirty Dozen

Includes: Chicken Bill, The Dueling
Outhouses, and The Suitor

by

Ranny Grady

Chicken Bill

Momma never ceased to amaze me when it came to finding ways to challenge her children. She wanted us to reach for goals that would provide us with the rewards that come from looking fear right in the eye, finding ways to become overcomers. One such lesson she taught my sister Pauline and me took place in the early summer of my sophomore year.

As poor as our family was, we still managed to own a Philco radio. How Momma ever managed that financial miracle, I never did know. Momma and our family loved to listen to the famous radio personalities spin their tales of humor and drama. I suppose it was customary for all radio stations to air local programs that allowed them to sell advertising to businesses and keep the doors open and the stations in the black economically. One such program was “Chicken Bill’s Amateur Show.” The show’s sponsor was a company that sold chicken feed. I guess it was a natural segue for the amateur show to be given the title of “Chicken Bill’s Amateur Show.” The show was produced in and aired from Salina, a city about thirty-five miles from Tampa.

Bill “Red” Hooten was actually Chicken Bill. He was the emcee of the program. He was the sole decision maker for who was allowed to be on his show. He was a “one-man band,” according to Momma.

We loved to gather around the radio each week to listen to the contestants demonstrate their talent, or lack of it. Our family would place small bets (they had to be confined to slave labor from one member to another) on whom Chicken Bill would choose to win and who would be runner-up.

One particular group of poorly talented contestants sang and played their instruments way off-key. None of them were worthy of winning anything, but winners had to be chosen each week regardless of their worth, Momma said.

“Pauline, you and Jessie can do better than that.”

“Sure we could,” Pauline said. “But you’ll never get me to make a fool of myself like some of those people just did.”

“But you and Jess can harmonize so beautifully,” Momma countered.

“Jessie, tell Momma it’s just a pipe dream,” she said as she turned to me to help her find a way to stop Momma’s scheming in its tracks.

Before I could say a word, Momma said, “Just think of what our family could do with twenty-five dollars.”

“Twenty-five dollars wouldn’t begin to cover the expenses that could incur if we went up there and laid a big fat egg. Why, I’d have to have some shrink work on me day and night so I wouldn’t end up in some funny

farm,” Pauline said as she became overly dramatic.

“Have you ever been down at the pond and spent time skipping a stone on the water?” Momma asked. The sudden shift in the topic of conversation startled Pauline, the rest of the family, and me.

“Well, sure—”

“Why did you spend time skipping that rock?”

“To see if I could skip it all the way across,” I said as I jumped into the conversation.

Momma slapped her knee, and it made a loud noise. “That’s right! You did it for the challenge! If you don’t take a bite out of life every chance you get, what’s the use of living?”

“Now, none of you can tell me that Pauline and Jess can’t sing rings around that bunch of caterwauling we heard tonight.”

All the children, except Pauline and me, nodded their heads in agreement.

I looked at Pauline; she looked at me. We had fear in our eyes, yet there was excitement in our hearts.

The Dueling Outhouses

In October of my sophomore year, an event took place that ranks as about the funniest thing I ever had the privilege to witness.

Bessie Cunningham was our neighbor, just out our back door and across a garden. I've known some religious people in my day, but she beat them all. She wore dresses that covered her from the top of her neck to the tips of her shoes, provided she chose to wear shoes; she often was barefoot in the summer. She wore a big bonnet that covered her head, and she tied it under her chin. I will say one thing: she usually chose very colorful feed sacks from which she fashioned her dresses and bonnets. She was just a little nip of a thing, and it looked like a good wind would blow her away. I recall seeing her sometimes with her bonnet off, especially if she and I were sitting under the large maple tree in her back yard sipping lemonade. *She really is a pretty woman*, I thought. Her husband of nearly forty-five years had passed a couple of years ago. She spent her days working in her garden and reading her Bible.

"If there was ever a saint on this earth, she's one." I remember Momma saying how she respected her so much.

One day in the third week of October, there was a slight knock on our door just after supper. We weren't

expecting any company; it was pitch dark, so it wasn't likely someone paying us a visit unless they arrived by an automobile.

Deannie ran and opened the door. When she saw the person standing there, she must have become frightened because she slammed the door and ran to find Momma.

"There's some weird-looking person at the door," she said.

Momma briskly took off her apron and laid it on a chair in the kitchen where she had been finishing up from supper. She rushed to the door.

"Deannie, why did you shut the door on our guest?" she asked as she opened the door to discover Bessie. "Why, I never... Come in, Bessie." Momma invited her in. "Kids! A body does all it can to teach them manners." Momma smiled at her. "What brings you out at night at this hour? Hope it isn't anything bad. Did my kids do something to make you mad?" Momma was offering up an apology, not even knowing that an apology might be due, just to head off any possible trouble with her fine neighbor.

"I'm much obliged to you for letting me barge in on you, Lou," Bessie said. "And heavens no, your children are always so polite and kind to me." Her reply allowed Momma to calm down and lose her apprehension concerning Bessie's visit.

“I was about to have a hot cup of tea; won’t you join me?” Momma caught herself in midsentence. “Oh, I forgot, you don’t drink any coffee or tea.”

“Stirs a body’s workings too much; it seems to make the brain race too fast,” she added.

“You don’t mind if I have one, do you?” Momma asked.

“I’m not one to go around telling people how to live. Now, the Good Book will, but not Bessie.” The two women giggled.

“Bessie, there must be something powerful on your mind for you to get out at night.” Momma started the conversation that soon became so fascinating that none in our household could hardly believe what we were hearing.

“Halloween has been a real sore spot with me for the past few years,” Bessie confided.

In Tampa, Halloween was a high time for foolish high jinks, particularly with the high school boys. The younger children were out paying visits to the neighborhood houses to trick-or-treat them so they could gather a bagful of wonderful treats to get spoiled on. The high-school-aged boys were being mischievous and, in many cases, cruel and hurtful. Their favorite Halloween trick was to turn over the outhouses and allow the stench to rise from the refuse and permeate the air. In too many cases the outhouse structures were heavily

damaged, which required the owner to build a new one.

“I realize that it isn’t a problem so big you’d want to have the town constable pay a visit,” Bessie said. “But it can be a big problem when Mother Nature comes a’calling.” She gave us all a wink. “Sometimes the old slop jar just won’t do the trick.” She laughed with us. “If you have to go for a spell without a proper outhouse...” She made a face that indicated she was suffering some pain. It made us all laugh loudly. “If I get a choice, I’d rather not.”

While her outhouse had been attacked nearly every year, ours had remained unharmed, probably because Howard and Charlie were well known and well liked by most of the older boys, roughies, as they were called in our school.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” Bessie said. “And for an eighty-year-old brain, that takes some doing.” She laughed, and we laughed with her. “I suspect that I am going to get hit again this year. It rankles my gizzard.” She leaned forward in her chair. “What if”—she allowed herself a little, soft laugh—“there was to be a new hole dug just before they come a’calling on Halloween night?” Her countenance changed as a sly grin crossed her face.

Momma and our family sat there for a few seconds, allowing the full impact of her plan to penetrate our brains. Momma suddenly slapped her knee.

“Bessie, that is the most ingenious thing I believe I have ever heard.” She giggled loudly.

Pauline was home from her job at the restaurant that night.

“If it works, that will be the smelliest Halloween trick ever pulled off in our town,” she said as she joined in with our laughter.

The plan was concocted that night in our kitchen. The aftershocks live on in Tampa’s folklore.

The Suitor

In late May of my thirteenth year on God's planet, Momma and I were out in the hinterlands, once again seeking deadbeats to pay their overdue newspaper bills. We were not having much luck. We were in Howard's Chevy coup.

The late spring day was filled with sunshine. Mayflowers could be seen along the road; when we passed the houses along the way, each one had flowers growing, and they added beauty to our idyllic drive. The sun was warm against our skin; I glanced at Momma, glowing in its rays, from time to time while I drove.

"We might as well drive on into Durham," Momma said as I was doing my best to maneuver the ruts in the road so we wouldn't find our insides completely turned wrong side out.

"Perhaps we could go to Martha's." I turned and looked at her with a bit of begging in my voice.

Martha's Restaurant was considered the best place to eat in Durham. A majority of the farmers and businessmen frequented her place any time they could find an excuse to do so. Her lunch specials were worth driving miles for. They consisted of country-fried steak that nearly covered the plate, a huge mountain of mashed potatoes and rich gravy, beans, and cornbread (she was a Southern girl and would never think of serving a lunch

without cornbread), vegetables, and a choice of pies. Her pies were at least four to six inches high (her trademark) and sold for a reasonable price. It was a meal that melted in your mouth and made your stomach grin. She had customers waiting to get tables come lunchtime.

Momma and I had gone to her restaurant a couple of times before. What a treat!

"Maybe Martha's is just what we girls need."

I pushed the gas pedal down.

"I'd surely like to get there in one piece," Momma said, and I looked at her and we laughed.

"Jesus said to watch and keep ready. Neither the hour nor the day is known when he will return," Momma told me often. "Life is much like his story, Jess. A body can get up in the morning and think all is well in heaven and earth; by nightfall, that same person may think the whole world's gone to hell in a handbasket."

Before that day was over, Momma proved herself to be a seer.

As bright as the sun was, in just a few minutes, the heavens filled with clouds. We stopped to put up the top on the car. By the time we arrived in Durham, it was pouring down rain.

"Goodness me," Momma said. "I forgot to bring an umbrella."

"We're not sugar," I teased.

"We may not melt, but we'll end up looking like

drowned rats.” She laughed.

We were fortunate because we found a parking spot very close to Martha’s place.

“Let’s sit here and see if it lets up some,” Momma said.

“I don’t care how wet I get, just so I get some of her pie.”

“Oh, for the joy of only having to worry about how big a piece of pie one can get.” She poked me in the ribs lightly.

After a few minutes the rain let up some.

“We’d better make a run for it,” I said.

We stepped out of the car and felt the mud and wetness fill up our shoes.

“Squishy yuck!” I hollered disgustedly and looked down at my feet.

“Don’t stop now, Matilda,” Momma said as she pushed me to get moving. I never really knew why Momma used that name, “Matilda,” when anything had to do with moving on, but I know she used it on me a lot.

We managed to quickly make the trek out of the rain and into Martha’s place. The weather evidently scared off the normal lunch crowd; we had our choice of seating.

We were seated and recovering as best we could. Martha spotted Momma and came to our table. The first time Momma and I went to her place, she let Momma

know that she was a welcomed guest at her restaurant.

She admired Momma and really enjoyed her writing.

“Your words show that you’ve got spunk,” Martha said. “I get to laughing and carrying on sometimes when I read your stories. It shows you’ve got sass too. I like a woman with spunk and a lot of sass.”

Martha was a bit of a legend. She had come to Durham many years ago. Gossip had it that she had been a mail-order bride. She came all the way from Virginia. Vince Gordon was a man up in his years. He was well to do, even though people never could put their fingers on what he did to earn a living. He made trips back east about twice a year for a couple of weeks. Then he kept a low profile and stayed to himself as much as he could.

The story goes that one day he told some business acquaintances that he was tired of living alone, and he aimed to do something about it. The next thing anyone knew, Martha arrived in town on the train. When she opened her mouth, “honey seemed to just drip out” is what the locals said. She was an attractive woman, cut a fine figure, and Vince was one happy man. They were married; a year later she had a baby. Old Vince was quite the talk of the town. Six months later, he fell dead on the street.

While Vince wasn’t as wealthy as people thought, he did leave Martha a nice nest egg. She used the money to open up her restaurant. Their daughter was given the

finest upbringing money could buy. But she chose to live in the east and had never returned to Durham. Martha had to visit her if she wanted to see her daughter.

After Martha befriended Momma, Martha verified that story's veracity.

"Lou, Eloise (her daughter's name) used her father's money and my sweat to rise above her raisin'." With a little tear in her eye, Martha said, "She just plum forgot who brung her to the dance."

When Martha spotted Momma and me, she came to our table.

"Lou Crandal and Jessie, what brings you to my little Southern mansion?" She and Momma exchanged hugs and warm smiles.

"Good fortune and the good Lord's providence." Momma laughed. "What else? Your pies!" She looked directly at me. "This girl has been talking about nothing but your fruit pie with a big scoop of vanilla ice cream on it for the last half hour." She looked at me; I was blushing but smiling, embarrassed.

"I don't blame you." Martha winked at me. "I have a hard time keeping away from them blame critters myself," she teased. She took her left hand and put it on her tummy and then her hips. "Since it is plain as day, I'm fighting a battle and losing the war." She laughed; we joined her.

"Martha, most any woman would trade yours for

theirs, including me," Momma said.

"That's so kind of you, Lou. That's what I like about your momma, Jessie. She's a journalist who knows how to write good fiction." She gave us a sly smile, and we all shared a good laugh.

Momma and I ordered lunch, and I ended my delicious meal with a big piece of warm cherry pie with ice cream; the ice cream was with Martha's compliments. My, how we enjoyed ourselves!

The rain stayed steady all the while we were in the restaurant.

"I'm getting to the stage in my life where I'm about ready for a keeper," Momma said. "Forgetting to bring an umbrella." She used her hands to mimic that she was opening an umbrella.

"We'll just wait it out," I said.

"The first chance it lets up a bit, we need to make a dash for the car," Momma said.

In a few more minutes, the rain slowed down to a light drizzle. "Let's go." We left a dime tip on the table, and we made a run for it. As we hurriedly made our way to the car, a man's voice came from behind us.

"If you ladies will slow down a second, I'll rescue you."

Momma turned around to glance at the man. Suddenly, he was beside us, and he had a very large umbrella. He put it up over us to shield us from the rain.

“Here, hold this,” he said.

Momma took hold of the umbrella, and he walked us out to the parked car. He surveyed it, and he shook his head. The rain made the area around it mucky, and it held a lot of water all around it.

“Let’s get this started, and I’ll see if I can move it closer and in a better spot,” he said.

Momma and I looked at each other curiously.

Why is this complete stranger volunteering to be so gallant and so kind? I thought.

He cranked the car and got it started. He backed it up, and he helped Momma and me into the car. He made sure we were in the car and out of the inclement weather. I was driving and Momma was in the passenger seat. He stood on my side of the car, holding his umbrella to protect himself from the rain, which suddenly increased its intensity.

“Do you hang around Martha’s place so you can rescue all damsels in distress?” Momma asked him in a teasing manner. “Or are we just special?”

“Hiram P. Dumphy at your service, ma’am,” he said. “And if the woman is as comforting to the eyes as you”—he looked past me and directly at Momma—“I’d be here all day long.”

“And here I thought chivalry was dead.” Momma smiled at him, and I detected a bit of a blush in her face.

It hit me right in the face. No denying it; for the

first time in my life I saw my momma flirting with a man. She had never flirted with Poppa that I could recall.

Evidently, she knew what I was thinking. “I’m just being polite,” she said in a low voice out of the side of her mouth.

Mr. Dumphy was a middle-aged man of medium girth. His white starched shirt contrasted sharply under the busy design of his reddish brown tie, which complemented a medium brown three-piece suit. A gold chain stretched from a watch fob to his watch pocket, where I suspected I would find a gold pocket watch. On his head was a tan derby hat, and his round face was bespectacled with wire frames, drawing attention to kind, crystal blue eyes. When he smiled, his teeth, white and straight, only added to his appearance.

“Since I did rescue you, I think it is only fair that I know the pretty ladies’ names,” he said, and he bent down so that he could better look directly at Momma.

“This here is Jessie, my daughter, and I’m Lou Crandal.” *What are you doing? Momma, how could you? On Main Street! In broad daylight, flirting with a man you just met,* I thought, as I was shocked at her behavior. “Momma, we’d better be getting home. Your dozen kids will be wondering where we have been,” I said in a direct, loud voice.