

THE LEGEND OF BLACKBERRY

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A soft South Carolinian breeze swept up from the mill pond and across the porch of the little mill-village cottage, ruffling the curls of two little girls as they nestled securely in the embrace of Big Pa-paw. The trio laughed uproariously and the young cousins begged:



"Tell us one more story, Pa-paw."

The rocking chair began to move again and the girls eyes grew round with wonder as Big Pa-paw began to spin another yarn. I slipped away unnoticed from the screen door and smiled to myself, for I knew by heart the story he would tell.

Born Lester Eller, a seventh generation descendant of Caspar Eller, from Palanate, Germany, with a maternal Cherokee Indian grandmother, Big Pa-paw answered to the colorful name of "Blackberry".

As a lad, he went blackberry picking with a group of boys. They emptied their small buckets into a larger one and moved on to another part of the blackberry patch. Lester slipped away, unnoticed, and when the group returned to the larger bucket, they found it empty. Lester's stained lips told the rest of the story and the name of "Blackberry" stuck throughout his seventy-four years.

Hand-to-mouth existence seemed to be the norm in the red clay mountains surrounding Clayton, GA. Food was scarce and schools almost non-existent. An older brothers, Charley, along with young Lester and several younger sisters, survived by themselves for three weeks, when abandoned in a mountain cabin. A kindly neighbor lady brought them a bowl of cold, cooked pumpkin each day. The interior walls of the cabin had been papered with newspapers, pasted with "Flour" paste. Hunger pains forced the children to pry the newspapers off the wall and eat the dough behind them.

John, Blackberry's son, says, "Dad wouldn't allow a can of pumpkin in our house. I didn't taste pumpkin pie until I was grown."

In spite of such hardships, Blackberry, the comedian, learned to poke fun at himself and entertain others:

"We moved so often," he declared, "that the handles on the suitcases would fly up in the air and the chickens would roll over on their backs and stick their feet in the air to be tied. "

I tied a string around the first biscuit I saw and dragged it around the house for three days, then discovered you were supposed to eat it! And I was a grown man before I knew that a chicken had other portions besides feet and necks.

Nevertheless, hunger left its mark. It was not unusual to see him eat a whole pie for breakfast, along with his "sawmill" coffee.

"Get two cups of water boiling," he instructed me, "then add a couple of handfuls of coffee. Boil the mixture down to one cup and strain it. There's no need to drink a gallon of water to get a cup of coffee. And I like mine strong, too. I left a spoon in a cupful one morning and by noon, that spoon had melted away!"

He also prepared "gruel in the gravy" (gravy made by substituting cornmeal for flour); and "sling-shot gravy" (white gravy made without meat grease).

Another recipe he shared with me was his famous "Stone Stew", which used a stone instead of meat.

"Choose a smooth stone from the creek bed," he told me, "and place it in the bottom of your cooking pot. Add the ingredients for stew. The heat from the rock will help to cook the stew faster and consequently give it a better taste."

With his zest for life and his jovial nature, he enjoyed making people laugh. During depression days, he'd black his face and pull his harmonica out of his bib overall's pocket. Then, Blackberry's rounded Santa Claus figure, with its tiny feet, kept perfect time as he danced the Charleston, accompanied by lively self-taught harmonica music. He claimed to know all 120 steps of the Charleston and also enjoyed another type of dancing known as "scolly-flopping."

After passing his hat and pocketing the collection, Blackberry hoboed his way, via box-car, to another street corner.

However, hoboing on the Swamp Rabbit Railroad and performing his black-faced comedian act soon lost its charm. Blackberry married his Annie Mae and went to work in a J. P. Stevens textile mill for \$19.00 a week. They purchased a mill-village cottage by taking on a fifteen-year loan at 4% interest, and a \$25.00 per month house payment.

Every mill had its bully. Tucapaw's big bully, Bush Smith, made a target of Blackberry. He'd tease, pinch and hurt the smaller man at every opportunity. Blackberry tried to enlist the help of his boss and failed.

One day at the company store, among a large group of witnesses, Bush attacked Blackberry. Backing up and pleading to be left alone, Blackberry stumbled over a piece of concrete. When the bully continued his persecution, Blackberry came to his feet with the piece of concrete in his hand and knocked his opponent unconscious. Bush remained unconscious for three weeks. Blackberry landed in jail, charged with assault and battery.

Not being able to afford a lawyer's assistance, Blackberry pled his own case before a jury of twelve men who acquitted him.

Two sons, John and David, arrived to tighten the meager budget. Blackberry, having no car, walked to and from the mill and faithfully worked night shifts to support his small family.

He rigged up a small "fix-it" shop beneath their high back porch and used his handy-man skills to supplement their strained budget. Making the rounds of trash piles, he'd pick up broken items and repair them, thus substantiating his claim that he "could make a living off what other people throw away."

He foraged in the woods for muskadines (to make jelly) and dogwood branches for sling-shots. After stripping the bark off, he'd tie the branches into a certain position and bake them in a small kiln in the back yard. He'd then fashion a very durable sling-shot and sell them to the local hardware store. When used with a steel plug, these sling-shots became a lethal weapon at thirty paces.

After I joined the family, he presented me with a small "Blackberry special", declared that "all Ellers know how to shot a sling-shot, and proceeded to teach me the skill. That tiny dog-wood sling-shot is still a favorite keepsake of mine.

"Flouride" water came to the little mill village, but Blackberry didn't trust it. That type of water was alright to bathe in, but the Ellers hauled their drinking water in gallon jugs from their trusted South Carolinian springs in the surrounding areas.

Neither did he trust banks! After being told that the bank's computer was malfunctioning and he'd have to come back tomorrow to withdraw his money, he used the old tried and proven hollow bed post on his iron bedstead.

He hid \$500.00 in his room one day and forgot where he had hid it. After a considerable length of time elapsed, he offered half of the amount to Annie Mae, if she could find the money for him. She tore his room apart, bit by bit, and found the bills tucked securely between two jars of home-canned green beans, stored on the shelves behind the bedroom door.

Blackberry moved like a happy-go-lucky whirlwind, always busy, hard-working, and honest to a fault. He would loan you his last dollar or walk a mile to collect it, if you owed him a dime. But his feelings were highly sensitive and his temper extremely quick.

He brought home a white coconut cake from the bakery one day. It didn't please Annie Mae. She commented, " I wanted a chocolate one." In two strides, he flung open the kitchen door, stepped out on the high back porch, and the coconut cake went sailing through the air, right over his son's head. John remembers thinking, "I bet that cake would have tasted good!"

Inheriting a mixture of his father and mother's opposite traits, caused John to comment to me one day, "I feel Lester and Annie Mae warring inside me!"

In spite of his temperament and his active schedule, he could always be counted on to have the time and the patience required to "pour coffee" from a doll-like tea set with his granddaughters: eat (and pretend to greatly enjoy) a well-kneaded "first" biscuit; or, share a harmonica and dance with his only grandson.

A high-light of his day came when the oldest granddaughter returned from school and he could play "school" with her. Judianne taught her "student" what she'd learned that day and gradually a life-long dream became a reality: Blackberry learned to read and write.

Economics caused the J. P. Stevens mill to shut down. Retirement didn't set well with an energetic man like Blackberry, so he ran a used furniture store for a period of time. Then, he became a jack-of-all trades for the city of Greer.

Early morning hours found him caring for the patches of grasses, flowers and hedges that dotted the southern down-town area like a colorful patch work quilt. Merchants looked forward to his cheery "Hi,Pal!" greeting. No trash dared clutter his down-town area and the streets were swept spotless.

At the age of 74, Blackberry worked his downtown area on a Friday in March of 1984. He had a massive stroke the next day which claimed his life, April 10, 1984. The city of Greer hired three men to do his work. On a recent visit to the little Appalachian village, John entered the small post office and introduced himself, proudly, to the postmistress as " Blackberry's son."

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "I remember him. He was Appalache's most colorful character."
