

Hoosier Vagabond

By Ernie Pyle

Editor's Note: This is the 21st of a series of Ernie Pyle war dispatches that are being reprinted while Ernie takes a rest.

THE TUNISIAN FRONT, February, 1943.—On the morning of the Germans' surprise break-through out of Faïd Pass, I was up in the Ousellita valley with another contingent of our troops.

Word came to us about noon that the Germans were advancing upon Sbeitla from Faïd. So I packed into my jeep and started alone on the familiar 25-mile drive south to Sbeitla. It was a bright day and everything seemed peaceful. I expected to see German planes as I neared Sbeitla, but there were none, and I drove into my cactus-patch destination about an hour before sundown.

I hadn't been there 15 minutes when the dive-bombers came, but that's another story, which will come later.

I checked in at the intelligence tent to see what was going on, and found that things were dying down with the coming of dusk. So I pitched my tent and went to bed right after supper.

Next morning I got up before daylight and caught a ride, just after sunrise, with two officers going up to the new position of our forward command post. We drove very slowly, and all kept a keen eye on the sky. I didn't have a gun, as correspondents are not supposed to carry arms. Occasionally we stopped the jeep and got far off the road behind some cactus hedges, but the German dive bombers were interested only in our troop concentrations far ahead.

Finally we spotted a small cactus patch about a mile off the road. We figured this was the new home of the forward command post, and it was. They had straggled in during the night and were still straggling in.

Nothing Left to Work With

THE CACTUS PATCH covered about two acres. In it were hidden half a dozen half-tracks, a couple of jeeps, three light tanks and a couple of motorcycles—all that was left of the impressive array of the traveling headquarters that had fled Sidi bou Zid 18 hours before.

The commanding general had already gone forward again, in a tank, to participate in the day's coming battle. The remainder of the command post were still sitting around on the ground. Half of their comrades were missing. There was nothing

left for them to work with, nothing to do. When I came into this cactus patch the officers I knew, and had left only four days before, jumped up and shook hands as though we hadn't seen each other in years. Enlisted men did the same thing.

I thought this was odd, at first, but now I know how they felt. They had been away—for along on the road that doesn't come back—and now that they were still miraculously alive it was like returning from a voyage of many years, and naturally you shook hands.

During the next few hours there in the cactus patch I listened to dozens of personal escape stories. Every time I would get within earshot of another officer or enlisted man he'd begin telling what had happened to him the day before.

Perfect Sounding Board

TALK ABOUT having to pull stories out of people . . . you couldn't keep these guys from dying down with the coming of dusk. So I pitched my tent and went to bed right after supper.

For instance, the omission of the word "not" in the seventh commandment which gives the name "Wicked Bible" its name.

Out of control, it may easily lead to bibliomania, which is a passion for possessing books because of certain accidental circumstances attending them—as, for instance, the omission of the word "not" in the seventh commandment which gives the name "Wicked Bible" its name.

TO BE SURE, the Russos didn't discover anything quite as exciting as that. Nobody has. Just the same, they uncovered plenty.

For example, in the second edition of Riley's first book appear the words "chipmunks" ("chipmunks" in the first printing); "breath" ("breath" in first printing); "natchural" ("natural" in first printing).

There's no telling which word is right, dialect poetry being what it is. It may be the result of Riley's practice of polishing every line until it glistened and, then again, it may be the fault of typesetters who, not infrequently, play by ear.

THE STORY of Riley's first book improves with age like good wine. It appears that Mr. Riley had dreamed of a first book as early as 1877, but it wasn't until six years later that anything was done about it.

"The Old Swimm' Hole" brought it to a head. When that poem appeared in the Indianapolis Journal on June 17, 1882, and got the reception that it did, it convinced George Hitt that something had to be done to preserve Riley's poems for posterity.

A year later, Mr. Hitt (an important cog in the Journal's office) went in search of a publisher. He wrapped a dozen poems including the headliner, "The Old Swimm' Hole," and submitted the proposition to Robert Clarke & Co., an old and well-known Cincinnati publishing house. They gave one look, discovered that it was dialect poetry, and refused to touch it. It was beneath their dignity, they said. It was not beneath their dignity, however, to consider the proposition as a printing job. Mr. Hitt contracted for 1000 copies at a total cost of \$141, including the price of copy-right.

THIS GROUP of buddies met regularly during the period of 1876-77. On one occasion when everybody was especially sour about the public's inability to recognize genius, Riley pulled from his pocket a manuscript and, without further coaxing, started to read:

"Leominie—angels named her; And they took the light Of the laughing stars and framed her In a smile of white."

COPIES of this issue were sent to all newspapers in the hope of catching the eyes of their literary critics. Some fell for it, but most of the big shots didn't. For one, William Cullen Bryant didn't, and the Boston Transcript remarked rather testily: "If Poe really did write it, it is a consolation to think that he was dead."

Another critic, recalling the hoax played by Chatterton, and the suicide it led to, charged the writer of "Leominie" with not having the good taste to follow Chatterton's example.

By this time everybody connected with the hoax got scared, and nobody more than Mr. Henderson. It was he who, finally, exposed the trick. After that, Riley resigned from the Anderson Democrat and returned to his old house in Greenfield. He continued his work and soon thereafter was encouraged by C. B. Martindale who ran The Indianapolis Journal. From that time on for quite a while, Riley practiced under the pseudonym of "Benj. F. Johnson" which was the signature of the author of "The Old Swimm' Hole" (and "Leven Other Poems").

IT WAS the start of the hoax.

Somebody got hold of an old copy of Ainsworth's Dictionary on the fly-leaf of which Samuel Richards (or maybe, Will Ethell) transcribed Riley's poem in imitation of Poe's handwriting. A facsimile in an old magazine furnished the pattern.

After which, Oscar Henderson, publisher of the Kokomo Dispatch, was dragged into the plot.

Mr. Henderson printed "Leominie" on the front page of his paper, issue of August 2, 1877, along with a lurid and elaborate story of how the poem was found.

Mrs. Samuel Richards is generally credited with thinking it up.

THE RUSSOS have also set me right concerning the cover of "The Boss Girl," Riley's second book (1886). Surely you remember it. It depicts an imp descending head first out of the clouds and touching off a cannon in the shape of an ink bottle. It's too cute for words.

Well, for 50 years now I've been content to believe that the cover was the work of Booth Tarkington, who was 17 years old at the time. It turns out to be a collaboration.

We have Mr. Tarkington's own word for it.

IN A LETTER to the Russos, Mr. Tarkington says: "Sometimes he (Mr. Riley) would spend the greater part of an evening drawing with me and he went so far as to ask me for suggestions about the cover of his first 'full-size' book."

"It was to be a paper cover, and for it he'd designed an ink bottle mounted as a cannon firing a charge that exploded into the words 'THE BOSS GIRL.' When he'd sketched the design, I drew upon the paper an imp flying downward from the top of the page and, with the point of a long quill pen applied to the touch-hole, firing the ink-bottle canon."

The idea pleased the poet; he made much of it and of me, and the book was printed with my imp on the cover. Whenever he talked to me of 'The Boss Girl' he spoke as if to a fellow-workman who'd had much to do with the book's creation and rightfully shared credit in its modest success.

"I glowed, but didn't swell. In all my relations with the good and true poet, mercy from on

high heaven was the best reward.

After all, it's Gus's haunted house.

Imagine those sober, conservative gentlemen! Arriving for a serious discussion of our party's campaign issues! And being met by a Ghost!

Please go away, O'Malley! I need quiet—Oh, dear! Now someone's at the back door—

Gus might score them.

That's GUS yelling...

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Up Front With Mauldin

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OUR TOWN: 'RILEYANA' . . . By Anton Scherer

New Book Clears Up Some Riley Mysteries

(Continued From Page One)

will receive the bulk of the edition. Libraries and collectors will get the rest. No copies are for sale.

BIBLIOGRAPHY, I learned, is one of the most important branches of bibliography. Rendered in more lusty language, it means that it is the science which treats of the descriptions, cataloging and preservation of books. At any rate, that is more or less what it is when under control.

Out of control, it may easily lead to bibliomania, which is a passion for possessing books because of certain accidental circumstances attending them—as, for instance, the omission of the word "not" in the seventh commandment which gives the name "Wicked Bible" its name.

The minute a man would start talking he'd begin drawing lines on the ground with his shoe or a stick, to show the roads and how he came. "I'll bet I had that battleground scratched in the sand for me 50 times during the forenoon. It got so I could hardly keep from laughing at the consistency of their patterns."

There's no telling which word is right, dialect poetry being what it is. It may be the result of Riley's practice of polishing every line until it glistened and, then again, it may be the fault of typesetters who, not infrequently, play by ear.

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