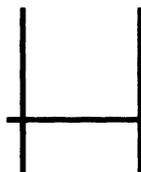


CRACKER CHIDLINGS

Real Tales from the Florida Interior



HERE, in the uncivilized Cracker interior of Florida, you insult a man in half-friendly fashion by calling him a damned Georgia Cracker. Nine times out of ten you have hit the mark. Georgia Crackerdom, joined by a thin stream of Carolinians and a still thinner one of Virginians, has flowed lazily into the heart of this State, back in the scrub, in the hammock, along the lakes and rivers, and created Florida Crackerdom.

Georgia Cracker and Florida Cracker have a common ancestor in the vanished driver of oxen, who cracked yards of rawhide whip over his beasts and so came by his name. One hates the other as mothers and daughters sometimes hate. I saw the hate flicker into words at the doings at Anthony.

Squirrel Eyes

Word came that Fatty Blake, snuff and tobacco salesman and Anthony's richest citizen—wealth in Anthony, as elsewhere, is relative—was having a big doin's on a certain Thursday night. The world, it appeared, was invited. Finally Fatty himself drew up in front of Adams's store to verify the advance story. Fatty was inviting two counties to his doin's, and all was free. Squirrel pilau and Brunswick stew. Fatty couldn't likker you, as he would like to do, but if you brought your own 'shine and were quiet about it, why, he'd meet you at the gate for a drink, and God bless you.

“I got boys in the woods from can’t to can’t,” Fatty said (from can’t-see to can’t-see, or “from dawn to dark”), “gettin’ me squirrels for that pur-loo. I got me a nigger comin’ to stir that pot o’ rice all day long. And my wife, God bless her, is walkin’ the county, gettin’ what she needs for Brunswick stew, the kind her mammy made ahead o’ her in Brunswick, Georgia.”

Cars and wagons and lone horses and mules began coming in to Anthony long before dark. They brought women in home-made silks and in faded ginghams, men in mail-order store clothes with high stiff collars, and men in the blue pin-checks of the day’s work. Children screamed and sprawled all over the swept sand about Fatty’s two-story house.

Up and down the forty-foot pine-board table bustled the wives of Anthony, each of whom had brought her contribution, as to a church supper, of potato salad made by stirring cut onion and hard-boiled egg into cold mashed potatoes, of soda biscuits and pepper relish, of pound cake and home-canned blueberry pie. Back of the house a nigger stirred rice in a forty-gallon wash-pot with a paddle as big as an oar. It grew dark and the crowd was hungry. It had not eaten since its high-noon dinner of white bacon, grits, and cornbread.

At seven o’clock Mrs. Jim Butler played three solo hymns on the Blakes’ parlor organ, moved out to the front porch for the occasion. Then she lifted her shrill soprano voice in the opening chords of “I know salvation’s free,” and the crowd joined in with quavering pleasure.

At seven-thirty the Methodist preacher rose to his feet beside the organ. He lauded Fatty Blake as a Christian citizen. He prayed. Here and there a devout old woman cried “Amen!” to taper off his prayer. And then the parson asked that any one so minded contribute his mite to help Brother Blake defray the expense of this great free feast.

“Will Brother Buxton pass the hat?”

Habit was too strong. The parson could not see a multitude gathered together in the name of the Lord or in the name of victuals without giving them a Christian shake-down.

The hat was passed, and as the pennies and nickels clinked into it, Fatty Blake made his address of welcome.

"I've done brought all you folks together," he shouted, "in the name of brotherly love. I want to tell you, all at one great free table, to love one another.

"Don't just stick to your own church," he pleaded. "If you're a Baptist, go to the Methodist church when the Methodists have Preaching Sunday. If you're a Methodist, go help the Baptists when their preacher comes to town.

"Now I want to tell you this meal is free and I had no idea of getting my money back, but as long as our good parson here has mentioned it, I'll say just do what your pocket and your feelings tell you to, and if you feel you want to do your share in this big community feed, why, God bless you.

"Now, folks, we've all enjoyed the entertainment, and I know you're going to enjoy the victuals just as much. There's all you can eat, and eat your fill. Don't hold back for nobody. Get your share of everything. I've had a nigger stirring the pur-loo since sun-up, and it smells the best of any pur-loo I ever smelt. It's got forty squirrels in it, folks, forty squirrels and a big fat hen. And my wife herself done made that Brunswick stew, just like she learned it at her mother's knee in Brunswick, Georgia. Now go to it, folks, but don't rush!"

The crowd packed tight about the table, weaving and milling, two or three hundred hungry Crackers. The pilau and stew were passed around in paper dishes.

The passing hat reached a lean, venerable Cracker just as he had completed a tour of exploration through his pilau.

"No!" he shrilled, with the lustiness of an old man with a grievance.

"No, I ain't goin' to give him nothin'! This here was advertised as a free meal and 'tain't nothin' but a dogged Georgia prayer-meetin'. Get a man here on promises and then go to pickin' his pocket. This food ain't fitten to eat, dogged Georgia rations, Brunswick stew and all. And he's done cooked the squirrel heads in the pur-loo, and that suits a damned Georgia Cracker but it don't suit me.

"I was born and raised in Floridy, and I'm pertickler. I don't want no squirrel eyes lookin' at me out o' my rations!"