

Title: "**The Riders Of Dark Region Road**"

(original title published in 1998 in the Grant County News: "*just another dog day afternoon*")

I am intrigued by the use of Southern flair, the style that so many famous authors choose, be it from their own upbringing or the draw of genteel nuances they have observed. Of the various artist we have read, William Faulkner, southern born and bred, wrote about his native soil. In "That Evening Sun" he utilizes a southern child's perspective, point of view, to convey his story. In another use of the southern wile, Faulkner uses the draw of a Southern Belle "A Rose For Emily", and about this story of old southern ways and beliefs he states “. . .the story came from his imagination. . .but the condition is there. It exists." Faulkner uses the environment he is familiar with to create his world. The South.

Zora Neale Hurston, another southern author, also writes about what she grew up knowing best, the southern people and places. "The abiding folk spirit inherent in southern life", is her writing forte. She said that she wanted to “. . .record the oral traditions of her native community. . .”.

Now I come to yet another southern writer, a well known lady, a lady that writes the moods of southern life, the southern skullduggery, the kind of stuff I grew up with. Flannery O'Connor from Savannah, Georgia wrote great southern stories. She wrote about life in the south the way southerners live it. She wrote about family relationships, wrote about the significance of what was real and meaningful, and what was possible. She said she wrote about “. . .an experience of meaning. . .”.

Of the three I have referenced here, each has a distinct style of writing about the south. Each writes, using local color, in their own way, using whatever they find outside the back screen door or under the jacked-up Chevy in the front yard.

As I read these stories, and shared them with my sister and mother, they said it reminded them of the day I was born. This story I have heard a hundred times, usually with a different twist, but always the same ending.

Enjoy.

.in 1942 rural Grant County, Kentucky, on a hot August dog-day-afternoon, in a usta'be log cabin, miles off the main road, I was born, without the assistance of doctor or midwife. My mothers helpers through this crisis was her three daughters, the eldest of which was only eight years old...

...Three little girls stood at the foot of the bed staring at their mother. Sweat soaking their brows yet their eyes were wide and very alert. All attention was focused on what the mother was telling them. It was just another dog-day afternoon in late August with stifling heat and no breeze, but these children neither felt the heat nor the humidity. The mother's speech was coming from clenched jaws, gasps, and emotions of pain waves showing on her tired face. If not for the pain and agony that she was enduring, it would have been a pretty face in a pleasant way.

Earlier, feeling as though she could endure it no more, pain and nausea intense, she took her body to the corner bed. The corner bed was chosen, it being the only place with a window, and if there were a breeze she sure did need it. Rubbing the sweat soaked cloth over her forehead and down across her parched lips, the mother was instructing the girls on what to do.

"Be sure them beans I put on, Ceile, don't boil over or run dry and burn."

"Yes mamma", came the voice of the eight-year-old. Turning, Lucille ran to check on the errand she had been given. Lucille was the eldest and had been helping with the household chores for as long as she could remember.

"Helen, go get me a few towels and another washcloth, and help Ceile if she needs it." The six-year-old child ran off and was proud to be able

to help her older sister. She, along with her sisters realized something important was happening but feared for their mother.

"Carol" said the mother, looking at her youngest, the four-year-old. She had not been round long enough, reflected the mother, and now she was a little woman.

"Go to the Martin's house, girl, and tell Miss Mattin that my time has come, for her to come check on me later", the mother gasped as pain wracked her, "go child, go."

The saucer eyed little child was amazed at the job. she had been given. Never before had she been put in the position of such importance.

"Be sure you watch out for that bull", whispered the mother to the thin air as a shadow of a fleeting child raced across her bedroom ceiling. . . "watch out".

As the mother reclined on the sweat soaked bed sheets her mind drifted to the past few years. When Ed had brought them here, by his reasoning, that while he was gone looking for a job in Cincinnati, they would be here, close to her mom and dad, who lived about a quarter mile up the pike. She thought about the people of Dark Region. Her grandpa had settled here back in the '60's, right after he had got released from the Southern Uprising War. His choice of this area was from all of the stories he had heard about Ireland and this was as close as he was going to get to his ancestor's homeland.

Grandpa and grandma had raised a passel of youngins and she knew a lot of her cousins and such. Her grandpa had died when she was three, granny sometime earlier, and she don't remember either one. They had built a nice log house-store on the Region Road and with all them youngins was able to get along just fine. Only the kids could read or write, but granny and

grandpa sure could figure and never got cheated. Most people only traded in kind anyway seemed nobody had money leastways. The old store is gone now but the feelings still linger in the folks around here. Stories abound even nowadays, about my grandfolks and their singing store. Seems they sat out front every night after sundown and sang bible songs, even sometimes you could hear the neighbors joining in for a rounding singalong covering the hills.

She thought of her mom. Her mom was still a child herself. Fourteen when she had married to pa, and him being fifty, course he'd already had another family with a passel of kids long ago. His other wife was buried with their youngest over in the treeline along the Region. She knew most all her half brothers and sisters and liked them all. Beulah, her only sibling had died at birth, of the brain fever. Her half brothers and sisters were more like older aunts and uncles than brothers and sisters, them all being at least twenty years older.

She thought of this house they were staying in. The Martin's had been real good about it, said they could stay as long as need be, and no sir they had said, no need to worry about paying rent. The Martins thought the world of mom and pa and wouldn't dream of chargin.

Two fine rooms, a big barn out back, a little space off the kitchen for one of the girls to sleep in and a mighty fine fireplace for colder days. The door off the kitchen needs put back on its hinges, but other than that, it'll do just fine.

She just remembered that she needed to ask the youngest Martin boy if he'd come press the grass for her. The kids could get lost in it, it being so tall and all. Course she worried about snakes too.

She thought of Ed. He had said he'd be back soon, to fix things up around here, before the fall comes. Other than a few chores, they'd get on ok

'til then. Money was not a problem she thought, ain't none, so no need to fret over what you ain't got and think about what you don't have.

Ed had promised his hobo days were over with and he was really going to find work. His being put on that chain gang in Georgia was probably for the best. If six months diggin ditches didn't break his hobo travels, then she thought nothing would. He'd spent three years bumming on the rails and to his reasoning, that more than enough qualified him to work for the railroads. Now he sought a job so's he could fix them.

She had grown up here playing with the Martin kids, skipped to school in the dry times and riding on a wagon in the wet or cold ones. Pa's buggy was good enough but it made her feel she was putting on airs to ride to school in it, besides, the old swayback Sally was getting blind and ever since granny had been killed in a buggy accident, pa had said she could not drive alone.

The mother heard from the kitchen, "watch out for the bull". It was the eldest yelling after the youngest.

Carol had to follow the wagon ruts through the field which ran parallel to Dark Region, up to the tree line, about a quarter mile or so from the house and within yelling distance to the grandparent's house, then over, through, or under the barbed wire fence. Once the fence chore was completed she would enter the land of the bull.

Arriving at that point, looking left and right, taking a deep breath, the child darted from concealment and shot across the open field with the distant farmhouse as her goal. With her determination to do a good job, an important job, it would have probably taken a charging bull to distract her goal. She had made this journey many a times, but never alone. Short of breath, nearing the farmstead fence, she was talking to herself and gasping as she went.

"Bull" she said loudly, "better be gone bull". A little louder she muttered "you better leave me be, my mama needs me bull".

Racing up to the farm she could see in a window. Mrs. Mattin Martin watching her come.

"Mamma said you come, mamma said you come later," raspy and deep came the voice, and turning while still in a forward stride, her baby feet not missing a beat, as in a rounding arc she charged to retrace her homeward bound journey.

"Directly child, directly... wanna cool well water drink, child. .well I declare" said Mattin as she observed only brown bottomed bare feet looming away from her. "I declare".

"Watch out for the bull, child" yelled Mattin "well I declare".

"Helen, go get us a bucket of cool water, baby", said the mother between gasp, "we'll need it for the beans." The second born turned happily and glad to have something to do entered the kitchen.

"Will she be ok?" said the middle child to her older sister.

"Course she will, ain't she always been" replied the eight year old.

Helen grabbed the bucket and headed down the trail to the creek. From beginning to end, Dark Region Road is only one mile long. Halfway along it cuts a little meandering stream named Odor-Fork Lick. It's from its waters that many draw their buckets, and Helen, being agile, has already drawn the lifeblood and is on her return trip homebound.

A full bucket is normally too much for these girls to carry, and so as Helen heads home with a half-full load of water, the straplin girl

reflects on her lot in life. All three had been born in the city, and even if she loved it here, so near to grandma and grandpa, she would have preferred to still live in the city. If only daddy would hurry up and find a job.

At six years old, Helen had carried many buckets home from the creek, never full of course, unless Carol or Ceil helped to carry them.

"Lucille, come here child" said the mother.

"If anything happens to me, take the girls and go to grandma's house" and the mother saw a tear well up and spill from the child's eyes.

"Not that anything's going to," she added gently.

As though an adult had entered the room and was addressing the situation "likely as not things will be just fine, just fine", answered the child-lady.

"You wind the clock like I asked you honey" twisting her head to look as she asked it, "they'll be askin for the time it happens I reckon".

"I moved it in the kitchen mamma" said Ceil noticing her mother's look.

Carol came darting in beaming proudly "I done it mamma, I done like you said".

"Good girl honey, now do you think you could go help Helen carry in some water". It didn't take an answer cause she could tell by the running footsteps that the baby was on her way.

"Care for them Ceil, your the oldest". This she said to no one in particular.

"Mrs. Martin will be coming later to see if all's well, and you know how she likes her beans." The mother gasped and reclined her head on the straw mat, sweat poured down her forehead; it ran in rivulets down to soak the only pillowcase she owned.

"I'll be in directly to help you fix them beans." again, this to no one in particular.

Carol reached the normal turning point for her helping in carrying the bucket, clasped her small hand around the handle and in turn relieved some of Helen's heavy load.

"Think mamma be ok" the child queried, looking in her sister's eyes for an honest answer. They could always read each other's lies or truth, as it showed in the eyes.

"Course she'll be ok, happened before ain't it", answered Helen, avoiding her sisters probing look. Helen looked skyward and silently uttered a simple prayer.

Water splashed as the two midgets struggled with the container of fluids up the path towards the log cabin on the rise. Together they made their way towards the kitchen door. Each knew they'd need another trip for more water soon enough.

Edison had been gone for over nine months now Lucille thought. She had taken to calling him that instead of dad. Not that she didn't love or miss him, but it made it easier to talk about him if she depersonalized his being gone.

"As sure as you two walk, you know you'll need go get another bucket full," Lucille said. Her eyes and maternal instinct said she loved, and could raise these two youngins, if need be.

"What times it gettin to be honey" came the call from the bedroom.

"2:05 mamma" answered Ceil.

"Where's the girls" the mother questioned.

"Their here mamma" came the oldest reply.

All three girls gathered at the foot of the bed and stared at the pain filled eyes of their mother. The mother tried to relax a little to show them she was ok. Pain swept over her again and she moaned and gasped, "what times it?"

"2:10 mamma" said Lucille as she raced in and back from the kitchen.

"I can tell time mamma", said Carol.

"Helen and Ceil taught me, mamma. I can read them pointers on the clock mamma. Helen taught me my numbers, remember mamma, Ceil taught me countin and tellin time mamma, wanna see mamma? " Carol's eyes were large and trying to cover her fear.

"Yes child," said the mother, "see what time it is."

Another mighty wave of pain, the deep kind, swept over the mother bringing a wave of nausea with it, and she knew she had to get the girls distracted. Knowing what was going on some was ok, but this they didn't need to see. It wasn't natural for a four-year-old baby to watch life and death spasms.

"It's time Ceil", she said.

"Carol, go watch for Mrs. Martin".

"Helen honey, you go get me some wet washcloths". A smile and a wink crossed her face.

"See what time it is honey", she instructed Lucille.

"It's 2: 15pm mamma" answered Ceil as she entered the bedroom and approached the foot of the bed.

"She's here mamma" said Carol as she sided up against her oldest sister and found a free hand to clasp.

"Here mamma, here" said Helen as she lowered the pan of water with a cloth in it on the stand beside her mother. She sided sideways and her free hands clasped Lucille's arms.

On one of the dog days, in late August, at 2:15pm exactly, in 1942, Mrs. Martin entered her families abandoned animal feed storage shed. The animals had been chased from it and they had let this tenant family have it to stay in for awhile. It normally held winter hay, but now, being the least she could do, since she'd known this woman all her life, it became a family home. She looked around and was amazed.

" Lookie, lookie, gracious me, how they're done it up". They had cleaned the floors and patched the walls and roof, and turned this place into something not half-bad, if she did have to say so.

She heard laughter coming from the back room, probably used as a bedroom, she thought, then she heard a lot of crying and excited talk.

"Are the beans ready yet?" she yelled as she lifted the lid from the cooking pot and spoke loud enough for the dead to hear.

This is, of course, a personal experience that I have no personal recall of, yet it is based, loosely, on fiction/fact. I am the main character. I hope I have allowed the local color of rural Northern Kentucky to shine through. I believe this story conveys realism, and everyday life. I have tried not to be ambiguous, include irony, or add allegory. There is no moral, literary or otherwise underlying meanings, just how they told me the story of my birth. Lucille, Carol, my mom and I returned to the story setting only recently (Helen died of cancer in 1974, and my dad also). My mom had eleven children, four born in rural country areas with almost the same conditions, the rest born in city hospitals.