

Charlie Thompson

I'm going to write my recollections of Charlie Thompson, the old blind man who lived in the little house half way down the hill leading from the Colebrook Center Schoolhouse at the bottom and the parsonage at the top. This is not intended to be a biographical sketch by any stretch of the imagination, but only what I remember of him as a student at the school from first grade in 1938 until graduation from the eighth grade in 1946.

I do not have very pleasant memories of this man, as he was not what you would call a nice person. I rather doubt that his cantankerousness was a result of his lost eyesight. I say this now after having lived a lifetime (almost) observing people, and Charlie does not fit any "normal" pattern.

Mr. and Mrs. Stotts, who owned the Colebrook store, used to have him up to their apartment over the store for Sunday breakfast quite often. It was just one of the innumerable kindnesses that they performed throughout their lives. In spite of that, whenever Charlie needed something from the store, he would spend a considerable amount of time trying to ascertain the denomination of a bill with which he intended to pay. I have often seen him scanning the intended bill, held about one inch from one of his eyes, trying to see whether it was a five or one dollar bill. Even as a child, I never could understand why he didn't just hand the bill over to whichever of the Stotts' who happened to be behind the counter, and ask what it was, but no, he couldn't bring himself to trust them.

It was common knowledge among us students that Charlie did not like children. We must have accepted the fact, as I can't recall that we hated him for being the way he was, we just avoided him whenever our paths crossed. When this did occur, most often on the hill between his house and Route 183, he would brandish his cane and make derogatory remarks about us nasty kids. We would just keep out of range of his flailing cane. I honestly don't remember any instance when he was taunted by any of us, as we really felt sorry for him because he was blind.

Charlie had an annual job that for some reason, my father used to do for him. Why this came about, I have no clue, but in the springtime, he had my father clean his chimney. He demanded that it be done his way, and his way only. First, the stovepipe was removed and a wad of crumpled-up newspapers was stuffed up the flue and lit. The resulting conflagration burned its way up the (unlined) chimney, eventually burning itself out, leaving behind a clean chimney. Every time he performed this service, my father would let someone from the then fledgling Colebrook Center Fire Department (of which he was a member) know, so that if need be, the house would not burn down. He could never persuade Charlie that this was a very dangerous procedure. As far as Charlie was concerned, this was the only "approved" way of cleaning a chimney. At the end of each session, he would have my father pull a small strongbox from under his bed and take his \$5.00 fee out of it. In retrospect, I can't justify his trusting my father to take his fee, when he did not trust either of the Stotts' from doing the same, but never the less, he did. The box, which measured about 12 inches by 10 inches and five or six inches deep, was about three quarters full of paper money; ones, fives, tens and twenties. Every year my father would plead with him to put that money in the bank, where it would be safe. I remember him saying that people were getting hit over the head for change, and if it ever

got out about what he had in his box, there was sure to be trouble. To which Charlie would reply that only those that he trusted knew about the contents. He never was robbed, but I understand that when he died, his body was removed to the funeral parlor, and members of his family (he had nieces and nephews) went through his household possessions. The result was that it was determined that he had died a pauper, and as such was buried in an (almost) unmarked grave, the only identification being a small, circular tag with his name on it supplied by the funeral parlor. Your guess is as good as mine as to the fate of the box under the bed.

To get back to my personal recollections: After avoiding “Old Charlie” for seven years at recesses and sojourns to the store, one autumn day we observed a load of slab wood being delivered to Charlie’s house. The dump truck load, cut into stove length, was deposited on his front lawn. Usually the storage of these loads would take him many days to transfer into the woodshed, at the back of his house, two or three pieces at a time in one hand, while the other held his ever-present cane. On this particular day, I remember one of my eighth grade classmates saying that as long as we were going to graduate before the year was out, and we would never have to deal with Old Charlie again, maybe we should show him an act of kindness and stack all his wood for him during our noon lunch break. This we did, someone went up to his front door and (fearfully, I’m sure) knocked and told him what we were going to do. This was satisfactory with him, and we worked like beavers all throughout our lunch period, at the end of which we had succeeded in stowing at least 90 % of the wood pile into his wood shed, neatly stacked. When the school bell recalled us at the end of lunch, we told him that the bell was ringing; we had to go back to school, and reminded him that almost all the wood was stored. What did he do then? Did we receive any thanks? Not on your life; he began flailing that cane of his amongst the students, all the while screaming (literally) “Get out of here, you damned kids! Get out, and don’t come back! Get off my property and don’t come back!”

Now we knew just what a truly mean man he really was, and before the day was out, heads were put together, and a plan of revenge began to take place.

Charlie got his water from a spring at the base of the hill down in back of his house. Today, this would be about at the edge of the shore of the pond that now occupies what was then a wet meadow. It was perhaps 150 feet away from the house, and he had a plank path that lead from the back of his dwelling (his wood shed, actually, to sweeten the irony) to the spring. That evening, when no one was looking, someone carefully shifted the location of those planks, and instead of leading to the spring, led instead into the swamp.

They say that Charlie spent a particularly cold and wet night, lost in the swamp, unable to extricate himself from the morass. He didn’t have a very loud voice, and his cries for help went unheard until someone finally spotted him after the sun rose the following day. I don’t remember anyone being gleeful about this turn of events, but I do remember a sense of satisfaction over Charlie having received something that he richly deserved.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg