

Colebrook Humor

Humor is where you find it, and some of us don't have to look all that far, while others, being more reserved perhaps, fail to see anything funny in the same circumstance or story that will send someone else into gales of laughter. Here are some stories that once circulated in town when it was an agricultural community, and as such are probably viewed differently today. However, I still find them funny, so please humor me (pun intended).

The various districts within Colebrook (there have been as many as 11 different school districts) each held themselves to be just ever so much better than any of the other districts. This feeling of "in-group, out-group" persists even today, although the reasoning behind it seems obscure, as most of the inhabitants are "new comers" and didn't have these prejudices thrust upon them as they grew up attending their local schoolhouse.

There used to be local jokes, intended to gently poke fun at your neighbor from another section of town. A story would be spun something like this:

A man from Beech Hill went to North Colebrook for something and while there became aware that Old Scratch was hot on his trail. Well, he ran to Phelps' Tavern and hid down cellar, while the Devil searched for him in vain. When the coast was clear, the man from Beech Hill made good his escape, and proceeded to Colebrook Center, where once again Beelzebub began to get close, so he went to Rockwell's and hid up in the attic near the yarn beam cannon. By and by he stuck his head out of the attic window, looked around, saw no one, and went downstairs and made his way to the Southwest District, where he had some business with Deacon Lawrence (where Ellen Fredsall now lives). He had no sooner concluded his business with the deacon than it became apparent that Old Harry was about to catch him, so he hid in Deacon Grant's old hollow apple tree and thus escaped once again. Leaving there, he proceeded to the South District, but not fast enough, Old Scratch's hot breath was right on his heels. The only place that offered a hiding place was the outhouse behind the South School, where he managed to elude the devil by crawling underneath and closing the seat over his head. The ploy worked, and eventually he was able to escape and go down Deer Hill to Robertsville, where he once again found himself almost in the clutches of the Devil, so he ran to the nearest building, which happened to be Homer Deming's barn. Diving deep underneath the hay in the mow, he heard Old Harry searching hither and yon, but fortunately not close enough to find him.

Robertsville was no place for a Beech Hill man to tarry in for long however, and he soon left for Colebrook River where – sure enough – the Devil was still close upon him. Well, he ducked into the old cotton mill and hid in a dark corner, but his luck had run out, and the Devil collared him. "Well Satan", said the Beech Hill man, "you caught me fair and square, where do we go from here?" The Devil looked perplexed for a moment, then said: "Go? – why, nowhere – we're in The River, aren't we?"

Dairy farming is a risky business, what with too much water, not enough water, early frosts and a mud season that could stretch for three months. Colebrook River, Robertsville and North Colebrook had good, rich soil, well watered and productive. The upland to the west, namely Beech Hill, was prone to a lack of water and sometimes it seemed as though they were in a permanent drought; why anyone would want to attempt

to make a go of farming there escaped the reasoning of the surrounding area farmers. One year, a little dryer one than usual, a young fellow decided he was going to see if he couldn't make a go of farming up there, only this time he was going to dig his well first, to guarantee that a lack of water wasn't going to be a problem for him. He and his friends dug and dug, and finally they were fortunate enough to strike water at less than twenty feet. Being a modern farmer, he decided to make sure there would be no surprises with the water and therefore sent a specimen off to the lab at Uconn for an analysis. Shortly he received a reply: "Dear sir, your water sample only tested out at 35% moisture."

Then there is my favorite, which I've probably told to you before, but as we had Guernseys on my father's farm, this one is near and dear to me:

Certain breeds of cattle are better for one thing than another. For example, if you want to raise beef, Herefords or Angus are for you, if you want rich milk with very high butter fat content, raise Guernseys, Brown Swiss, Ayrshires or Jerseys. If you want quantity rather than quality, fill your barn with Holsteins, sometimes referred to as Friesians. Farmers tend to favor one breed over the others, and are loyal to theirs at the expense of the others. A Guernsey farmer has nothing but contempt for Holsteins, and the Holstein man feels the same way about the other guy. Down at the feed mill one day a Guernsey farmer and a Holstein farmer had this conversation: (Holstein man) "You know how to tell a Holstein from a Guernsey? Take a twelve-quart milk pail, put a fifty-cent piece on the bottom, and then milk your best milker into that pail. When you're done, if the milk hasn't covered the fifty-cent piece, you know you have a Guernsey." "Well", the Guernsey man replied, "You can take that same milk pail, put the same fifty cent piece at the bottom, and milk your best milker into the pail, and if you fill the pail to the brim and can still read the date on the fifty cent piece, you know that you have a Holstein!"

A good many of the farming jokes that I know came from George Gray, Sr. We used to bounce any worthy joke back and forth between us; he's been gone quite a few years now, and I still miss him. Some of the shorter versions follow:

"How's your brother doing with his new farm?" "Not so good. There ain't much money in milk and eggs any more. Lately he's been sitting up nights trying to think of something else for the hens and cows to do."

"You turning a profit yet on your farm?" "Not yet. Things are so bad, I can't pay the hired man his wages, so the hired man works until he has enough money coming to buy the farm and then I work for the hired man until the hired man owes me enough money and then I take the farm back from him."

I remember once stopping by the farm and finding George standing half way between the house and barn, looking at a piece of rope hanging from his hand. "What's up, George?" "Well, I've either found a piece of rope or lost a cow."

"Fred's graduated from Uconn now; I suppose he knows all about farming. Does he know how long cows should be milked?" "The same as short ones."

George ran the farm during WWII, and thus didn't have to face the draft. One day he was milking a cow and a soldier came by. "You slacker! Why aren't you at the front?" "Because there isn't any milk at that end."

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg