

CROSSTIES AT CEDAR CROSSING

In its early days, Cedar Crossing was a hub for three different railroads. Volume-wise, it certainly didn't compare to the big cities, but strategically it proved to be essential. Over time, as railroad traffic diminished, one of the railroad lines discontinued service through Cedar Crossing and the other two lines merged. The merged railroad lines still find it profitable to run through Cedar Crossing because of the rich natural resources and farm products of the area.

An offshoot business that developed in Cedar Crossing from all the railroads came in the nature of used crossties that the railroads replaced with regular track maintenance. For a while, two businesses operated in the county, but one eventually closed when old Adam Jones passed away. The remaining business is owned by Robert Haleron and his wife, Virginia. While Virginia is a regularly attending member of St. John, her husband is a C&E (Christmas and Easter).

It is late November, and I am making my annual subtle attempt to get Robert to expand his

attendance beyond that of a C&E. The neat storage yard of Robert's Railroad Ties has rows and rows of cross ties in orderly stacks. I find Robert up by his shop sharpening chainsaw cutting tips.

"Hi, Robert," I said. "How are you doing today?"

"I'm doing good, Pastor," answered Robert.

"I assume you know why I'm here," I said.

"Of course, it's late November," replied Robert. "I do need to let you know that I've accumulated a whole new list of excuses."

"Well, that's a little disconcerting," I said. "I came with counter-responses to all those that I knew. You know next week is the start of Advent. Do you remember what Advent means?"

"Coming, I believe."

"Since we're on the subject of coming, it would be an ideal time to start coming to church for a few weeks before Christmas."

"To do that, I would have to violate the official ethical standard of C&E's all over the world," said Robert.

“They have an official ethical standard?” I asked, incredulously.

The verbal sparring continued for about half an hour until Pastor Schmidt broke the cycle by taking a walk around Robert’s outside display area. For now, the match ended in a draw, though Pastor Schmidt liked to think optimistically that he was making some inroads. Either way, he did always come away with a litany of excuses to plan answers to.

Pastor Schmidt knew that Robert believed in God, so that didn’t bother him as much as it did with some other people. Robert lived his life and had a relationship with his friends, family, and business customers that he was sure God would approve of.

As Pastor Schmidt strolled around Robert’s display area, he noticed that most of the functional and decorative pieces made from railroad crossties had a common theme. They had some connection to God and His creative hand.

“Robert, you have become quite the master artisan,” I said. “You do beautiful work. Are you selling much?”

“I used to move quite a bit, but I’m not selling anymore. The creosote issue has become a large concern, not only for me working with the ties every day, but for the people that are taking these products home. I have always been very careful about the creosote layer that I cut away, but recent studies find it penetrates the inner wood in trace amounts, too. I understand and accept that. Considering all the current information, I don’t want anything that I might sell to affect anyone’s life adversely. So, I’m waiting to hear from the regional EPA office as to how we should proceed in getting rid of all these ties and products.”

“What would you do?”

“Oh, we’ve been conservative with our money and have a pretty good nest egg saved up.”

“But I still can’t see you just sitting around the house,” I said.

“I might for a couple of weeks or so, but you’re probably right. Ginny and I have talked about a few things when the time comes.”

“If there’s anything I can ever do for you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“You never know. When that day arrives, I might even end up coming to church more often.”

“Wait a minute. Is that another curveball you’re throwing me?”

“Could be,” said Robert.

“If it is, then I must consider praying that they ban the sale of all railroad ties immediately.”

Something caught Pastor Schmidt’s eye as he looked around. He walked back to the far corner of the display area and stopped. There he saw a 6-foot-long and 4-foot-wide model of the scene of the crucifixion on Calvary. The crosses were, of course, made from railroad crossties and intricately carved pieces added to the authenticity of the scene.

“Robert, this is beautiful.”

“Thank you, Pastor,” said Robert. “Do you see the irony in it, now?”

“Um ... well ... the scene at Calvary was all about death.”

“Yeah, and this model contains material that we now know to be toxic.”

“So, this model contains poison and on Calvary, Jesus took on everything that poisons the human spirit,” I said. “Very interesting. I’m just glad you didn’t make a model of the resurrection scene with railroad crossties. The theological implications would have been a little more challenging.”

“Amen to that, Pastor.”

Pastor Schmidt left Robert, confident that he would do what was right and get it all worked out. Still, he had questions in his mind, and they didn’t leave when he pulled out of Robert’s driveway. They were questions that he posed before, but today they just seem amplified.

“Why do people such as Robert not come to church regularly?” he asked himself. “What is there about the Sunday worship service that turns them off? In Robert’s case, it does not appear to be a lack of faith. Is there some kind of Twilight Zone that C&E spirits live in—something that all those sitting in the pews and all of us standing in the pulpits on Sunday just can’t see? Oh, sure, I’ve heard all the common excuses, many jokingly coming from Robert. There’s got to be something more.”

Looking in the rearview mirror, he saw the cloud of dust behind his car as he drove away. It had been so dry in the area lately that the cloud seemed almost impenetrable to the eye. It seemed to parallel the cloud in his mind.

“I think I’ll pick Fred’s brain a little when I get home,” he continued to himself. “Maybe I’ll also throw Robert a little curveball of my own. I think I’ll visit him just before Lent instead of late November.”