

## SAM'S GENERAL STORE

Every morning (well almost), Jasper Higgins and Teddy Marsh sit outside Sam's General Store and hone their skills with the game of checkers. Sadly, after ten years of such a diligent pursuit, their skills seemed to have reached the highest threshold of checkers insight that the game would allow. They thought about moving up to chess, but checkers had a natural fit with the ambiance and the occasional interruption of a tall tale. Besides, checkers required no clothing above jeans or overalls. With chess, they thought that they might have to wear a suit and a tie. During that ten-year period, the two gentlemen, plus assorted tourists when the gentlemen weren't there, managed to wear out sixteen checkerboards. As part of the town's regular monthly street maintenance, workers cleaning the drain along the curb found an average of six checker pieces per month in the drain. Sam's wife, Martha, often complained about the costs associated with the previously mentioned activity eating heavily into their store overhead budget, but Sam felt it was all part of public relations. By the tenth year, the table and checkerboard had become an officially declared town fixture, thus advancing to the

status of tradition. Numerous candidates from the town's retired elite stood in waiting, should Jasper or Teddy pass on.

Cedar Crossing boasted of many other traditions besides Sam's General Store and the revered checkerboard, but they shall be subjects of future accounts.

Stepping inside Sam's General Store evoked a sense of yesteryear, for those old enough to remember the concept of yesteryear. One might think that the prices in such an establishment would be a little higher than the modern superstore in, say, Profitville, with its sleek efficiency and bulk purchasing power, but they were not. Sam and Martha just wanted enough to meet their modest home needs with contingency funds for spoiling their grandchildren. Oh, sure, some items fell victim to the bane of inflation. Chicken feed proportionally rose with the cost of tractors, so Max's egg wholesale cost continued to creep up. The town needed more tax money for things such as street and drain maintenance. Overall, though, most products lining the shelves reflected the step into yesteryear.

Pastor Schmidt felt so enamored with Sam's General Store that he considered it the first stop on his tours of the area for visiting dignitaries and

church higher-ups. Just last week, the President of the district to which St. John belonged, savored one of Martha's homemade brownies with a cup of fresh-brewed coffee while standing over a pickle barrel. Pastor Schmidt covered the cost of 39 cents from his discretionary fund.

Though Sam and Martha were members of First Baptist Church, Pastor Schmidt didn't hold that against them. Of course, the feeling was mutual. The ecumenical spirit had wide boundaries in Cedar Crossing. He sometimes wished that denominational dogma didn't put up so many roadblocks to working as a team with fellow Christians. There was one occasion, though, that he emphatically stated to a well-educated theologian in the higher echelon of the church, that the brownie he was consuming was a Baptist brownie. The indiscretion occurred after the synod had issued some dictatorial decree that he thought to be beyond their authority. He later admitted to Father Tom, over coffee at the Chit Chat Café, that he did it in spite.

Occupying a back room of the store, an old-fashioned barber's chair frequently held a patron who felt the need to discuss matters that could only be discussed while getting a haircut. Mel Overfield sold his barbershop down the street and retired. As

part of the deal, Sam and Martha gave him permission to set up the little room in their store. He would come in every Wednesday and solve world problems with his client in the chair. The rest of the week, the room functioned as a photo spot. Pastor Schmidt faced a dilemma regarding haircuts. Bobby Fowler, the current owner of the only official barbershop in town, was a member of St. John, but Mel had been cutting Pastor Schmidt's hair since he was a little kid. So, he had to come up with some sort of compromise. If there were no deep religious issues inflicting the town, he went to Bobby's barbershop. If serious theological or moral issues arose, he would, by sheer coincidence, be shopping in Sam's store on Wednesday and, if Mel's chair were unoccupied at the time, then he felt it to be his duty to have a hair consultation with Mel. Of course, over the years, Mel's opinions had become quite predictable—at least enough for Pastor Schmidt to lead him on a little.

On this particular day, Pastor Schmidt's wife asked him to pick up some hamburger buns when he made his trip into town. It was a simple enough request, he thought. After making his purchase of some office supplies at the Five and Dime (yes, Cedar Crossing still has a Five and Dime), he headed

over to Sam's. He opened the door to the general store and heard a familiar voice coming from the rear of the store. Then he remembered it was Wednesday. Feeling the back of his neck, he decided he could use a trim, so he made his way to the "room". One in the chair and one waiting. He looked at his watch and decided he had enough time to wait.

Then Silas Warner, who was the next one waiting, said, "You can go next, Pastor. I'm just here for the conversation."

"Thanks, Silas."

Pastor Schmidt listened to the flavor of the conversation that Mel and Jim Barry were having, so he had some idea what Mel was hot on today. In vigorous discussion, Mel always resorted to quoting someone else, but he always tried to make it sound like it was something he came up with. Mel and Jim seemed to be engaged in the analysis of politics, so Pastor Schmidt figured he may as well continue with that subject.

When Pastor Schmidt got into the chair, he said, "So, Mel, what do you think about this upcoming special congressional election?"

“Well, I tell ya, Pastor, politics has become so expensive that it takes a lot of money even to be defeated.”

“Uh, huh, and if you do get elected, it’s still expensive for the rest of us,” said Pastor Schmidt.

“Lord, the money we do spend on government, and it’s not a bit better than the government that we got for one-third the money 20 years ago.”

In his mind, Pastor Schmidt tried to recall the last two quotes that Mel borrowed. Then he quietly said to himself, “I’m thinking Will Rogers, but let’s go for another one to be sure.”

“Well, Mel, maybe if we get the right people in there, they will finally balance the budget.”

“I don’t know,” said Mel. “I think it was old Alexander Hamilton that started the U.S. Treasury with nothing, and that was the closest our country has ever been to being even.”

“Definitely Will Rogers,” said Pastor Schmidt to himself.

“I don’t think that will ever happen, Pastor. And you know why?”

“Why is that, Mel?”

“Congress is so strange. A man gets up to speak and says nothing, nobody listens and then everybody disagrees.”

When Mel finished with his haircut, Pastor Schmidt got up out of the chair and pulled out his wallet. Apparently, there was still time for one more.

“You know, Pastor,” said Mel. “I look at this ten-dollar bill and how much I’ve got to pay in taxes on it and it reminds me that the only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn’t get worse every time Congress meets.”

His time with Mel and Will Rogers had come to an end. He looked at his watch again and decided he had a little more time to spend on the bench outside Sam’s General Store. Jasper and Teddy had already left, so he was all alone on the bench. Sometimes, he just liked to watch people. If it’s somebody he doesn’t know, he wonders where they are in life. Do they know God? He tries to imagine if he were sitting on a bench in New York City and he was looking at huge crowds of people. Undoubtedly, there would be many who either don’t know God or choose to reject Him. It almost seemed a little intimidating.

His friend, Pastor Anderson, had started doing some statistical work for the district and what he found was disturbing. So many churches were just declining. Their members were getting older, and the young were leaving and never returning. Many of the churches had an average weekly attendance of less than one hundred. The one hundred and fifty in the pews of St. John, a small country parish, every week almost seemed surreal in comparison. As he continued contemplating those numbers, he noticed a man crossing the street and heading towards him.

“Is this seat taken?” asked a gray-haired man in a tieless suit.

“No, my friend,” answered Pastor Schmidt. “Have a seat.”

“Are you from around here?” asked the man.

“Yes, I’m the pastor at St. John Lutheran Church, out on Route 37. How about you?”

“I used to live here fifty years ago, but then I moved to Chicago.”

“What do you do for a living and what brings you back to Cedar Crossing?”



“I’m retired now, but I worked for the railroad for twenty years. Then I started my own trucking company. I’ve just come back to take care of the paperwork on my brother’s estate.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What was your brother’s name?”

“Robert McComb.”

“McComb ... McComb? I didn’t know him, but ... was his place out on County Road 12?”

“Yes.”

“Okay ... I’m sorry, my name is Arnie Schmidt and yours?”

“Randy McComb.”

“Do you remember much about Cedar Crossing, Randy?”

“Oh, it hasn’t changed all that much from what I remember.”

“Have you ever considered moving back?”

“I’ve thought about it, on occasion, but it was a different life and fate has led me elsewhere ... I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be impolite, but I’ve got a little work I’ve got to get done.”

“By all means, my friend.”

Mr. McComb opened his briefcase and pulled out a writing pad and a portable calculator. Pastor Schmidt continued watching people on the street as Mr. McComb appeared to be doing some serious number crunching. About fifteen minutes later, he pulled out a checkbook and wrote a check to someone, but Pastor Schmidt couldn't see the name. Then the man wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it up, and put it inside an envelope. He inserted the check into the envelope, as well. He addressed the envelope and tucked it under his left leg while he put away his writing pad and calculator. Closing his briefcase, Mr. McComb stood up.

“Well, Pastor, it was good to meet you, but I must be going now.”

“Come back any time, Randy. Again, I'm sorry to hear about your brother.”

“I have an envelope here that I'd like to give to you for the church. I simply ask that you not open it until I'm gone.”

“Okay, Randy. I will do as you wish.”

“Thank you, Pastor.”

“Have a safe trip home, Randy.”

The man nodded and turned around. He walked about a block and then got into a car and left. Pastor Schmidt opened the envelope and began reading the paper that was inside it.

“Pastor, it was again a pleasure meeting you. Fifty years ago, my family belonged to St. John. I was an altar boy when I was thirteen years old. One Sunday, as I was carrying the offering plates back to the office after the service, a twenty-dollar bill fell off the plate onto the ground. Instead of putting the money back into the offering plate, I put it into my pocket.

I know it was wrong, and I asked God to forgive me many years ago. Somehow, I just felt that my forgiveness was not complete until I paid it back. This check is for that twenty dollars plus interest plus inflation plus the loss of its use in the mission. Please put it to good use.”

Pastor Schmidt looked at the check for five thousand dollars and smiled. Then he looked at another man on the sidewalk across the street. He wondered where he was in his relationship to God and what his life story entailed. It might be hard to top the story of Randy McComb today. At the very least, Pastor Schmidt didn't think he would ever look at a man outside Sam's General Store in a

complacent way again. He got up from the bench and headed home.

“Have you got the hamburger buns, Arnie?” asked Mary, his wife.

“No, I ... uh...”

“Wait a minute. It’s Wednesday, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I believe it is, dear,” said Arnie.

“It looks like you got a haircut.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You spent so much time talking to Mel about some world problem that you forgot the hamburger buns, didn’t you?”

“Uh, well ... you see ... I met this man who had a spiritual problem and I ... uh ...”

Mary just looked at him.

“I ... uh ... I did bring back a check that the man gave me for five thousand dollars for the church.”

“Five thousand dollars? Wow, that man must have had a big spiritual problem. All right, forgiveness requires that I make the burgers without buns.”

“I suppose so, Mary.”

Mary let out an exaggerated sigh, smiled, and said, “Forgiveness can be tough sometimes.”

Pastor Schmidt looked out the window and said, “Yes, it can ... and sometimes it is the toughest to forgive yourself.”