

TOMMY

Tommy. Copyright © 2008 by Sid Webb

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address The Clark Group, 250 East Short Street, Lexington, KY 40507, call 800-944-3995, visit www.theClarkGroupInfo.com, email info@the-ClarkGroupinfo.com

ISBN: 9781883589981

Cover design by Sid Webb

www.sidwebb.com

Cover Photo: Portrait of four young boys, [between 1895 and 1910], Bartle Brothers, Glass plate negative. Courtesy of the Archives of Ontario.

Reference Code: C 2-10232-1780, Archives of Ontario, I0002499

In memory of Lottie Taylor Webb

and for Lee A. Webb



The author at age thirteen

TOMMY

By

James Plimell Webb

The Clark Group

2008

Other books by the author

Poems

Riley Dawson

INTRODUCTION

The manuscript of this book has been tucked away for nearly sixty years since my dad's first novel, *Riley Dawson*, was published by Dodd Mead in 1950. Riley was a boy who lived in a cabin out in the backwoods of Kentucky a couple of decades before Tommy, who lives in a small village. Dad died soon after he finished *Tommy* and the manuscript has languished on the shelf since then.

Dad was ten years old in 1913. Tommy was thirteen.

When Dad was writing the book I was about Tommy's age and I tried to advise him about what boys Tommy's age would or wouldn't do. I am not sure of what impact I had on his telling of the story, but I am sure he kept his eye on me to sharpen his memories. Of course, many of the events woven into in this story are from Dad's own boyhood. My father was a town boy and I was a city boy, but in many ways our pre-teen years were alike.

Like Dad, I grew up in a age before television. There was, however, radio for me and there were some great dramas on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. They were my substitutes for the dime novels Dad and Tommy read. Dad grew up to be much like the man he describes as Tommy's father, Mr. Clarey. He was pretty laid back when it came to discipline, which I am sure was how my grandfather was with him.

I grew up in Owensboro, Ky., just a couple of blocks from the Ohio River. I ran around with a half dozen boys and our playground was generally along the overgrown riverbank of the

Ohio, a playground that I was forbidden by my mother to use because of her fears that I would do something stupid and get myself drowned. I played Cowboys and Indians like my father had 37 years earlier, and my boyhood companions and I played a hide-and-seek game called Kick-the-Can, a near cousin of the game Tallyho that Tommy played. Cowboys have long since lost their appeal as heroes for young boys and I suspect that Kick-the-Can, like Tallyho, has fallen by the wayside, too.

But when all is said and done, while the activities of boys may change, their socialization remains universal. All boys encounter bullies and must face issues of right and wrong. Like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Tommy's story is set in another time, and it is, I think, an accurate depiction of village life in rural Kentucky at the beginning of the last century.

When I step back a little, which is easy now that I am nearly 20 years older than dad was when he wrote this book, I see Tommy as a boy who has to make some hard choices that will shape the moral fiber of his adulthood. I see Tommy as a boy like I was, who had a caring and loving family, a boy who could tell the difference between good people and bad people, and a boy whose experiences led him to understand the differences between right and wrong as well as the many nuances of gray.

Sid Webb

Lexington, Ky.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Young People

Bob Allen - *son of the village doctor*

Joe Bates

Jesse Brewer - *new boy in town and two or three years older than Tommy*

Tim Burch

Tommy Clarey - *a thirteen-year-old boy*

Orvie Cotton - *son of a banker*

Nick Fuller

Lester Spaw - *son of the village miller*

Paula Spencer - *new girl next door to Tommy*

Adults

Bartholomew Abbott - *owner of the livery stable and hotel*

John Ackroyd - *former cowboy who runs the livery stable*

Jennie Allen - *friend of Louise*

Miss Bellows - *Tommy's teacher*

George Benchman - *cobbler*

Harvey Burch - *Tinker and father of Tim*

Ralph Chowning - *a pensioner and small property owner, college educated, and veteran of the Civil War*

Henry Clarey - *Tommy's father, store keeper*

Jane Clarey - *Tommy's mother*

Louise Clarey - *Tommy's older sister*
Pearce Clarey - *Tommy's older brother*
Orval Fulman Cotton - *banker*
Will Emory - *local wit and scholar*
Clabert (Clabe) Engle - *carpenter*
"Uncle" Jake Engle - *veteran of the Civil War and a pensioner*
Cliff Everetts - *farmer*
"Uncle" Vince Hargett - *sheriff and carpenter*
Henry Inman - *the town barber*
Roy Inman - *Tommy's future brother-in-law and son of Henry*
Clotis Jenkins - *a neighbor of the Clareys*
Mr. Jennings - *the principal, taught the seventh and eighth grades*
Tobias Kling - *house painter*
Oscar Leavitt - *teamster and chairman of the school board*
Miss Norton - *the primary teacher*
Ben Oaks - *agent and telegrapher*
Stanley Packlin - *store owner and postmaster*
"Uncle" Clint Ransom - *the "village atheist"*
"Uncle" Jonas Trimble - *owner and operator of a planing mill*
Shem Whitlook - *old friend of Tommy's father*

CHAPTER I

“Tallyho! Tally-ho-o-o-o!”

The village boys were playing a game, a sort of hide-and-seek, which they liked because it was played at night and without parental approval, and the cry of “Tallyho!” from the boy picked to be It must be answered by all those in-hiding, no matter what the penalty. The constant bellowing of “Tallyho!” from every corner of the sleeping Kentucky village had every adult - parent or otherwise - in an uproar.

Tommy Clarey, thirteen, accompanied by Orvie Cotton, also thirteen, had been lying in the weeds at the edge of a narrow alley; but having answered the latest cry of Lester Spaw, son of the village miller, they felt the need of a new hiding place. Swiftly they crossed the alley, climbed a board fence into the vegetable garden of George Benchman, the cranky cobbler, and dashed across it without worrying about the effect of their passage upon the young plants. After scrambling over another fence into Clotis Jenkins’ back yard, they opened a rickety gate and returned stealthily to the alley. They sprawled in the shelter of the high weeds and lay still.

Besides Tommy and Orvie, Lester was seeking Nick Fuller, Tim Burch, Bob Allen, and five or six others - the exact number was uncertain. Of these eleven or twelve boys, not one had left his home in the conventional manner, by the door; and the parents of not one knew that he was out. Each father and mother, in the sleep-clouded warmth of their bedroom, consoled them-

selves with the thought that *their* boy was not with those young "outlaws" who were making the night hideous with their yells.

Tommy and Orvie heard the approach of stealthy footsteps, and then they saw Lester Spaw in the dim moonlight. He stopped and listened; then he tilted his head and uttered a long-drawn "Tallyho-o-o-o" which demanded an answer. Tommy and Orvie heard the other boys make reply - some fairly near, some faint and far. It was necessary, that one or the other of them answer. It did not occur to them to cheat by remaining silent. Lester was standing within twenty feet of them, and to give voice now would be risky; so Tommy resorted to a trick which was regarded as both clever and legitimate; he pressed his, cloth cap tightly to his mouth and uttered a long, muffled shout against this barrier, which produced the illusion of distance.

Lester Spaw, a slender-shanked lad in baggy knickers, turned round and round with a movement not unlike that of a dog attacking a flea on its hip, and then went loping away toward the center of the village. Orvie and Tommy sat up in the weeds and laughed with repressed glee.

"I sure fooled him that time," Tommy said exultantly. "Woodrow Wilson couldn't a-done it better, I bet."

"Talk sense," Orvie reproved, "The President of the United States don't play tallyho."

"Who said he did?"

"You did."

"I never said it. I just said he couldn't a-fooled Lester no better'n I did."

"He wouldn't try," Orvie said. "I heard he used to be a school-teacher."

“They better watch him, then,” Tommy replied. “You can’t afford to trust a schoolteacher even if he does claim he’s reformed. And after a moment of sober reflection: “Wonder what time it is?”

“Must be nearly midnight, I reckon.”

“Bet it is. Dad said he better not catch me out any more till he said I could go.”

“That’s what mine said,” Orvie answered. “But if I waited for him to say I could stay out, it’d be a long dry spell before I played tallyho any more.”

“Same here.”

They stared into the shadows beyond the alley. The night had a lonely, silent, deserted air. Objects at a little distance sometimes took on frightening shapes in the pale moonlight; but the boys were not really afraid because they felt instinctively that they could hide in the darkness and evade any pursuer.

After listening again for a moment, Tommy fitted his cap over his rather shaggy blond hair.

“Let’s hit for home,” he suggested. “School’s out tomorrow, and we’ll have plenty of time to play then.”

So they parted. The boys never seemed to know when a tallyho game broke up. One by one they slipped away to their homes, and at last no answers came to the challenging cry. Sometimes the seeker grew weary and simply went home, leaving the others to hide from nobody for a time before they discovered that they were not pursued.

Orvie, son of the banker, lived near the southern edge of town. He ran down the alley, and the darkness swallowed him up. Tommy’s home, a large white frame house which contained eight rooms, faced the main street, but it was not from the

street that the boy approached it. He came in from the alley at the rear and followed a footpath along the side of the vegetable garden. He slept in a downstairs room adjoining that of his parents, while his brother Pearce and his sister Louise occupied rooms upstairs.

Tonight, Tommy had entered the path and fastened the gate behind him when his shifting, uneasy glance discovered something which gave him pause. In the opposite corner of the Clarey property, facing the alley, stood an old carriage house which had been used as such by some previous owner, though Mr. Clarey possessed no horse and buggy. But the little building was not empty. A few years earlier, one of the villagers had become, for a brief period, an undertaker. When he went out of business he had a hearse on his hands, and Mr. Clarey had given him permission to store it in the vacant buggy house, where it had remained ever since. Tommy, as superstitious as the average boy of his age, always ran past the carriage house when he passed it at night.

Now his roving glance caught a movement at the door of the buggy shed and stopped him in his tracks. He could not identify the object, because a dark shadow lay across the alley at that point; but he saw *something*, darker than the shadow and in motion. Then in the stillness he heard a faint creaking sound such as a rusty hinge might make. Tommy knew that somebody or something had opened the door of the buggy shed and entered. Despite his alert attention, he saw no other movement.

Nothing moved for ten seconds and then something did move, exceedingly fast. It was Tommy! He went along the path with great velocity, but slowed down a trifle as he crossed the back yard and the grassy space at the side of the house. The ee-

rie spell of the moonlight seemed to have increased sharply; the odor of honeysuckle was cloyingly heavy on the air; somewhere at a great distance a dog was howling; and two sets of shivers were dancing along Tommy's spine - one set going up and the other coming down at the same time. He made more noise than he liked in his frantic haste to open the window and crawl through.

Once inside the room with the window locked, he felt relaxed and comfortable.

Then a new trouble disturbed him.

He had forgotten to take the usual precaution of hiding his plug of chewing tobacco. It was still in his pocket and a danger to him. The plug was not much, but there remained enough of it to condemn him if his father chose to search his pockets. The plug had been bitten all around, and the remnant was about the size of a quarter in circumference and about as thick as four quarters. Ordinarily, Tommy would have concealed it under the house before he entered, but tonight he had been in the grip of panic and he had forgotten.

Tommy and most of his friends carried tobacco whenever by hook or crook they were able to obtain any. At that time, 1913, the village stores sold a plug of generous size for a nickel. The difficulty lay in finding the nickel. Frequently, having no tobacco, the boys used such substitutes as a length of grapevine, dried coffee grounds, dead leaves, or a gray weed known as Life Everlasting. Few of the boys in Tommy's "gang" had a genuine taste for tobacco, yet most of them both smoked and chewed - and had an insistent urge to experiment with snuff. Their desire to use tobacco probably sprang from an instinct as old as the

Garden of Eden and was cut from the same cloth as Eve's temptation to eat of the forbidden fruit - because it *was* forbidden.

In the warm, dark security of his bedroom, reflecting upon his predicament, Tommy decided that, since his father searched his pockets only occasionally, there was a fair chance that he would not do so tonight. Tommy had no inclination to go out into the yard again at present.

Undressing swiftly, he got into bed and was quickly asleep.

It seemed to Tommy that he had slept only half an hour when Mr. Clarey aroused him; but daylight had come, and sparrows were chattering in a tree near the window.

For a moment the boy lay motionless; then he remembered this was the final day of school, so he got briskly out of bed and dressed himself.

Then he plunged a hand into one of his pants pockets - and it seemed to him that his heart stopped beating.

The little plug of tobacco was gone!

Mr. Clarey had searched his pockets before waking him and had removed the tobacco. Knowing this, Tommy was filled with dread of their meeting at breakfast. Seating himself on the edge of the bed; he supported his face in his cupped hands and stared gloomily at the threadbare rug. It seemed to him that his luck was all bad lately. He had one trouble after another.

He was in a trap now, and there seemed to be no way out of it. He must face the music, and he did not know what the tune would be. Most fathers, in a like situation, would handle it in a forthright way: they would get a switch and "whale the daylight" out of him and let him go, and that would simplify mat-

ters. But it was not thus that Mr. Clarey was likely to proceed. He kept his boy on tenterhooks, in the shadow of a nameless threat, as often as not, and the uncertainty was trying on the boy's nerves.

Realizing gloomily that his only hope lay in the inspiration of the moment, Tommy softly opened his bedroom door and, with more stealth than the average burglar would have considered necessary, slipped into the living room, where he paused to listen. The rest of the family were assembled in the combination kitchen and dining room. Tommy could hear their voices mingled with the usually pleasant clatter of tableware, but, surprisingly, they were not discussing him.

To avoid the necessity of greetings, conversation, and other attentions, Tommy suddenly dashed through the kitchen and out to the back porch, where a basin stood on a small, scarred washstand near the doorway. A pail of water occupied an empty soapbox near by, and there was a towel on a roller within easy reach. There was a cake of soap, too, but Tommy ignored it completely and, dipping a small quantity of water into the basin, he wet his hands and rubbed them gingerly over his face; after which he dried the moist spots with the towel, poured the water out of the basin, and reluctantly entered the kitchen.

Mr. and Mrs. Clarey sat at opposite ends of the table. Pearce and Louise faced each other at the sides. Tommy's chair, beside Pearce, awaited him. The members of the family sat with folded hands, solemnly waiting. Tommy's desperate glance noted this fact, and it was a fact which had a grim significance; for it was not customary for them to wait when the younger son was

late for meals. That they were waiting now, in such complete silence, seemed to bode no good. Tommy had no doubt that they were waiting for him to be seated before they "jumped on him" about the tobacco. While this thought was flashing through his tormented mind, his anguished glance took note of another strange circumstance - all the plates were upside down:

Mrs. Clarey had never followed the custom, considered polite and proper in some circles, of setting the table with the plates turned over, and Tommy wondered why she had done so this time. There must be a reason, a reason which probably augured ill for him - if he could only discover it.

Tommy, moving reluctantly toward the table, considered the advisability of telling his parents that someone had given him the tobacco to keep until today, that it was not his own and that he had intended to return it intact to its rightful owner; but then he remembered that he had tried that "dodge" a few weeks before, and it had not been successful.

With downcast eyes he slipped into his chair.

Mr. Clarey, a portly man with a brown mustache, said in an elaborately casual voice:

"Well, we're all here. Let's turn over our plates and eat."

Mr. and Mrs. Clarey, Pearce and Louise turned their plates with considerable pomp and ceremony. Tommy, darting quick, furtive glances, like those of a trapped animal, kept his head tipped forward and sought an explanation of the unusual. He made no move to turn his plate yet, because, as he would have expressed it, he "smelt a mouse."

With one of those sudden flashes of inspiration which may be more common in the world than men suppose, the explanation came. The whole diabolical scheme was instantly clear.

The *little plug of tobacco was beneath his plate*, and the watchful eyes of the family were waiting to see his confusion when he lifted the plate and uncovered the evidence.

Tommy, aware now of his danger, thought fast and conceived a plan of action. Perhaps it was not the most brilliant plan imaginable, but it was the best one available on such short notice and under such limiting circumstances. He would try to turn the plate over fast, set it down quickly with the thin plug concealed, at least from his own view, under the rim of the plate. Then he would pretend that he had not seen it, had not even suspected its presence, and leave the rest in the lap of the gods.

Carefully, and with some difficulty, he worked his fingertips under the farther edge of the plate, got a firm hold, lifted, and swung the plate away from him with a quick motion.

Alas for the best-laid plans of mice and boys.

The lower edge of the turning plate struck the plug of tobacco and lifted it like a fly-ball to center field; it curved up and over, cleared his glass of milk, passed far above the bacon and eggs, the syrup pitcher, the butter and the platter of biscuits, and fell with a tiny splash into the bowl of gravy!

Tommy's heart sank. He tried to pretend that he had seen nothing of what had happened. He kept his gaze innocently lowered, while, in the midst of a great silence, his mother arose, picked up the gravy bowl, marched with it to a side table, and returned empty-handed.

A quick glance revealed that Pearce, a slender, freckled young man of twenty who helped his father in the Clarey store and on the lumber yard, was having difficulty restraining his mirth. Louise's face, too, was excessively red.

Mr. Clarey sighed heavily. Reaching, he lifted the long, oval platter of bacon and eggs and extended it toward his younger son:

“Have some bacon and eggs, Tommy. Looks as if your mother has vetoed the gravy.”

CHAPTER II

Thereafter, while the suffering boy imagined dire punishments in the offing, the other members of the Clarey family conversed calmly of unimportant matters - politics, religion, education, business, and the cost of living.

Tommy was too uncomfortable to pay attention to much that was said, but he did display a slight interest in one remark of his mother:

“That Mrs. Spencer’s over there next door, early as it is. I do hope she’ll be a good neighbor. Anyhow, I’ll be glad to have *somebody* living there. I don’t like for it to be vacant.”

Tommy arose from the table and started through the living room fearful that, before he could make his escape from the house, he would be called back and whipped. But neither his father nor his mother opposed his departure and he breathed a sigh of relief when he had reached the street.

Approximately 250 people dwelt within the limits of Hill Point. All that number, except the babes in arms, would be interested in the arrival of a new family. Tommy, standing on the board sidewalk in front of the house, wondered if there were any boys in the Spencer family. He noted that the windows, closed for many weeks, were open now. The front door was open, too, and at this moment a woman, wielding a broom, appeared there. She was a young woman, although, being perhaps thirty years of age, she did not seem so to Tommy.

Mrs. Spencer looked up and, seeing the boy, smiled and nodded as she turned away. Tommy proceeded slowly toward the