

[Jared David Busby]

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[NAME OF INFORMANT?] JARED DAVID BUSBY

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ADDRESS WARREN, MASSACHUSETTS MAss. 1938-9

“Grandfather” Jared David Busby, aged seventy-eight, was born in the Berkshires and has lived in Warren more than forty years. He has been a notable figure in the business and political life of the town. “Jerry”, as many call him, is likable, witty, regarded as just a philosopher, with little formal education, but a vigorous mentality. Though very dear, he seems to know what is going on, is much interested in public questions and is well read. He spends considerable time at his small radio, despite its poor quality and static. Jerry subscribes to four newspapers and reads magazines also.

He lives alone and enjoys himself. His health is usually good, his eyes are bright, his white hair thick and flowing. Though Jerry's shoulders are stooped, his arms show strong muscles and his shapely hands apply themselves to many tasks. At times his whimsical expression reminds the interviewer of Mark Twain.

One of Jerry's regrets is that he did not follow the profession of law. His favorite uncle was a graduate of Yale, and the boy intended to study law “when he had time.” He never seemed to find the time. Another regret is that he did not remain in the West, when he went there on a trip. He believes he would have had a more intense and vivid life, and been more successful.

Climbing the long, steep stone steps of “Gramp” Busby's hill, on a wintry night, one clings, in the blustering snow, to the intermittent lengths of iron and wooden rails, as he scales to the summit where the dwelling, barn, and poultry house sit squarely, like a citadel. Near by lie the orchards of apples, pears, plums and peaches, and the gardens variegated with grape vines, small fruit and berries. The outside well and hand pump are quiet reminders of the days when he drew water for his cow and his white horse, Billy, the death of which “Gramp” mourns even now. Thirty-odd years of faithful service to his master are not forgotten.

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Though there has been running water in the house for many years, “Gramp” still prefers to drink the cold water from the old well. Pausing beside it, one has a view of the town scattered on the hills and in the valley, with Mark's Mountain standing like a sentinel toward the West.

The hurricane of 1938 twisted many trees planted long ago by a former owner of the place, and several detours are necessary before the visitor, scrambling on the slippery snow, reaches the back piazza. The light in the kitchen reveals through the frosted window Gramp, or Jerry, in his accustomed place on such an evening - sitting before the radio. Loud and repeated knocking reached his ears after several moments and he moved to open the door, peering suspiciously until he recognized his relative. Then welcome beamed for the visitor, and he started, almost immediately, 2 preparations for “a cup of tea.” Gramp began the interview. “How'd you come? Up the steps or the roadway? Humph, why didn't you come up the roadway? It'll take me a century to get my land cleared up. Nowadays every darned person is too lazy to do a stitch of work. They won't cut wood, even ef you give it to 'em. By hemlock, I won't hire any more lazy scamps. Come spring, my sciatica will be gone and I'll tend to the wood myself. I can straighten up my orchard if I have a mind to.”

“Drink you tea,” I said. “Dunk you doughnut if you want to. Don't mind me.”

“Catch me dunking, or using a bowl instead of a cup, if you can. I dare you to catch me. I've got on my company manners.”

Chuckling at his own joke, Gramp settled back to his rocking chair. “By crickety,” he said, “take a look at my new cane over there in the corner. It's a gold-headed one, too. I always wanted one.” he [glibly?] lied. “I hate it,” then he muttered, “but it's darn useful.” He lifted his broad shoulders. “I come of a long line of good fighters and so I tell 'em down street that I use it for looks; and, by golly I'll smash their heads if I see a snicker.

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“Say, I'm glad you took some Christmas greens up to the cemetery last week. Can't get up there this year.” Then, after a slight pause.

“I ain't hankering to die yet.” I had a feeling that he wanted to linger on the subject a bit, so I said: “Gramp, you remember the little chubby four-year-old I took up to see the cemetery? Well, she said to me: “Gramp is a nice, funny old Gramp. I like him, and he owns a nice, big cemetery. He must be rich.””

He laughed heartily. “Did you set her right?”

“No, I couldn't. She wouldn't believe me.”

“[?], in the old days,” he reminisced, “we didn't have perpetual care in our graveyards. But we did set store having nice tomb stones.

Lord, how long our funerals was. They were always held in the home and they lasted hours. The parson used to preach a long sermon. Sort of a general resume of the deceased's life. We had some swell solos and quartet singing. Usually some favorite song or hymn. We had one long-winded minister by the name of Clark. Some of the town wits used to say: “Wal, Parson Clark sent old Jones to hell at exactly two-thirty.

Took him about four hours to git him there.” Or, again, “Widder Smith went to heaven at four prompt.”

“What kind of flowers did you use?” I asked.

“If the man was a farmer and he happened to be buried in the fall, the women used to make great sheaves of grain. They look awful pretty with the tassels. They used corn or anything handy. If it was in the winter, they used red berries and greens. In the summer time they picked the old-fashioned flowers from their gardens. Or they picked daisies, asters and ferns from the fields.

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4

“After the funeral party returned from the grave, all the immediate family and relatives set down to a hearty meal. Usually some one was left at home to have it all ready, piping hot. Soon after the feast of hot food and drink, the relatives who lived away would get their horses hitched up ready to take them home.

“Sometimes they lived far away and they couldn't waste much time hanging around [mourning?]. The dead were usually buried in the ground in the winter, but sometimes if the frost was down too deep, they saved them for a thaw, or a slack in a snow storm.”

Death reminded Gramp of “one special Christmas”, the first after his mother died.

“There were so many of us kids that my father had an old Negro woman to take care of us. Old Sal was a good mammy. You know Massachusetts was once a slave state. Afterwards there were a lot of freed slaves around. They usually lived in bunches. Down in Sheffield there was a number of them. Old Sal was pretty good to us children, but I missed my Ma.

“Sal could cook flapjacks great and was a dabster at cooking pork. She was ‘right smart’, as they used to say in those days. Wal, we had turkey pie for Christmas and stick peppermint candy with red [bands?]. But I was lonesome just the same.”

The old man sighed, and looked quizzical. “You want to hear some stories. Wal, one day Pa told us kids he would be gone a few hours. Beforehand he had taken out the old washtub, washed himself and dressed up in his best suit. One of the boys greased his cowhide boots for him.. Another kid brushed out the old buggy. I dusted off the old mare for him.

“Pa was gone a few hours and when he came back he brought a wife. But she was just a stepmother to us boys. She was kindhearted, but she had a bitter tongue and we were afraid of her.”

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“Tell about the marriage ceremonies in those days,” I asked.

Gramp took a big pinch from his snuff box. “Marriages in those days were usually held in the office of the justice of the peace, or at the parsonage. The ceremony was short and sweet. They didn't have much of a honeymoon. Sometimes there were love matches, but usually it was a business-like arrangement. The parents and friends often arranged them, or the couples themselves.”

The old fellow started to nod in his chair. “Good night, Gramp,” I said, rising. “We'll talk some more tomorrow.”

The next night he busied himself throwing pine logs into the fireplace in the living room as we sat before the blaze, while the wind roared and swirls of snow hit against the panes. The storm outside and the warmth and comfort within seemed to combine to encourage confidences.

“What do you consider the great moment of your life?” I asked suddenly. “The greatest moment of my life was when every single thing was against me. The blackest and most dismal time, loss of family ties, position and money. A time when everything tottered and I almost went down into a pit too deep to crawl out of. But I didn't go down.

“I prayed, too, I crawled cautiously up, foot by foot, until gradually stood on my feet again. You've heard Patrick who wouldn't cross the ocean unless he first went to the priest to ask the holy Saint Michael to help him. We're the same. We all need help both from within ourselves and from our religion, whatever it may be. We old-timers learned to rake for ourselves. We had to have plenty of hope, faith and courage. Just now the whole country is helpless. Would you like to know why it's helpless?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, meekly. One gets a humble feeling listening to Gramp. He speaks with such assuredness.

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“My solution of solving the troubles of the depression is that everyone should work, in the first place, and work hard. There is too much play, too much gambling and speculation. The panic was caused by the people depending on the country. It should be vice versa. The country should depend upon the people. Every family should try to own their own home and a little land. He should 7 plant a garden and raise enough vegetables to last through the winter. A wife should can everything possible. There should be a salt pork barrel and a pickle barrel. If possible, have two cows, and hens enough to have one's own eggs. Feed the hens some grain and, mostly, table scraps. Always raise a good, fat pig to be killed at Christmas time. A good heifer calf can be raised cheaply, with some work. The bull calves can be fattened, and eaten when cold weather sets in.

“Plant apples, pear and peach trees. Have a strawberry and raspberry patch, and if possible, an asparagus bed. Be sure to get a good job and keep it. If machinery replaces men, men must walk barefooted looking for something else. (You know I think I'm a socialist.) Be on time and work early and late. This money will pay taxes , insurance and repairs, buy regular food not otherwise provided for, and clothes. Don't make use of installment plans in buying anything. Have the cellar full of fruit and vegetables, such as potatoes, cabbage, turnips, carrots, parsnips. Have plenty of stews; buy a few pounds of good meat and cook up a quantity of vegetables.

Buy or cut fuel for the winter in the summer and have it ready before it is needed. Dress children simply and warmly and have them in the care of a doctor and dentist, at regular periods.

“Teach the girls to cook and sew. Teach the boy to cut wood, take care of a garden, milk a cow, hunt and fish. Give the boy 8 a boat and a dog and a gun, if he acts sensible. Teach him to use carpenter's tools. Give a girl a sewing machine. Educate your children so they can become wage earners. Girls need a college education, just as much as boys. Have parties at home. Don't buy an automobile unless it is necessary, or you can afford the

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luxury of owing one. Rise early and go to bed before midnight. The best sleep is before midnight.”

Gramp was in one of his good moods for talking and he rambled on, but with certainty.

“When I was a boy I would run a mile for a penny, and now a is so lazy he will not even walk across the street to earn a quarter. When I was a boy, ice cream and candy were a treat. Nowadays they are not treats at all. Everyone is satiated with all the comforts of like imaginable, but still he is not satisfied. The rich man may envy the poor man but the poor man tries to act like a millionaire. There is hardly a middle man, except in the insane hospitals and jails, which are more crowded every year. There, at least, life goes on in some sort of even regularity. Those in charge live the best, but all the rest are on a similar plane, whether patient or guard. Americans strive to out-do each other, and a uniform unrest and real poverty will result, sooner or later.”

Gramp seemed to enjoy talking on and on.

“This is a fast age. Look at the fast young men lurching along the streets. Look at the painted dolls mincing along on high 9 heels, prancing along in overalls, or slacks as they call 'em, with bare back, humped up like kangaroos. A fast crowd in look looks at any rate. Perhaps in time they will grow up and look and act like sensible people. I like to see a youth wear a hat and I do not like greased heads. We used to grease shoes, not hair, except dowdies and dudes, perhaps. Look at the fast life on the highways. A spending whirl of life. Topsy young people hurtling to their death against a tree or post.

“A school bus dashes into a flying train and the hopes of many fathers and mothers; and bodies of school children are strewn along the way - some in pieces to be picked up in buckets, as at a slaughter house. Too much haste, too much spirits in the stomach, and in the mind. Drunken drivers - death and sorrow for many families result. Speed in the air. Speed on the land. Speed on the sea. Speed on the screen. Money making schemes.

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Cities full of cars. People People playing [beno?] - dollar entrance fees paid out weekly by people that haven't even an undershirt or a pair of garters.”

We ate the apples that Gramp had handy, throwing our peelings on the fire, and watching them burn in fantastic shapes.

“In the old days family ties were very strong; relations used to be loyal and help each other out.” Gramp remarked, after a minute or two of silence.

10

“Did you ever hear of Beartown? We used to call it Ba'rtown. It was a section of Great Barrington near South Lee. The ba'r himself was Judge Sumner. He had long, white hair and a big crop of whiskers. He used to shine at all the court sessions. Then there was Levi Beebe.

He was very active in town affairs and religious duties. Levi was witty, droll and charitable. His wife used to give money to the poor, and baskets of food to the sick and needy.

“For many years, old Levi kept a weather chart. He was quite a weather prophet. He had stacks of charts piled away and he spent all his spare time studying up on the subject. Levi was very slack. For instance, if he was getting in a load of hay and a shower was coming up suddenly, he'd stop and tell everybody it was going to rain, instead of getting his load of hay into the barn. In politics he was very much alive on every subject. This weather business was his weak spot.

“Beebe owned hundreds of acres of land. He had a fine saw mill. He had the first circular saw up thereabouts. The old kind of saw was the up and down saw. He used to boast loudly that at one time he had owned land in thirteen different states. Our cattle shows and fairs used to last three to four days. Beebe used to make a lot of speeches there. He was a would the orator on every subject. In fact, he tried to be a [?] on all subjects.”

11

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"Isn't there a reservation called Beartown?", I inquired.

"Yes, there is. The people sold plenty of land to the government."

Gramp resumed his collection of old time families. "Now, there was another prominent family called the Culvers. There was a big family of them. One of them Ed Culver, was one of my schoolmasters. I remember one incident that happened during a winter term. Old Culver had a lot of trouble with some of the boys who were as big as he. The oldest were from eighteen to twenty-two. Not many went after they were twenty-one.

"One day the gang were especially unruly. [Ed?] didn't fight the big ones so he picked on the little ones in a true cowardly fashion.

I was quite mischievous and he caught me up to some prank, so he make me do what they called in those days 'straightening or tightening the nails.' You had to put you toes on a line of nails on the floor and bend forward in good position. The teacher then gave you a good swat."

"What did he use?"

"Culver made a certain kind of a stick, shaved out of a hard slab board."

"Did it hurt much?"

"Wal, he usually was so mad that he broke his stick at the first whack. The women teachers used to have us cut our own 12 whips. They were cut according to the teacher's orders and were of a size to suit the offense."

There was a rattle of the door leading to the porch - one of Gramp's few visitors had come to call. The interviews for the time was over.