

The Fight on Packing Day Evening

Bill Estel was the tallest man anyone had ever seen in Chatsworth. He stood at least six foot seven, and he had broad shoulders and thick arms. You wouldn't think anyone would want to pick a fight with Bill Estel. But people did. Fact is, that was how he lost the bottom half of his right ear.

Bill didn't talk about it much. "Someone bit it off in a fight" was all he'd say about it, and then he'd change the subject--ask you about fishing or something. But I know exactly how he lost it, because I was there that night thirty-some years ago when it happened.

Life was pretty tough in Chatsworth back in the 1860's. There wasn't much to do except work. Lotta people cut wood or made charcoal back then. There was still a lot of tall virgin pine around. People just cut them down, laid them in a pit and burnt them--you had to burn them just right, kinda smother them as they burned--then sold the charcoal to one of those iron foundries west of here. Once the war started, the foundries were kept pretty busy making cannonballs and stuff, and they needed lots of charcoal to keep the ovens burning.

Now Chatsworth is smack middle in the heart of the New Jersey pine barrens. The soil here ain't much good for farming--it's mostly sand. But like I said, there was lots of big pine around back then, enough to keep everybody working right through the war. Not like today. All the old trees are gone now. Seems like nothing grows around here any more 'cept scrub pine. Doubt if anybody'll ever find a use for that stuff.

But I was talking about Bill Estel. Man, was he strong. Couldn't nobody haul as much wood as Old Bill. I once seen him drag two twenty foot logs, one under each arm, clear around the side of our house when he was helping my dad put up a smokehouse.

Yet that wasn't what made him so famous 'round here. It was the way he could sing what got people talking. Just about everyone from here to Philadelphia knew Bill Estel, and they'd all tell you what a great singer he was.

You see, Bill owned a team of horses, and once a week or so he'd haul charcoal out to the factories around Philly, then bring back a bunch a supplies for us folks here in Chatsworth. It took him two days to make the trip--one day there and one day back--and he'd be singing the whole way. You could hear him coming a half mile off.

Like I said, there wasn't much to do around here for fun. Come Saturday night, most folks in the area'd go over to the Red Pine Inn for some socializing. Now, you have to understand about the Red Pine Inn. It wasn't the best place to go for a night out--it was the only place. There wasn't nothing else between Mount Holly and Waretown. So 'less you wanted to spend three hours behind a horse, it was either Pine Inn or home.

So the folks that owned it didn't need worry about making it fancy. All they had to do was keep the walls up, the roof on and the doors open, and come Saturday night they had themselves an inn full of customers.

Us kids, we'd be running 'round all over the place, while the grown-ups hung out inside and gossiped, (or whatever it was they did in there. Mom didn't like to call it gossip. She'd say she was just getting caught up on the news.) Now the men, they'd keep sneaking out back for fresh air, but funny thing was, that fresh air they was breathing smelt pretty strong of whiskey to me.

Round sundown or so the singing would start. Sometimes somebody would play a fiddle or something for music, but most times people just sang. Everybody sang, even those what couldn't. But then Bill would sing, and everybody else got real quiet so's they could hear him. One of us kids, hanging out outside, would notice how quiet it got in there and call out "Bill's singing", and we'd stop whatever we was doing and come inside to listen.

Bill had a deep voice, but he could hit some high notes too. And you could understand every word that he sang. His voice filled up the whole room--it was like you could almost feel it--and it made you feel good, kinda like feeling warm and cozy on a cold night.

People loved to hear him, and they'd make him sing three, four, five songs in a row sometimes. Bill didn't care; he loved singing, 'specially if he'd been out back a lot getting lots of that fresh air.

So Bill made quite a name for hisself, and before long people'd be coming from far away as Browns Mills just to hear him sing. And to fight him. See, that was the other thing Bill was so good at, fighting. Fact is, nobody could beat him. People sure did try though.

You see, people could only sing for so long. After a while, they just kinda ran out of songs. Nobody wanted to go home yet since it was Saturday night and there wasn't nothing to do

at home except sleep, so they'd start in having fights. Wouldn't take much to get them started--two guys'd just brush each other the wrong way, I suppose. Oh, sometimes they'd have a grudge or something going on, but usually it was just for sport. The next thing you knew, all the chairs and tables were pushed aside, and two guys'd be going at it in the middle of the room. Everyone else'd be circled around them yelling and shouting and placing bets.

Sure enough, wouldn't be long before someone'd go after Bill. Now Bill never went looking to fight nobody--he always said he didn't like fighting all that much--but somebody'd always want to fight him 'cause he was so big. It was usually someone from out of town, thinking they was gonna prove something. Most times it didn't last very long. Bill'd usually just push the poor fool around a little bit at first. "Now don't make me hurt you," he'd say. "I don't want to hurt you." But if he saw that the guy wasn't going to let up, then Bill'd start swinging them big fists of his--and swinging hard, too. Usually wouldn't take more than a punch or two for him to put someone out stone cold. Everyone would laugh and cheer as Bill carried the poor stranger out the front door and tossed him into the street. Chances are he woke up the next morning in the middle of the road, never really knowing what hit him.

But one night in particular things got a little outta hand. It was packing day, and everybody'd already been celebrating since morning, when the hogs came back.

See, 'round here people usually kept a hog or two during the winter--fed them and cared for them--then let them go wild in the spring. Just kinda open the gate and say "Go on, get outta here." The hogs would take off into the pines and be gone all summer. They was just shoats when they left, probably didn't weigh more than fifty pounds apiece. Then around late fall they'd come back, all growed up, and that's when you'd slaughter them. Never could figure out why they'd come back just to get eaten, but they did.

And that was packing day, because after you scraped and skinned them and cut >em up, you had to pickle them so's they'd keep for the winter. What you did was you'd get a big old wooden barrel, and you'd put a bunch of pork in the bottom of it, and then pour rock salt over the pork. Then you'd put a layer of pork over the salt, and take a big wooden mallet, and you'd pound that pork down real hard, and then add more salt. Then another layer of pork--pound it down--then more salt, and you'd keep doing this layer after layer for maybe fifteen, twenty layers till that

barrel was filled. The key was packing that barrel as tight as possible with the mallet--you didn't want any air in there. Then when you got that done you poured in the pickle--usually just water and rock salt--and filled the barrel to the top. And if you packed it tight enough you wouldn't be able to get more than a bucket or two of pickle in that whole barrel. Seal that barrel tight and you've got meat for your family for the whole winter.

Thing was, starting October everybody'd get kinda nervous 'bout those hogs. Sure, everyone knew they'd come back, but what if this year they didn't? Why, you might not have any meat the whole winter. By the end of October people'd start worrying pretty hard, even though they knew better.

So packing day was always a big event for the whole community, and this year almost all of the hogs in the whole area came back on the same day--Saturday. By the time folks got to the Pine Inn that night, they was real happy and ready to make some noise. Don't know why it is that the happier some people get, the more they wanna fight, but that sure was the case that night.

Now it also happened that some rowdies from Toms River chose that night to come down and find out for themselves if what they'd been hearing about this Bill Estel guy was really true. These were some pretty big boys, and they couldn't believe it when they heard there was a piney down in little old Chatsworth could lick any man around.

It was a pretty rambunctious night to begin with, what with all the celebrating going on all day. You could tell something big was gonna happen. 'Bout nine o'clock Bill started singing, and everybody else stopped to listen. It was kinda too bad that no one else was singing, cause if they had been, people might not've heard that one Toms River boy call out: "Is that him? He don't look so tough."

Now on a less festive day folks might've had enough sense to let a comment like that slip by, but not on packing day. No way. That was a challenge to their local champion, and wasn't nobody in Chatsworth gonna let some clamdigger from up North question Bill's toughness. Before Bill had even finished his first song the fights had already started. Us kids come running in, 'specting to hear Bill singing, but wasn't ten seconds after we got through the door that whole place was amok. A bunch of women came at us trying to shoo us back outside, but there was no

way that was gonna work. We scattered and squeezed our way to the front of the crowd to watch a couple local boys go after those trouble makers.

It soon became obvious that it was either gonna be Bill or nobody that was gonna get the better of them Toms River boys. Bill kept saying things like "No, I don't wanna fight anybody" and "C'mon folks, lets just have some fun", but by then it wasn't just Bill's honor at stake, it was all of Chatsworth what needed defending. Couple guys kinda nudged Bill into the center of the floor just as one of those Toms River boys chose to throw a chair across the room, and it hit Bill right in the face.

That was enough to get things started, but it wasn't really a fair fight, 'cause when one of those three boys started losing, another one would step in and help him out. Still, Bill was holding his own, and at one point he picked one of them up and kinda threw him into the other two and started laughing. I guess by that point Bill was feeling pretty good, and was starting to enjoy hisself. But those Toms River boys didn't think it was very funny being laughed at like that, and all three of them jumped up at Bill at the same time. The four of them went crashing through a table down onto the floor. Bill was still laughing pretty good down there with those three other guys on top of him, when all of a sudden he let out this yell that I thought was gonna bring the roof down on top of all of us.

Bill jumps up with this one guy still on top of him, and you could see the whole side of Bill's face was bloody. So Bill pulls the guy up off him and spins and kinda sling shots the guy into the wall, and son-of-a-gun if that guy didn't just crash right through that wall. Now pine isn't the strongest wood around, and the Pine Inn was a pretty old place, even back then, but those walls weren't *that* old. Yet that guy hit the wall and there was this loud snap!, and suddenly he was lying on the ground outside and there was a six foot hole in the side of the inn. For a moment there was complete silence as everybody tried to figure out what just happened, and when they all realized that Bill Estel had just thrown someone from Toms River through the wall of the Pine Inn, a cheer went up in that place that must've carried all the way down to Cape May.

We all ran to the hole where the wall used to be and looked out. The guy from Toms River was lying on the ground moaning, but soon as he sees us staring at him, he jumps up,

points at Bill and says: "Bill Estel, you go home and you tell your mama that Chuck Lukey from Toms River just bit your ear off."

And Bill says: "Well, Chuck Lukey, you go on back to Toms River and tell everyone there that Bill Estel just threw you through the wall of the Red Pine Inn."

So Chuck Lukey thinks about this for a second and then says: "Yep. I reckon ya did." And that ended the fight. The three Toms River boys just left without saying another word.

Bill always said he was sorry for putting the hole in the inn like he did, but I think he was secretly pleased that he done it. Kinda made up for some of the pain of having his ear partly bit off.

Funny thing was, about two years later Chuck Lukey ended up moving to Hanover, about five miles from here. Bill said that whenever he and Chuck met, they always shook hands.

That was over thirty years ago. They fixed the wall at the Pine Inn, but they had to replace it with a different kind of wood, so it never looked the same as the other walls. After Bill died they put up a small plaque about him and that fight right on the spot where the guy went through. They didn't need to, really. Anybody in Chatsworth could tell you why that wood there was different.

The Pine Inn burnt down about three years ago, and hasn't been rebuilt. Towards the end there it wasn't doing much business anyway. As far as I know that plaque is still in there somewhere, buried among the bricks and debris. Some day I ought to go down there and poke around in the rubble a little, see if I can find it.