

Creative History

History in Poems, Photographs, and Stories





Ecorse Clinic in 1960s Ecorse, Michigan
Photo by photographer Sandy Blakeman

Uncle Mosbey and the Damn Yankees

The Civil War caused bitter divisions in Kentucky as it did in the rest of the states, but sometimes war produces light hearted incidents as well. This story is imaginary, but based on a real Kentucky family legend. Do you have any family legends to share?)

My great-great Uncle Mosbey was a peaceable man unless someone threatened his moonshine that had been in the family for a hundred years before the Civil War. One day somebody did threaten it and Uncle Mosbey acted accordingly.

During the Civil War Uncle Mosbey operated our family distillery in Mosbey,

Kentucky. One morning when he was peacefully working with his mash, a neighbor jogged up the ridge on the back of his mule. "Word's out that the Yankees are coming," the neighbor hollered to Uncle Mosbey.

Uncle Mosbey was a man of few words. "How far from here?" "Last seen, they were over at the Hawkins place."

Much obliged for the warning," Uncle Mosbey said.

Since the Hawkins place was about three miles down the road that gave Uncle Mosbey a little time. He snatched up two jugs of the precious moonshine. He hurried back to the house, leaving the neighbor to plod on his rounds.

"The Yankees are coming!" Uncle Mosbey shouted to Aunt Hildy and their four young'uns in the cabin.

Aunt Hildy dashed out onto the rickety front porch and leaned on the sagging railing. "The Yankees! Lord have mercy, Mama's silver!" Aunt Hildy screamed, "Jady! Jady girl, get the silver together. We have to hide it from the Yankees. Hurry up there, gal!"

Uncle Mosbey stood there with his two jugs of precious moonshine. "Hildy! We gotta hide this shine before the Yankees get here!"

Jady dashed out on the porch with a handful of silver, spoons, forks, knives all mixed together. "Here, Ma."

Aunt Hildy grabbed a handful of silver from Jady. "We can hide it over here, Mosbey."

Aunt Hildy rushed over to the well in the front yard and cranked up the bucket. "I'll put it in the bucket and cut the windless. Then they won't get suspicious."

"We ain't gonna do no such thing!" Uncle Mosbey shouted. "Don't you cut that windless. I'm gonna put my shine down there!"

"Mosbey, your moonshine's bothering your brain! The silver is worth more than that!"

"Hildy, coons and hound dogs is best friends if that silver is worth more than my

shine.”

Jady stuck her head out the window just then. “Pa, I hear horses galloping up the trail!”

Uncle Mosbey ran to the well with those two whiskey jugs full of moonshine and put them in the bucket. He cranked it down to the bottom of the well. Aunt Hildy was quick behind him. She jumped on his back, scratching and clawing like a mountain lion. “Mosbey, you give me that bucket!”

Since Uncle Mosbey outweighed Aunt Hildy by about 150 pounds, you know who won that fight. Aunt Hildy didn’t give up that easy, though. “Tarnation Mosbey!” she screeched. She hopped off his back, grabbed the silver by handfuls and threw it down the well. Faint plunking and splashing sounds drifted up from the bottom.

“We’re gonna dive for every piece of that silver when the Yankees go away,” Aunt Hildy told him. “I’m gonna stand over you with the shotgun while you do it.”

Uncle Mosbey shrugged her off like a drop of rainwater and fastened the bucket rope to the windless. “Gotta be able to get at that shine when the Yankees go,” he grunted.

Jady dashed across the yard and tugged at Uncle Mosbey’s elbow. “The Yankees are here, Pa! They’re here, Pa! What are we gonna do?”

“We’re gonna go meet ’em,” Uncle Mosbey growled. “What else would a red-blooded Confederate do?”

“The rest of you young’uns git out of here quicker than a coon scoots up a tree!” Aunt Hildy shouted. The three boys scurried out of the cabin like rabbits and huddled close to Aunt Hildy’s skirts. Jady stood a little apart from Aunt Hildy, as befitted the oldest and the bravest.

The Yankees galloped into the yard. There were four of them on brown horses streaked with sweat and dirt. Their saddlebags bulged and the Yankee in the lead had a chicken slung across his saddle. He looked to be a captain by the bars on his arm. “Halt!” the Captain shouted to his men. They stopped in a cloud of dust and cursing as Duke, Uncle Mosbey’s mangy hound dog, fastened his teeth in one of the men’s boot. “Call off your dog or I’ll kill him on the spot,” the Captain ordered

Uncle Mosbey.

“Hey old Duke, get your waggin tail over here,” Uncle Mosbey drawled. Old Duke ambled over and lay down in front of Uncle Mosbey. That’s why there are still some of Old Duke’s great-grandchildren running around today.

The Yankee Captain pointed to three scrawny chickens pecking around the yard. “I’ll take them chickens.”

Uncle Mosbey shrugged. Aunt Hildy said, “They’re yours if you can catch ’em.”

The three boys behind her skirts snickered. They knew about mountain chickens.

While the Yankees were chasing the chickens, Aunt Hildy threw the last spoon down the well. She thought she was being real sneaky, but the Yankees were real sneaky too. They heard the splash that silver spoon made. The Yankee Captain hurried over and grabbed Aunt Hildy by the arm. “Watcha got there, Reb Lady?” he snarled.

Aunt Hildy held out her empty hands. ‘I ain’t got nothin.’”

“Then what did you drop down the well?”

“Nothing.” Aunt Hildy said flatly.

A Yankee soldier with a dirty brown moustache drooping over like wilted cornstalks clumped over to the windress. “What’s this rope fastened to?” he asked Uncle Mosbey.

Uncle Mosbey studied the Captain hanging on to Aunt Hildy and the other damn Yankees heading towards his moonshine. Uncle Mosbey headed for the damn Yankee who was about to cut the rope holding the bucket with his moonshine in it, but Aunt Hildy beat him to the rescue. She twisted out of that Yankee Captain’s grip and said, “I threw our silver down the well to keep you thieving rascals from getting it.”

The Yankee Captain drew his pistol. “Do you have a rope that goes into that well?”

“Your boy was about ready to cut it,” Uncle Mosbey said.

The Yankee Captain leveled the pistol at Uncle Mosbey. "Go down in the well and get that silver, every piece of it," he ordered.

Uncle Mosbey climbed down into the well. On his first trip he cut the rope that was fastened to the bucket so the Yankee Captain wouldn't discover his moonshine. He handed up all of the silver to the Yankees, piece by piece. "It sets a nice table when it's all together," he told the Yankee Captain.

"I intend to keep it together and my wife will polish it all together," the Yankee captain said. "It's a good war souvenir"

The Yankees finally left with the family silver, three chickens, and some cornbread that Aunt Hildy had just baked that morning. Uncle Mosbey was soaking wet and Aunt Hildy was madder than a swatted-at bee to think the family silver was going to turn Yankee instead of the moonshine.

Aunt Hildy glared at Uncle Mosbey.

"Mosbey, would you have let that Yankee Captain take me instead of your moonshine?"

"Now that thar's a good question, Hildy, "Uncle Mosbey stalled.

He never did answer it.

Women's Voices, Women's Worlds

Sandra

Later on that evening we went to a burned out ship

As if the Arizona at the other end of our mooring line

Wasn't burned out enough.

The U.S.S. Solace, our ship's name.

But what Solace is there in a burned away face?

No legs, a buddy blown to bits?

The commander said we must search for life

Amidst all of this death.

I searched and found

Bits and pieces of cloth, a few buttons

All that was left of lives.

The tears hit my eyes torpedo force

If only I could spray them over the burning water

To extinguish the flames.

I knelt down

Listening for life below deck,

Then I found it:

A small cross

Dented, covered with oil.

I wiped it off on my skirt.

It gleamed in the light of the fires,

A chaplain's shoulder cross

Reflecting the fires of a man-made hell

And the calm, steady eyes of a nurse.

Sarah

Tom brought me back to Kentucky; I sighed

Then I laughed and I hugged them and I cried,

And tidied the cabin cozy and neat

Got Tom to put shoes on his children's feet.

And the boy, that long and rail-thin boy,

I gave him a book and he laughed with joy

He stretched out on the hearth every night

Reading every page by firelight,

And soon I could see his mind grow as tall,

As his shadow stretching across the wall,

The same shadow paced the White House at night,

Worrying over the Gettysburg fight.

When last I saw him the train whistled by,

Leaving a smoke trail across the sky

The prints of many feet trampled the grass

My sobs hung in the air; the train chugged past.