

Bearly Hang'n On

By

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When I was a lad, and mind you this was certainly a lot further back than anyone reading this was probably alive, we didn't have much. Oh sure, I've heard all the millennials puff up about their lack of wifi signal in the basement of 'Mom's place'... but trust me, that just isn't the same. Internet? What's the internet? When I say we had nothing, I mean we had nothing.

Now then, let me assure you this is not meant as a 'poor me' episode of a toothless old Bear think'n back to times that certainly, by comparison, were stark and thread bare (no pun intended). Yes, I did walk two miles to school, but it was only uphill one way. The difference between now and then: we talked to each other back then. We actually all got together and made a joyous noise unto life and the ability to just breathe. There was no 24/7 television. In fact, there was no television at all. We could have had a radio... but we didn't have any electricity to power the darned thing up. That all came later when I was in my teens.

Our home was what you would probably call a shack by today's standards. It did have a wonderful front porch we would all sit on in the cool of the evening which was specially braced up to handle all of us at once. It had a living room that was more kept for visitors than it was for us cubs. Mess that room up and you had Ma to answer to. We had three bedrooms, one for Ma and Pa, one for us boys, and one for my sister. She had all the luck cuz there was only one of her and there were four of us. And, of

course, it had a pretty good sized kitchen where we would all gather for our evening meal.

Pa was a farmer, so he was out of the house at sun up. That Bear worked harder than anyone I ever met, tending to his fields. The rest of us, if there was no school to be attending, were sent off to the woods to hunt and gather. We had one rule for the house; if you didn't pitch in when it came to eating, you didn't eat. I remember the day that Lulu came in all full of herself and with a full belly, claiming she hadn't found anything to bring home. Of course the strawberry stains were all over her dress as proof of her ruse. This was quickly observed by myself, and I quickly said so.

"No poke, no dinner," Ma said firmly, and it just so happened my older brother came in with a whole string of perch and bluegill. What a feed! It was delicious and all the more so because 'she' didn't get to share.

So! Let me s'plain something so you understand. A 'poke' was not a hit to the arm like me and my brothers did, nor was it some sort of fancy prepared food manufacturer because back then if it wasn't pickled, canned, salted, or dried, it was going to spoil. So you know, a 'poke' was a gal's bonnet. For you city types, that's a type of hat. We boys would josh each other saying, 'Ya better not forget your poke, sissy bear, cuz too much sun on the head'll make you crazy.'

OK, the bottom line is this; you see a patch of berries, you darned well better fill your poke with 'em and bring the whole back to Ma. Then you repeat the process until you got them all or you got enough, and I can tell you for sure you never had enough.

Where was I? Got too much – got not enough – stupid sister – the house – no electric – brothers – berries and fish... man that had to be my most favorite dinner ever... hav'n stuff. Yeah, all right, we'll go with that then.

Hav'n stuff. We didn't have a lot, but what we had we took good care of. Ma even taught me to darn my socks by using a wooden ball... and no you did not sit there with your needle and thread saying 'darn darn darn'.

Old too soon and wise too late. All that you kids got these days and it just sits in my craw sideways – and no I ain't gonna tell you want a craw is either. Your sock gets a hole in it and you're off to the store to buy new ones. (*sighs) All right, no more... I'm get'n to the crux of the story now.

We had exactly five things we called possessions; note the house and barn didn't count. We had Pa's plow, we had our clothes (two sets of work and one set of Sunday Go To Meeting), we had Ma's cast iron stove (inclusive of her cooking utensils), we had Ma's Squeeze Box (that's a concertina to whatever moron had bad thoughts there), and we had Pa's mandolin.

The occasion was this; I had a broke leg. Don't ask how I got it, cuz I hardly remember but I think maybe I fell off the porch, pushed just a bit by Lulu the day after I laughed at her for missing dinner that one time. I never told a soul that info-mation, so don't you neither.

Well... I was splinted, and I was in pain. The most we had for that was willow bark and I bet I'd drunk a gallon of tea made with the stuff. I was also relegated to staying put in the kitchen while Ma worked. Sometime after lunch, saying she was tired of hearing me moan and groan, so she goes and fetches Pa's mandolin and tells me to play her a tune while she worked. Sooooo... I started with 'The Bees And The Bears' bee-cuz (I had to do that) it was Ma's favorite. Of course I didn't play nearly as good as Pa but

that's aside the point. I played a few more and then my brother Jack walks in with a full basket of mushrooms. He was all happy with himself for getting such a find and says he's got a new secret area in the woods to pick. Ma was happy too. We generally didn't have a whole lot to eat each evening, and you know how hungry we Bears can be... but we always always always shared.

Next thing I know, she's cleaning and slicing mushrooms and he's got her biggest pot in his lap and is a slapping away on it keeping time with my playing.

Jethro then comes in and he was lucky with the fish again including no less than five big mouth bass along with his usual string of perch and bluegills. He takes to cleaning them and while he does, Ma finishes up and goes and grabs her sque... her concertina and then joins me at the kitchen table. We then played (don't laugh) 'The Bear Went Over The Mountain' and by the time we was done all of us could bearly hold it together. I mean we really busted up laughing.

That led into another three songs, 'We Bearly Know Each Other But We're In Love', 'Bears In Love' (similar but different), and 'Grin and Bear It'.

Bo came in then carrying a bushel basket of corn. Darned if he didn't dance it right over to the sink. When the music stopped, he told us this was the first of five bushels he got for helping out the farmer down the road with chores.

We all whooped and congratulated him; and of course sang a hungry as a Bear song of harvest, 'The Bear Bones Cupboard'. Ma's rendition brought tears to all our eyes, and there we were all blubbering like babies when Lulu walks in with a poke full of wild strawberries, and I want to say narry a stain was seen on her lips. She actually winked at me, and then took Ma's place playing the c-o-n-c-e-r-t-i-n-a, and we played 'Strawberry Bear', which was her choice, by the way.

That left only Pa out of the picture, but he was bound to show up sooner if not later when he heard all the music and singing. I remember seeing his reflection in the polished finish of his mandolin. He was framed in the kitchen doorway and just looking at us. When he stepped into the room, the floorboards creaked under his weight and for a moment I was worried the whole house was going to tip over from all of being in there at the same time. This was, of course, a foolish thought since we all gathered there every night.

It got real quiet suddenly, and the old fella gave me an angry look, holding out his paw for the one thing that was his. This, of course, I passed over.

"Dear?" Ma asked him, "Is everything all right? The children all brought us so much for dinner tonight."

He growled real low like in his throat and looked at each of us in turn, and then his paw was a strumming and his voice was a singing, "Oh the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountainnnnnn... to see what he could see."

I never laughed so hard in my life.

And then we ate... and oh boy do I mean we ate. We Bears didn't have much in the way of wealth; but we were so very rich in each other.

