

Fighting with a Gobbler

Learning about my past at a truck stop in New Mexico. By Vess Quinlan

When we finally got a place of our own in partnership with a kind and generous man who was long on optimism and short on common sense, it was in a pretty bad neighborhood for agriculture. Our version of “the American dream” was in southern Colorado, nearly 8,000 feet in elevation, and blessed with only six to eight inches of moisture a year. An even more optimistic group from Holland called Freehold Land and Immigration Company built a giant reservoir based on a decimal-point error by a British engineer back in 1919, so there was only enough irrigation water for about one-tenth of the land it planned to develop, but it gave our little community an on-again, off-again supply of irrigation water.

One thing we could do as good or better than most was grow more high-quality alfalfa than needed to winter our cattle and sheep. I found some dairymen in Texas willing to pay enough for the alfalfa that we could afford to haul it to them. I bought an old cab-over Peterbilt and a set of well-used 27-foot double flatbed trailers from Forester Trucks in Amarillo and set about creating a winter job for myself hauling hay to Texas.

We’d load 620 bales on the two trailers. I’d leave after supper Sunday and drive all night so we could unload in daylight Tuesday. Over La Veta Pass then down I-25 and over Raton Pass into New Mexico, then across the corner of New Mexico to Clayton. There was a New Mexico port of entry on top of Raton Pass and another at Clayton.

When I hauled the first load through New Mexico, the officer at Raton explained how I had to pay cash to cover the estimated fuel tax on every trip. He told me to keep the receipt to show the officer at Clayton or he would make me pay it again. I walked in the little port at Clayton and handed my paperwork to a weather-beaten old fellow sitting on a stool behind the counter. He looked at the paperwork, then asked, “Is your uncle Dddell Aldred?”

Uh-oh, I thought. “Yes, sir, he is.”

“I tttthought so. There can’t be two ppeople on one planet with a name like yours. Do you remmmember spending summer with Ddell and Helen on the Red Top Ranch east of Wwwalsenburg when you were little?”

“I sure do.”

“I was on that rrranch with Dell that summer. Do you rrrremmmember me? I’m Stuttering Bill.”

“It has been over 30 years. I would not have known you, but I remember the Stuttering Bill stories. Like the time that big albino colt went snow-blind, walked off a cut bank in a snowstorm, and broke several of Dell’s ribs. You went to visit and kept making him laugh, but it hurt so bad to laugh he called the nurse, and had you thrown out of the hospital.”

“I told Dell tttthat big albino colt would never amount to nothing. He was so clumsy he’d fall down walking. I told him ppppainting big black circles around that horse’s eyes with shoe polish wouldn’t keep him from going snow-blind either. That hhhorse was just plain dumb and big black circles around those ugly red eyes mmmade him look even dumber. He was the wwwworst horse I ever saw.”

“Sammy Grimsley told me about the time you and Dell were in Sammy’s Wonder Bar in Walsenburg. Some fellow got loud and was using bad language in front of the lady tending bar. Dell asked her to get him some coffee and when she brought it, Dell grabbed the guy and tried to pour that hot coffee in his shirt pocket. You went to court as a character witness and told the judge he should go easy since Dell was only trying to defend the lady’s honor. The judge said: ‘Hell, I have known that woman for 30 years. She ain’t got no honor left to defend.’ He fined Dell a hundred dollars for starting a fight and disturbing the peace.”

“Do you remember tttthat turkey?”

“You bet! I fought that damn turkey all summer.”

“Helen had quite a bbbunch of tturkeys. Most of them were pretty nice turkeys, bbut a young gobbler got your number. One day I

heard a bunch of screaming and yelling. Ttthat turkey had knocked you down. Dust was fogging, feathers were flying, and he was flogging the daylight out of you. I rrran out, kicked him off, and carried you to the bbbarn. You weren’t hurt but you were mad as hell. After that, whenever you would try to run to the barn, tthat turkey wwwwould chase you back to the house. Helen had an old dust mop and had me cut the handle shorter so you could handle it good and told you the turkey would be afraid of the dust mop. She said if you shook it at him, he’d leave you alone.

“The next evening when we were putting the horses up, I heard a fight start. That ttturkey was not the least bit afraid of the dust mmop. He was flogging the hell out of it. You were poking at him with the dust mop, bbacking toward the barn one step at a time, and cussing that turkey every step. You sure knew a lot of bbad words for such a little bboy. I said, ‘Well, I better go rescue him.’ Dell

said: ‘Nnno, I’d kind of like to see how long this can go on. He mmight figure out how to kill that turkey with the dust mop.’

“Your birthday came on Tthanksgiving day that year. Helen said we would have a birthday ppparty for you. You were gonna be five. She said you could get even with that tturkey because we would have him for Thanksgiving dinner and you could chop his head off.

“The day before Thanksgiving, Helen wanted to get the bird

ready. We caught him, Dell tied his wings, and laid him on the chopping block. I grabbed his head and stretched his neck out. Helen handed you the hatchet. You looked at that bird, then looked up at me and shook your head. You wouldn’t do it. You handed the hatchet to Helen, told her to kill him, and covered up your eyes with both hands. I saw you flinch when Helen chopped off his head.

“There were a lot of cowboys there for your birthday. That turkey sure tasted good for such an ornery bird. We ate every bit of him.” ■

Vess Quinlan, a former rancher, admits, “I didn’t have a retirement gene.” He still drives semis but is now carrying other goods, like beer and clothing. He misses his hay hauls.

