

# The Ballad of Billy Butts

*A win for the whippersnappers.*

*By James Hines*

**T**he story began when my dad, John Hines, raised his arm and pointed toward the cow pasture. He, my younger brother, Homer, and I were standing on a hillside on our Kentucky farm.

"It's Red," Dad said. "Looks like she's finally had her calf."

This was great news. Dad had promised Homer and I that Red's calf would be ours.

"Yahoo!" Homer yelled, and the three of us hurried down the hill.

When we got to the pasture, Dad stopped and chuckled. "Boys," he said, "this calf is so small and runty, you can hardly see it."

Homer and I didn't care. The important thing was that it belonged to us. Dad told me

to shoo Red away while he and Homer got the calf up on its wobbly legs. "It's a little bull calf," Dad said. "We'd better get him and Red to the barn where we can keep a close eye on him, or he might not make it."

After we put them in a stall, Homer and I fetched water and feed. Then Dad said, "Boys, I expect you to take good care of this scrubby calf. The runts of the world need our help."

Homer and I didn't need any coaxing. When we looked at our calf, all we saw was a miracle. After Dad went off to do chores, Homer and I stared proudly at our new property.

"Isn't he a dandy, Jimbo?" Homer said. "What are we going to name him?"

"I read a book about a steer named Billy Butts," I said. "Let's call him that."

We took excellent care of Billy Butts, and soon our calf was growing like a weed. He wasn't full stock, however, so we marked him, turning him into a steer.

When Billy was just over a year old, Dad said, "You boys should sell your big steer now, and buy two nice young calves with the money. That's how a person gets ahead."

"No," said Homer. "We'd never sell Billy Butts."

"That's exactly right," I said.

"Now, boys," Dad said, "this is a business proposition. You put feed and care in and get money out."

But we reiterated that Billy Butts was here to stay. Over the next two years we trained him to pull a

wagon. We tried riding him, but he always bucked us off. Then one day a neighboring farmer dropped by while Homer and I were in school. He made an offer for Billy Butts that Dad thought was just too good to refuse.

When Homer and I got home, Billy was gone. We were really upset. So was Dad—he thought he'd done us a big favor and here we were getting mad at him.

"Well," he finally said, "I was wrong to sell him without talking it over with you. If you boys are sure you don't want to get ahead, then here's the money. You ride over and get Billy Butts back."

We saddled up the two mules and off we galloped. When we explained to the neighbor that Billy was ours and we wanted him back, the farmer just laughed.

"Listen here, boys," he said. "That steer is mine. I bought him off your pa fair and square."

I saw we were up against a wall and drastic action was called for. "Do you have a bill of sale, mister?" I asked pointedly. "Everyone in this county knows Billy Butts is ours. We'll make sure they know you don't have a bill of sale. It's the same thing as stealing him."

The farmer's face turned purple. He was a big man, and I thought maybe I'd gone too far and wouldn't be alive much longer.

"I will not be confounded by two little whippersnappers," he fumed. Then he sighed, and the right color came slowly back into his face. After a moment, he shrugged his huge shoulders. "You are a couple of determined little rascals," he said. "I would not normally give in on a fair deal. But I can see that steer means more to you than just meat on the hoof. So give me my money, then take your steer and go. And lots of luck when you have to make your own way in this flinty world."

Homer and I rode off, leading Billy Butts on a rope. From the crest of a hill we looked back. The farmer was waving and we waved too. The sun was sinking toward the horizon and all the shadows were long.

We punched the mules into a trot. It was a good feeling to know we'd stood up for Billy Butts. We got home and fed him some grain, then gave him a thorough currying. ■

*James Hines lives in Rosine, Ky.*

PHOTO COURTESY JAMES HINES



*James, left, with little brother Homer, take charge of their first piece of property, Billy Butts. And, no matter what, their prize was not for sale.*