

The Buckeye Tree

Danny Youngblood

It all started with a phone message on a cool early spring afternoon in 2007. “Danny would you please give me a call? It’s Cliff Hoofman.”

I stared at the answering machine. Mr. Hoofman, who was now in his eighties, lived down the street from us when I was a child and was a good friend of my dad. But both my mom and dad had passed away and, while I had occasionally run into Mr. Hoofman over the years, I did not know him very well at all. Why would he be calling me?

For a couple of days I attempted to call Mr. Hoofman back and he also attempted to call me. We were playing phone tag, but on the third night just as I returned home the phone rang again. As I placed the phone to my ear and said “Hello”, this is what I heard: “Danny, Cliff Hoofman here. I owe you an apology. I doubted what you told me and I should have known better. You Youngblood’s are good folks.”

A little background on my family: In the 1880’s, my great great-grandfather, his wife, and four sons came to the New World from Luxenbourg, a small country in Europe, by way of a cattle boat from England when they were promised 80 acres of land in Blackville, Arkansas, which now is called Blackwell.

Soon the four brothers became tired and bored of the farming life, so two of the brothers moved to North Little Rock and opened a saloon that catered to the railroad workers. My great-grandfather was one of those brothers, and my family and I exist because of him.

So, I said, “Mr. Hoofman I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, Danny, do you remember the story you told me about that ole Buckeye Tree when we were going through surgery rehab together?”

“I replied, of course I do.”

Back in 1984, my dad, Bill Youngblood, my sons Chris and Daniel, and I were headed to my dad’s cabin on Lake Conway for a day of repair work and relaxation when my dad said, “Look at the size of that Buckeye Tree! It’s loaded with buckeyes.”

We were right at the Pulaski and Faulkner county line on I-40. This Buckeye Tree is on the right hand side as you travel to Conway. It grows on a sloped incline where the hill was removed to allow for the construction of the interstate. It is exposed to the hot west setting sun in the summer, with a little saw grass around it, and it also endures those northwest harsh winter winds. The Buckeye only puts on a single spurt of growth in the spring and the blooms are often visited by Hummingbirds. The Buckeye is slow growing but has considerable drought tolerance once it is established. Just in case you don’t know, this type of tree only grows about five feet tall in most parts of the state and is becoming harder to find. This was then, and still is now, one of the tallest Buckeye trees I have ever seen.

My dad immediately pulled over on the side of I-40 and came to a sliding stop. We quickly started up the sloped hill and began gathering the tree’s fruit, light green buckeyes of several shapes and sizes. I don’t know who was more excited, my dad or my son Daniel, only seven and snatching and grabbing as many as they both could and depositing them in the folded up T-shirts they were wearing. I remember pausing to just watch the frenzy, and smiling and realizing what a wonderful family event was unfolding before my very eyes. Daniel quickly came to the conclusion that he could sell the buckeyes at school for at least .25 cents apiece while my oldest Chris was trying to analyze how the fruit was growing inside the pod. You know

it was just two dads watching their sons have a little fun, or maybe our sons were watching us. When we got back into my dad's truck we looked at each other and grinned and then we all laughed aloud. A laugh so loud it filled every space in that old truck. What a wonderful moment it was!

I like to think of that day as our discovery, that one thing that we shared together, that one precious moment that we'll never forget. For me to reveal the secret location of this tree is to be considered by all who hear a gift from my dad and family.

So, when I was going through surgery rehab with Mr. Hoofman, and I told him the story of me, and my dad, and the Buckeye Tree, I could tell that he thought I was stretching my story a bit. I could tell by his facial expressions and by the type of questions he asked me that there was some doubt. This tree is about 15 feet tall, but perhaps I was over exaggerating; I'll let you be the judge. Did you know that the buckeye seed turns brown and hardens as you handle it? They turn a reddish brown from the oil from your skin. They are highly sought after as a lucky charm and it is an old custom to carry them in your pocket. As the old saying goes in Arkansas, 'You'll never find a dead man with a buckeye in his pocket.'

Mr. Hoofman's voice on the other end of the phone brought me back to our conversation.

"This past winter I was traveling to Conway," he said, "and as I looked to my right I saw a very large tree which at first I thought was a persimmon tree, and as you know persimmon trees had a bad winter this year, but this tree was loaded with fruit. I then realized as I came to a stop that it was one of the largest buckeye trees I have ever seen. I just wanted to tell you I am sorry that I doubted you. Deep down I knew that if you were Bill Youngblood's son that you had to be telling me the truth. I just wanted to tell you that."

As I listened to his words I knew that I was listening to something that very few men will ever hear or experience in their entire lives. I took that sudden breath, the one that catches you totally by surprise, the one that causes tears to run down your cheeks. I was almost choking and yet at the same time having these unbelievable feelings of pride and respect towards a man that I really did not know. Men don't call men and apologize for their mistakes, or do they?

I shall never forget his voice or the softness in his words as he made that apology. I could barely find my own voice to thank him, but thank him I did.

He went on to say that he had gathered a few of the buckeyes in a bucket so that he could plant one at his place.

As I hung up the phone I broke down and cried like a child. The memories of my father and that little moment of time shared with the people closest to me, and the tenderness of those spoken words from Mr. Hoofman caused a multitude of explosive emotions to erupt from within my inner self. I can't explain how small and yet how humbled I felt. But I can definitely tell you that I became a better person because of it.

I often think of Mr. Hoofman and his buckeye that he planted at his place. I hope it's growing.

You see this is not a story about pride, or respect, or me, it's about The Buckeye Tree.