He Got Goosed

Sneaky gander on grandparents' farm met his match…and the chase was on.

Grandma raised geese on her and Grandpa's farm in western New York in the late 1930s and '40s. She used their feathers to make downy soft, warm feather ticks.

On winter nights, I'd snuggle into one of Grandma's feather ticks and pull another over me. Sounds of snapping and crackling from wood burning in the potbellied stove made me feel secure and safe.

I'd listen to the winter wind howling around the corners outside and hear snow and sleet beating against the windowpanes while I was curled snug and warm in my feather bed.

Grandma's geese lived in the barn, but they had the run of the lawn and garden. There was always a big gray gander in residence with a powerful beak, a terrible temper and a neurotic possessiveness of his territory. I avoided any contact with him.

By 1939, when I was 7, Grandma began to let me use her hatchet in the woodshed to make kindling to start a fire in the kitchen stove. She cautioned me over and over to be careful when using the sharp hatchet.

As I worked in the woodshed, piling up shavings from quartered pieces of wood, that big gander would eventually poke his head around the open door.

I'd continue to chop while I surreptitiously watched him. Just inside the doorway, he'd silently lower his head, ready to strike.

As he cautiously put one of his big webbed feet forward, I'd turn,

brandish the hatchet and shout at him, then listen with satisfaction to his surprised squawk and watch him flap his wings as he ran away.

Grandma's garden was beside the house. It was a wonderful place where I could sit in the dirt between rows of vegetables and crunch cucumbers or devour bright red, juicy tomatoes.

One summer day, Grandma gave me a dish and asked me to fill it with peas for supper. Bending over, concentrating on pulling the bursting pea pods from the vines and watching them pile up in the dish, I didn't notice the menacing gander sneak up behind me.

Suddenly, he struck! A nasty bite on my butt.

I whipped around, and the dish and peas went flying into the air.

I wanted a weapon. I headed for the woodshed as the gander screamed and honked ahead of me.

Snatching up the hatchet, holding it over my shoulder and chasing that goose, I shouted dire threats of what was going to happen when I caught him.

The gander flapped his big wings and squawked and honked at the top of his lungs while running as fast as he could around the house, with me in close pursuit, shouting and threatening.

Hearing the noise, Grandma came outside, took one look and began chasing me, shouting, "Dickie, put down that hatchet! Don't you hurt that goose!"

And They're Off...

As we rounded the front corner of the farmhouse, the noise woke up "Spooky" the dog as we passed her favorite napping place, a nice, cool hole she'd dug in the dirt under the snowball tree. She leaped up in the air and added her voice as she joined in the chase.

Around the house we went. The goose continued to flap and honk and run, but he was tiring. I was still in hot pursuit, waving the hatchet and still shouting threats.

Grandma ran behind me as fast as her skirt and apron allowed, still screaming, “Dickie, don’t you hurt that goose!” And the dog, barking frantically, ran after Grandma.

The goose finally ran through the open barn door just as Grandma brought me to a halt by grabbing the back of my shirt. The dog danced around a while, barking, but finally decided the excitement was over and headed back for the snowball tree.

Meanwhile, Grandma put the hatchet in the woodshed and took me in the house where I received a very detailed lecture on my deplorable behavior. Secretly, I found it difficult to feel bad and regretted that the goose got no punishment.

As I think back about subsequent visits to my grandparents’ house, however, I don’t recall seeing that gander again.

Though Grandma never mentioned it, I think he may have sacrificed more than his down for one of Grandma’s feather ticks.

—Richard D., Largo, Florida