

# GROWING UP WITH GRANDPA JOE

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by Jim Casada

A rocking chair, push plow and a few grainy snapshots may be all that is left to remember Grandpa Joe, but a storehouse of rich memories are irreplaceable.

I flat-out worshiped Grandpa Joe. His soft-spoken, folksy wisdom, the magical hours I spent in his company as a youngster, and his unlocking doors to the natural world and living close to the good earth endeared him to me. He died a half century ago, and in hindsight I must acknowledge he was anything but a perfect man. Nonetheless, he was an endearing, enduring mentor.

Joseph Hilberry Casada was my paternal grandfather. Youthful days spent with him served as foundational building stones for key aspects of my life. Tough as leather and strong as a well-seasoned hickory shaft, he seldom showed emotion. One notable exception involved the demise of the monarch of Eastern upland forests, the American chestnut. Grandpa had an almost symbiotic linkage to the tree before deadly blight spelled its doom. He cut wood; used chestnut boards to build barns, sheds and pig pens; fattened hogs on its mast; gathered nuts as a foodstuff; and made money by selling them for shipment to cities. Mention chestnuts and he developed an audible catch in his voice, and moisture filled his eyes.

For all his curmudgeonly exterior, Grandpa Joe was wonderfully patient and tenderhearted with his adoring grandson. Fiercely independent, he wouldn't labor under the supervision of another man. Yet he possessed an admirable work ethic comprised of pure grit, keen understanding of the wisdom inherent in "making do with what you've got," and sharply honed skills developed

during a lifetime of living in close harmony with the land. In his inimitable fashion, Grandpa Joe introduced me to storytelling, provided hands-on exposure to traditional means of subsistence, and was a walking encyclopedia of country folkways.

While I idolized him, Grandpa was undeniably a character — at times exasperating to his wife and children, out of touch with the mainstream in about every imaginable manner, and obstinate as only the most mule-headed of those of Scots-Irish descent can be. Yet with me he was seldom judgmental, never really critical and ever willing to listen to a pesky, eternally curious youngster.

He was highly eccentric, but his idiosyncrasies only endeared him to me. We were buddies in the special fashion only possible when a generation is skipped and those involved are, respectively, of appreciable age and quite young. Grandpa's perspective and general approach to life closely resembled those of a youngster. He just had the misfortune of being imprisoned in an old man's body. Offsetting physical constraints, however, were decided advantages of being blessed with a lifetime's experience and possessing a youthful zest for life.

Having now reached the approximate age Grandpa Joe was when my recollections of him begin, I realize how fortunate I was to have him as a mentor. He had no tolerance whatsoever for a goodly portion of the adult world, yet was incredibly patient with me. He was distrustful

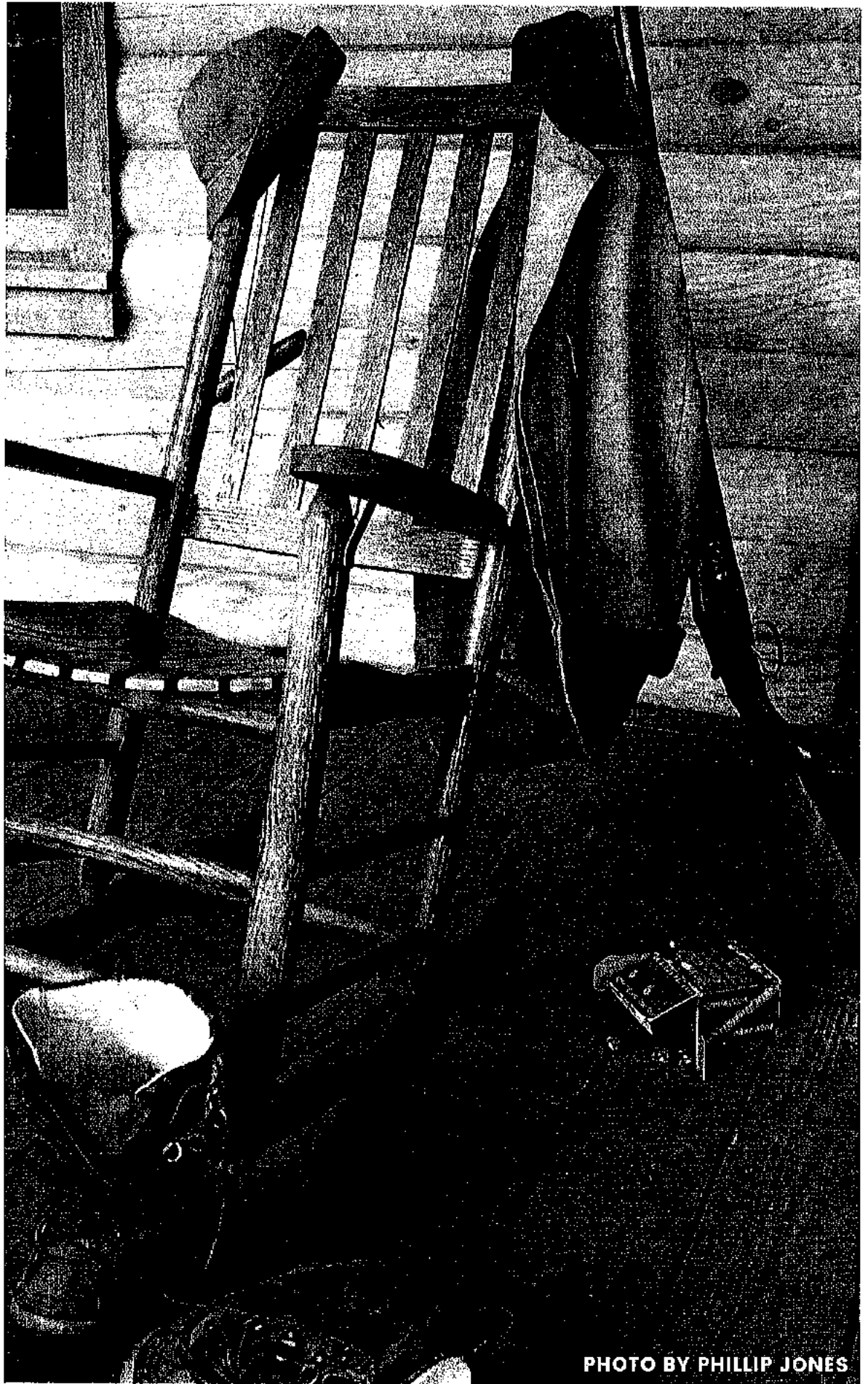


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of most of mankind, highly individualistic, perfectly comfortable in his own skin, religious after his own fashion, hardworking, self-sufficient, a devoted sportsman and as full of tricks as a pet raccoon.

Thanks to him I know how to make a slingshot and select the right type of wood for the task; have solid understanding of down-to-earth subjects ranging from pulling weeds for pigs to dealing with free-range chickens; can find fishing worms; know all the tricks of catching night crawlers and spring lizards; hold an advanced education in the finer points of fishing for honeyheads and catfish; realize that formal education is by no means the only measure of a man's intellect or his worth as a human being; am deeply permeated with traditional southern Appalachian culture; and have an abiding appreciation of the meaning of seeking oneness with the natural world. Those qualities provided me a mighty fine legacy.

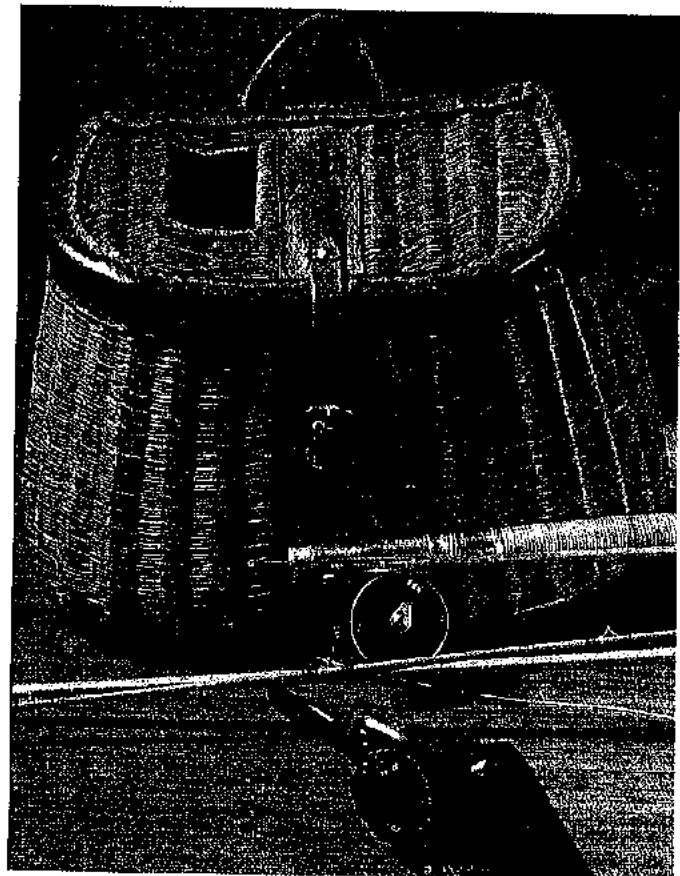
In terms of physical possessions I have little to recall the man. The rocking chair which served as his storytelling throne adorns my study. There's a single photograph of Grandpa by himself, a few grainy snapshots showing him with family members, and a push plow with which he worked his garden. That's all and it doesn't matter. I have a storehouse of rich memories. As Robert Ruark wrote about his grandfather in the pivotal story from *The Old Man and the Boy*, "all he left me was the world."

It was only with his death in 1967 that recognition of his legacy really dawned on me. Maybe sharing a single anecdote will help explain the gift he left. Grandpa had a knack for turning an afternoon's fishing or a day hunting squirrels into grand adventure even if those escapades didn't always work out as planned. Often as not we came home from autumn woods with only a bushytail or two between us, although our fishing outings were somewhat more predictable in terms of fish on the stringer. Alas, the day which brought one of our finest catches turned into a catastrophe. It involved an early spring trip to a big pool locally known as Devil's Dip.

Deriving its name from powerful hydraulics and a strong backwater, Devil's Dip was a short walk from Grandpa's house. We had fished it countless times, and invariably the pool was



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*“Grandpa had a knack for turning an afternoon’s fishing or a day hunting squirrels into grand adventure . . . .”*

good for a number of chubs. On this particular day, however, yielding to “catch a bunch more” temptation, we ventured into uncharted territory. Rock hopping took us farther out on the shoals adjacent to the whirlpool’s turbulent depths than ever before. At one point, scared by the nearby torrent, I commented, “If we aren’t careful, we’ll fall in.”

Grandpa nodded in agreement but added, “You might be right, but every time we move we catch more fish.” It was difficult to argue with his logic, because whenever we hopped from one rock to the next, two or three additional chubs graced an increasingly impressive stringer.

Unfortunately, my prophecy came true. I’m not sure whether I slipped and grabbed Grandpa or if he fell and reached out to me. Whatever the case, we both took a dip in Devil’s Dip. We immediately scrambled out, shaken and chilled but no worse for wear other than that Grandpa had lost his straw hat. Purchased the previous day, it made four complete circles in the current as my erstwhile companion tried to snag it. The fifth time around the hat caught the main flow and headed downriver, gone forevermore.

By that time both of us were shivering and dreading the coming confrontation with Grandma Minnie. My grandmother was tiny, weighing perhaps 100 pounds, but she possessed a 300-pound temper and a tongue sharp enough to flay hide off a razorback hog. The family in general, and Grandpa Joe in particular, stood in awe of her wrath. Everyone did their best to avoid her periodic eruptions. For the most part, everyone except Grandpa and me succeeded. We had an uncanny knack for evoking her ire.

As we walked to the house, dripping water and thoroughly chilled, we passed the hog pen and chicken lot before making our final approach through Grandpa’s garden. Each step brought us closer to impending doom. Showing up on the doorstep looking like a pair of half-drowned muskrats was going to earn a serious tongue lashing. Grandpa acknowledged the inevitable by muttering, “They ain’t gonna like this.” The “they” to whom he referred was Grandma. In such situations he found it comforting to use an impersonal pronoun rather than her name.

I nodded in silent agreement and followed close on his heels. Sure enough, Grandma met us at the door. What I now realize was a millisecond of relief immediately gave way to rage. For some reason she directed her initial

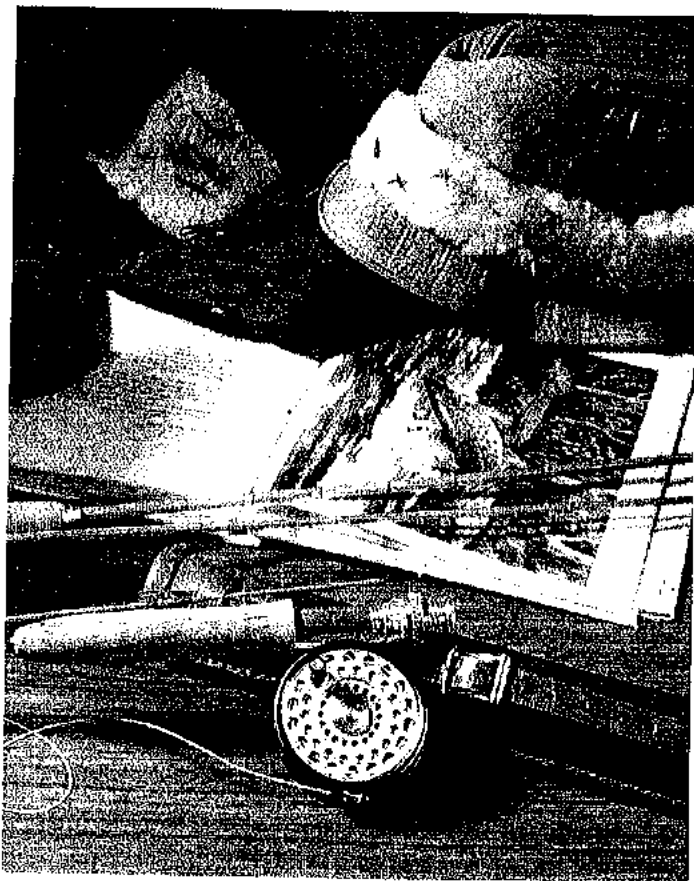


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verbal sally towards me. Punctuating every word by poking me in the solar plexus, she said: "The only thing worse than a young fool is an old fool." Then, having switched suddenly to prodding her spouse with added emphasis and impetus, she added, "Here stands a matched pair."

At that moment I chanced a glance sideways at Grandpa and discovered he was slowly retreating. I wasn't about to be left to face Grandma's anger alone and joined him in what threatened to turn into full flight. As we backed through the doorway and out of sight, Grandpa impishly grinned, winked at me, and whispered quite softly, "I reckon they won't be cooking any fish tonight." We had cold cornbread and milk for supper.

Timing-wise Grandpa's death, which occurred in late February, seemed to me singularly appropriate. In our countless sessions of winter-time rocking chair relaxation, as he eased close to the fire and muttered about having "the miseries," Grandpa often philosophized about the month. "It's fittin' February is short," he'd say, "because twenty-eight days of it is all a body can tolerate." He would then opine that winter's best hunting was over, and note "gloomy days of rain and snow are a time for a spry young colt like you, not an old man like me, to be out and about."

For all he groused about weather, it wasn't in Grandpa's character to remain pessimistic. He suffered myriad pains associated with advancing age but for the most part ignored them and refused to have any part of pain relievers. "I reckon an old man's got a right to ache a bit," he'd say, "but it don't do to dwell on it." With that, he'd turn our conversation in an entirely new direction.

Grandpa was a dreamer. In some senses he spent a lifetime dreaming, although his wanderings in the realm of wishful thinking lay outside normal approaches. Financial affairs meant little to him other than regular usage of the quaint term, "cash money." He had so little of it that the redundancy was richly deserved. His visions focused not on money but on matters such as the American chestnut's return, the significance of planting black walnuts (he called them "grandchildren's trees" because of their slow growth), olden times when he often heard the scream of a "painter" (cougar) and even killed one, hunting pottiges when they existed in large numbers, and indeed fine sport of any kind. He lived a life partly cast in the past and for the rest looked to the future

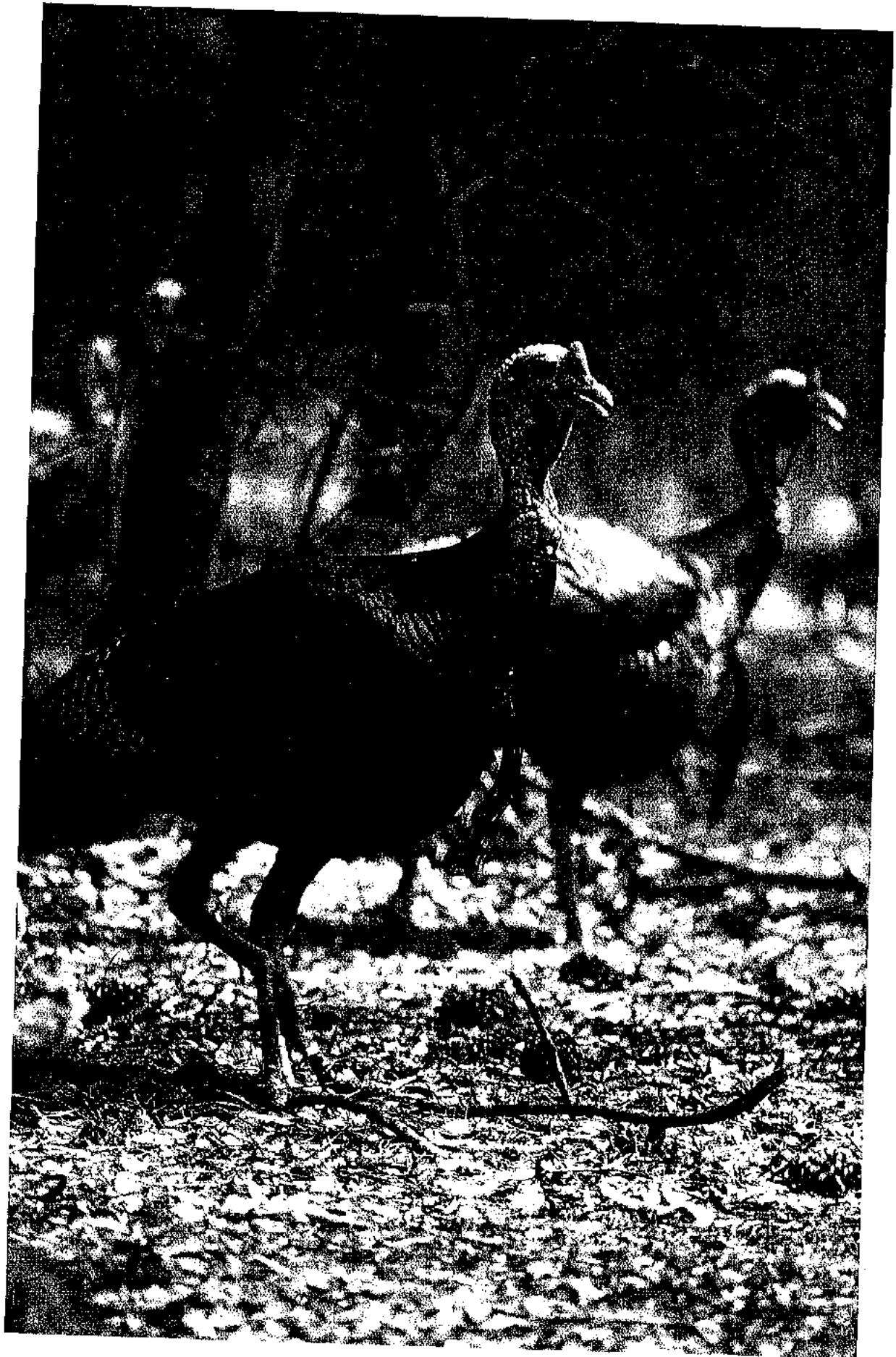
rather than being preoccupied with the present.

Hunting took primacy of place in his reminiscences, but he also ventured into romantic realms on the fishing side of the sporting equation. I loved to hear him talk about a time when speckled trout (brook trout) were so plentiful you could easily catch a hundred in an afternoon of fishing. Similarly, whenever he recounted epic catches of catfish while running trot lines, I listened in enchantment. Despite hearing his tales times beyond number, they never grew old. That's the hallmark of a masterful weaver of words.

Sooner or later, Grandpa would abruptly switch from musing about matters dating from the late nineteenth century and focus on the future. "I've always liked figurin'," he'd opine, "and it's high time the two of us got busy doing some." Or maybe he would suggest we needed to undertake a spell of "dreamin' and schemin'." His point in was quite clear. He had decided to quit reflecting on the past and start musing on the future. He reckoned a good dose of planning about coming events offered an ideal antidote for anything from cabin fever to Grandma being vexed with the two of us.

Grandpa would then launch into a detailed plan of what we needed to do to get ready for spring fishing, or maybe decide it wasn't too late to make one more rabbit gum and set it in a likely spot. We might peruse that year's Sears & Roebuck catalog to compare mail order prices of essential items such as snelled fish hooks or the new-fangled monofilament line with what they cost at the local hardware store. Or perhaps we would rig several cane poles for fishing forays come greening-up time. Year after wonderful year Grandpa showed me that dreaming is by no means the exclusive preserve of the young. You just had to be young at heart. Along with offering endless amounts of that most precious of commodities, time, that was one of his finest qualities.

Grandpa Joe never saw the ocean, but he fished pristine streams and drank sweet spring water so icy it set your teeth on edge. He never drove a car, but he handled teams of horses and understood meaningful application of the words gee, haw and whoa. He never once ate in a restaurant, but he dined on sumptuous fare — pot likker, backbones and ribs, fried squirrel with sweet potatoes, country hams he cured from hogs he had raised and butchered, cathead biscuits with sausage gravy, cracklin' cornbread,



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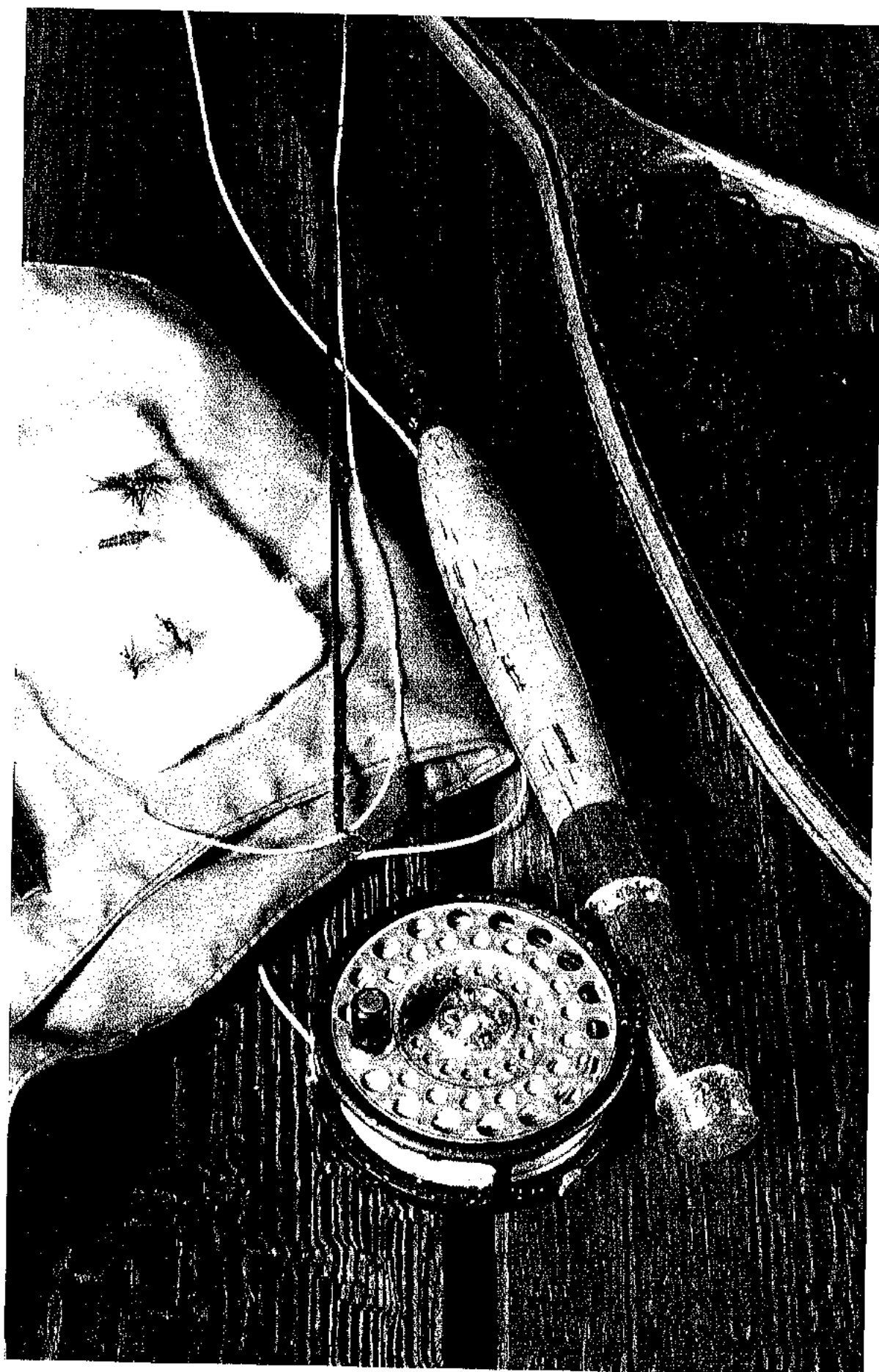


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and other fixin's the likes of which no high-profile chef ever prepared.

He never drank a soda, but he "sassered," sipped, and savored pepper tea prepared from parched red pepper pods like a connoisseur of fine wines. He never tasted seafood, but he dined on fish he caught battered with stone-ground cornmeal and fried in lard rendered from hogs he raised. He never ate papayas or pomegranates, but he grew cannonball watermelons so sweet they'd leave you sticky all over and raised muskmelons so juicy you drooled despite yourself when one was sliced. He never had crepes Suzette, but he enjoyed buckwheat pancakes made with flour milled from grain he grew, adorned with butter his wife churned, and covered with molasses made from cane he planted. He never ate eggs Benedict, but he dined daily on eggs from free-range chickens with yolks yellow as the summer sun.

Grandpa Joe was not, in the grander scheme of things, an individual who garnered fame, fortune, accolades or notable achievements. His life was one of limitations in many ways — geographically, technologically, economically, in breadth of vision, and at least in some eyes, accomplishments. To my way of thinking though, he epitomized love, the magic of mentoring, liberal dispensation of the precious gifts of shared time and hard-earned knowledge, and down-to-earth wisdom which constitutes true common sense.

I didn't quite think, to echo a refrain from Randy Travis' poignant song about his grandfather, that Grandpa Joe walked on water. Yet seldom has there been a day since his death, now encompassing the passage of half a century, that I haven't thought about him. Invariably those musings bring a wry smile to my face, even as they produce tightness in my throat. He blessed me with treasures beyond all measure, all centered around life in the outdoors. For that I owe him an enduring debt of gratitude. He was, in my small world, the most unforgettable character I've ever known or will likely ever know.

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Jim Casada is a full-time freelance writer who has written numerous books and regularly contributes to regional and national magazines. This piece is an abbreviated version of a chapter in his forthcoming memoir. To learn more about the book or to sign up for a free subscription to his monthly e-newsletter, visit his website at [www.jimcasadaoutdoors.com](http://www.jimcasadaoutdoors.com).