

Cannibals in Missouri

by Rick Reil

It was 1960, I was eight years old and on a summer vacation with my dad. We had spent three days traveling by train from Washington State to St. Joseph, Missouri, arriving the first part of July. This was our annual pilgrimage to visit my dad's hometown, his parents, and childhood friends.

It was a typical Missouri summer, very hot and humid, the kind of weather a young boy from Washington wasn't accustomed to. The rest of my family refused to make the trip, which was just as well. Neither my mother nor my two teenage sisters would have suffered the boredom and climate well. So there I was, a young boy left alone most of the time with my elderly grandparents while my dad was off visiting friends and relatives.

To say my grandparents were poor would have been an understatement. "Poor" could only be used if you add some adverbs to more appropriately describe their level of poverty. In this case "dirt" might be the best one. Their tiny house was no bigger than five hundred square feet and until only a few years earlier had been served by an outhouse. It had been built by my grandmother's brother-in-law Timothy right after the World War II on an acre of ground her mother gave her. It cost seven hundred dollars to build.

They only had a small fan to temper the summer heat. Entertainment was provided by a AM radio and a tiny black and white television which only received one station, and that was only after the sun went down.

My grandfather suffered from a chronic disease that caused his legs to be covered with weeping ulcers which never healed. He acquired this while in his late twenties. His legs were wrapped daily in gauze. He was unable to walk unassisted. My grandmother worked most of her life as a cook in a nearby diner called the "Beacon." They never owned a car so my grandmother walked the mile to work.

You might think their circumstances would have meant they weren't happy. I don't think it ever occurred to them that they had it "rough." Their little house was warm in

the winter, it was paid for, and they had plenty to eat. My dad, their only child, made sure they had enough money to pay the bills. Our annual trip to see them was in part to assess their situation and provide relief where needed.

My grandmother's name was Mamie, she was one of fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls. By the time I came along there were only six sisters left. They were Grace, Dorothy, Edna, Pearl, Leila, and my grandmother. Her favorite sister was Edna, a very plump woman with a great sense of humor. Edna live a couple of blocks from my grandmother. She had a car, a 1949 Chevrolet Deluxe. It was a four door with mohair seats. I knew it was mohair because my grandmother told me so. I wasn't sure what a Mo looked like but I knew they must have been pretty hairy animals because a lot of car seats were covered in their wool. Along the back of the front seat was a heavy cord running the width and near the top of the seat. It was kind of like a "grab bar" in today's cars. You would use it to help pull yourself up to exit the back seat.

My grandmother was a gentle and kind woman. She was highly intelligent and extremely funny. She almost always wore dresses. When doing housework or cooking she always wore an apron. Her aprons always had pockets. She needed a place to keep her false teeth, which she hated to wear, and the apron pockets were just right. If someone came to the door or she would quickly retrieve her teeth from the pockets.

We usually stayed in Missouri for about ten days. My Aunt Pearl would always lend us her 1957 Chevy Bel Air, a very nice car for the time. Dad would use it to take us to visit our many relatives and friends. He was also gone a great deal of the time and I was left in my grandparents care. During those times my grandmother did her best to keep me busy and entertained. I helped with her gardening, fed the chickens, picked cherries from her pie cherry tree and handled any other odd jobs that came along.

St. Joseph, Missouri, was a city of about fifty thousand with a rich history. It was here that the Pony Express started. The notorious James Gang was from St. Joseph. Jesse James, the gang's leader, was killed in a house that was only two blocks from my grandparents house. There were some stately mansions in the city, one of which had been turned into a fine museum.

One day my grandmother and my Aunt Edna decided to take me to visit the museum. From an early age I have loved history. I was very excited to see the museum, especially to get to go inside a "mansion", something I had never before done. My aunt arrived in her old Chevy about early afternoon. Like my grandmother, Aunt Edna always wore dresses, that day she wore a bright sleeveless one. I remember looking at her huge flabby arms as she got out of the vehicle. They jiggled as she walked and were kind of dimply. I think they were about as big around as I was at eight years old.

We all got in the car, the old ladies in the front and I in the back. I sat in the middle of the seat and grabbed the cord and pulled myself forward so I could see between them and hear what they were saying. We headed down the street and into the better part of town. I was very excited!

The museum set up on a hill with a curving driveway up to its front. It was white in color and about three stories high. It was an amazing building, nothing like anything we had in Eastern Washington. Edna parked the car, we exited and walked up to the front door. In the presence of my grandmother I was the perfect boy. I was also a very good reader. The old ladies knew I wouldn't get in trouble so they told me to look around and enjoy myself. The first and second floors had many interesting exhibits. There were paintings, period clothing, Civil War uniforms and weapons, nineteenth century household items, and Native American artifacts. All the displays had placards explaining what they were. I read everything, it was wonderful to actually see some of the things I had learned about in school.

The third floor housed displays from around the world. There were items from Europe, the Orient, Africa, and more. I was by myself having a wonderful time while the old ladies had confined their interests to exhibits on the main floor. The third floor had sloping ceilings and dormers. There was a small area between two of the dormers that had a display case, much like you would see in a jewelry store. I noticed some small doll like heads with long black hair in the cases. Like all the other displays there were placards explaining what the objects were. The heads were very grotesque and a little scary looking. As I read I discovered they were from the Amazon area of South America. They were "shrunken heads!" As I read further I learned they were made

from the decapitated heads of prisoners captured by cannibals. I read that cannibals were people that ate other people!

I was shocked. I had never heard of cannibals. I knew right then and there that I was their next target. Nothing could be tastier than a tender little boy from Washington State. I ran from the exhibit and down the stairs to my aunt and grandmother. I was nearly in hysterics. I told them what I had just seen and that we needed to leave immediately before the cannibals got me. They tried to console me but I would have none of it. We needed to leave and we needed to do it right then!

They took me to the car, I got in the back seat, grabbed the cord and pulled myself forward again. Edna grabbed the big old steering wheel and backed out of the parking lot. She shifted to first gear and headed down the long driveway. All I wanted to do was get out of there and back to the safety on my grandmother's house. I was terrified! Aunt Edna's hands were at the top of the wheel she slowed a bit and looked back at me and started to laugh. She looked me right in the eye and said, "Ricky, you don't have anything to worry about, cannibals only eat fat people like me!" She started to laugh, her big old arms shaking as she and my grandmother were busting up. I think those two old ladies got more enjoyment over my panicked fear than looking at all the old stuff in that museum!

We arrived home early evening. I was on the lookout for cannibals and wasn't about to go outside. My dad arrived home for dinner and was told what happened. He tried to assure me that I would be alright. It took my grandmother sitting on the side of my bed to protect me from the Missouri cannibals to get me to go to sleep that night.

It's funny, I remember waking up the next morning and the fear was gone. We had breakfast and then headed down to the chicken coup to gather the eggs.

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