

Jim Casada Outdoors

February 2015 Newsletter

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Remembering Grandpa Joe

Anyone who has read this newsletter for an appreciable length of time knows that I thought the world of my Grandpa Joe. I often mention his folksy wisdom, the wonderful times I enjoyed in his company as a youngster, and how much he taught me when it came to living close to the good earth. He died 48 years ago this month, and that consideration, combined with the fact that a chapter in a book I am working on (along with the Archibald Rutledge project and a couple of other major endeavors), made it seem appropriate to devote my February, 2015 edition of the newsletter to him.

Joe Casada was my paternal grandfather. In many senses my halcyon days of youth and the countless hours spent in his company as a boy served as the foundation for some key aspects of my life. In his inimitable fashion Grandpa Joe introduced me to storytelling, provided hands-on exposure to the traditional mountain way of life, and was a walking encyclopedia of high country folkways. A man I idolized, he was most certainly a character—at times exasperating to his wife and children, more than a bit out of touch with mainstream thinking, and mule-headed as only the most stubborn of mountain folks can be.

He lived within shank's mare of our house, about a mile and a half walk, and as a boy I spent a world of time with him and Grandma Minnie. Grandpa was a peculiar fellow, what mountain folks call "quair," but we were buddies in the special fashion only possible

February Special

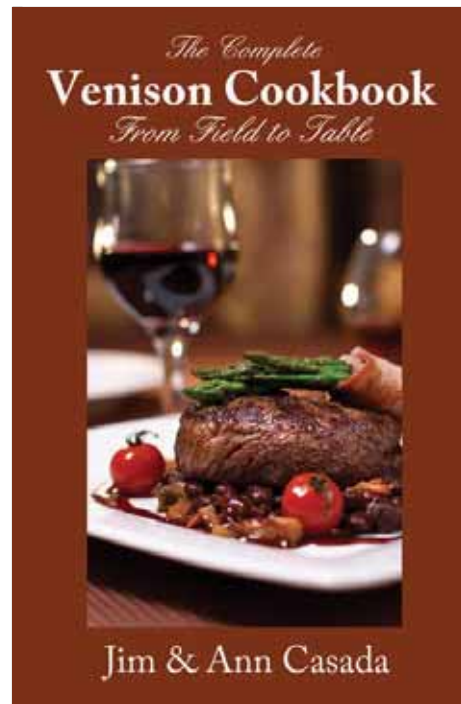
In many parts of the country February is the most miserable month of the year, weather-wise. It's a time to stay close to hearth and home, enjoy hearty soups and stews, and maybe read a good book.

I've got lots of good reading—thousands of books—listed in the various catalogs you can [see on my Web site](#), and provided you've got some venison in the freezer, or if you are among the less fortunate and have to rely on beef, which can be substituted for venison, this month's special has hundreds of answers for fine eating on the culinary front.

between those of appreciable age and the quite young. In truth Grandpa was in many ways just a youngster trapped in an old man's body, but he enjoyed the advantage of being blessed with a lifetime of experience to go with his youthful enthusiasm and zest for life.

Having now reached the age he was when my first recollections of Grandpa Joe begin, I realize just how fortunate I was to spend so much time with him. He was a man of infinite patience, at least with me, although he had no tolerance whatsoever for a fair portion of the adult world. Grandpa probably had some mental problems, and there's no question that he was stubborn to a fault, distrustful of most of mankind, highly individualistic, perfectly comfortable in his own skin, religious after his own fashion, incredibly hardworking, self-sufficient, and full of tricks as a pet 'coon.

Thanks to his tutelage I know how to make a slingshot and select the right type of wood for the task (a good fork from a dogwood is hard to beat, although other tight-grained woods such as persimmon also work well); have a solid understanding of down-to-earth subjects ranging from pulling weeds for pigs to dealing with free-range chickens; can find fishing worms and know how to store pumpkins, turnips, cabbage, apples, and other foodstuffs so they will keep for months; hold an advanced education in the finer points of fishing for knottyheads; have solid grounding in many of the elements of storytelling; 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 imbued in traditional mountain culture; and most of all have a deep, abiding appreciation of the meaning of closeness to the good earth. To my way of thinking, in leaving me those qualities as well as many more, Grandpa Joe provided me with a mighty fine legacy.



I've just reprinted the first cookbook the missus and I wrote, *The Complete Venison Cookbook*, and I'm offering it at **\$11, postage paid, until the end of February only**. That's a savings of \$9 over the normal price of \$20 (when shipping and handling are included). You won't find it cheaper anywhere, and you'll get the advantage (admittedly a dubious one) of having a signed and inscribed copy.

[Add to Cart](#)

Order online now by using the "Add to Cart" button above, or just send a check to me c/o 1250 Yorkdale Drive, Rock Hill, SC 29730.

Jim's Doings

I plan to be at the annual [National Wild Turkey Federation Convention](#) in Nashville for the entire event (February 13-15). I'm traveling there in my truck and thus can bring books along for anyone who plans to be in attendance. I've already made arrangements along that line with some customers.

If you are attending the convention and have some items you want, whether on turkey hunting or some other subject, [e-mail me](#) or give me a call (803-329-4354) and we can make arrangements. One small bonus is that you'll save shipping costs.

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[Back to Top](#)

Famed Tar Heel writer Robert Ruark, in reminiscing about his own "Old Man," wrote that when his maternal grandfather died, impoverished by medical bills and the toll taken by the Great Depression, "all he left me was the world." Pleas of poverty notwithstanding, his grandfather left him far more in terms of tangible things than Grandpa Joe did me. I have the rocking chair where he held storytelling court situated four feet from where these words are being written, a single photograph of him by himself, a few family snapshots where he is part of the group, and nothing else you can hold in your hands or look upon with your eyes. That doesn't matter. I have a storehouse of memories filled with riches far beyond the measure of material things.

One of the great regrets of my life, and like anyone who has lived as many years as I have there are plenty of regrets along with even more fond recollections, was that I was unable to attend Grandpa Joe's funeral. He died back in 1967, just short of his ninetieth year. I was 25 at the time and under different circumstances would have joined other grandsons as a pallbearer at his memorial service, which took place on a bitterly cold winter's day. By unhappy coincidence the day of his service and burial coincided with the date I was scheduled to take the Graduate Record Examination. I was teaching school and coaching in Virginia at the time and hoped to begin graduate school studies once the spring semester ended. This was the last opportunity to sit the required examination if I hoped to start my graduate education that summer. Thus Grandpa's passing left me with an impossible choice—miss the funeral or mess up my future.

Fortunately I had in effect already said my goodbyes, not once but several times as we talked during his final years, so the decision was easier than it might otherwise have been. That was the first time I truly realized the truth inherent in the old adage which suggests funerals are for the living. Looking back, it may have been a blessing in some ways, because absence from the funeral enabled me to remember the man and all he meant to me privately as opposed to being part of a wide circle of his extended family and friends in the local community. Grandpa was always a bit of a misanthrope, and I have no doubt whatsoever he would have understood, indeed appreciated, my perspective in preferring to be alone with memories.

His death came in late February, which seems to me somehow appropriate, because in our countless sessions of rocking chair relaxation in the heart of winter, as he eased close to the fire and muttered about what he simply styled "the miseries," Grandpa often philosophized about the month. "It's fittin' February is so short," he would say, "because 28 days of it is about as much as a body can stand." He would then opine that the best of winter's



Grandpa Joe, dressed up in his "go to meeting" attire.

hunting was over, "and besides, these gloomy days of rain and snow are a time for a spry young colt like you, not an old man, to be out and about."

I was often tempted to remind him that he had been "out and about" on just such a day when he slipped in snow while squirrel hunting and shattered his hip, but I knew better. I would have gotten a gentle but biting dose of verbal tea concluding with something to the effect that while I didn't know what I was talking about, "you'll learn."

I reckon I'm still in the process of learning all those life's lessons which Grandpa figured ought to be a part of a mountain youngster's upbringing. Who knows, maybe I've now advanced to a point a bit beyond the kindergarten stage.

For all that he groused about weather, mistrusted mankind, and clung to his independence with a ferocious tenacity, it wasn't in Grandpa's character to stay pessimistic for long. He'd shake off bouts of arthritis, "rheumatiz," or associated other miseries linked to old age. Possibly he would mention whatever ailment plagued him at the moment but then hasten to add: "I reckon an old man's got a right to ache a bit, but it don't do to dwell on it."

Thereby dismissing the subject, he would take a sip of "Rooshian" (Russian) tea so hot it would burn the lips of most mortals and then turn to sharing his particular brand of homespun wisdom. His thinking ranged widely and might involve anything from reliving his boyhood to practical matters such as how he planned to lay out the garden come spring or what the signs foretold regarding weather in the coming weeks. Grandpa was a mighty believer in signs, from planting by them to reading what the skies, smoke, animal behavior, and a host of other things portended.

More than anything else, never mind that he had known poverty all his years and should have had reasons aplenty to be pessimistic or reel downtrodden, Grandpa was a dreamer. In some senses he spent his whole life dreaming, although his visions and wanderings in the realm of wishful thinking lay outside normal approaches. If financial affairs meant much to him I never saw any real indication of it, although whenever the subject came up he always referred to "cash money." He had so little of it the redundancy was richly deserved.

Grandpa could outwork men half his age and never shied from doing so, although he was constitutionally incapable of following orders if they involved so much as a hint of supervision or oversight. You could tell him a field needed hoeing, a lawn needed mowing, or an orchard needed pruning; just hire him to have at it and all would be fine. Look over his shoulder though or make suggestions on how to perform the job though, and it was time to seek someone else to handle the chores at hand. He was so completely his own man no one, with the possible exception of Grandma Minnie, could tell him anything.

Grandpa's dreams 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," knowing it would take that long for the slow-growing species to reach maturity), olden times when he often heard the scream of a "painter" and even killed one as a young man, hunting pheasants (his word for grouse) when they existed in large numbers, and indeed sport of any kind. He lived a life cast in the past and looking to the future rather than being much occupied with the present.

His reminiscences also ventured into romantic realms on the fishing side of the sporting equation, with my favorite tale being when he told of speckled trout so plentiful you could easily catch a hundred in an afternoon of fishing. Similarly, every time he recounted an epic battle with a giant jackfish (muskellunge) I listened in enchantment. Despite hearing that tale times without number it never grew old. That's a hallmark of a masterful weaver of words.

Sooner or later, and especially during the depths of winter when outside activities were limited by inclement weather, he would turn to a subject which provided me endless delight. Grandpa would abruptly switch from musing about matters dating back to 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 on that front." Or maybe he would suggest we

needed to do some “dreamin’ and schemin’.” Whatever his choice of words, the point of it all was quite clear. He had decided to quit reflecting on the past and would start musing on the near future. He reckoned a good dose of planning about events to come offered an ideal antidote for anything from cabin fever to Grandma being vexed with the two of us.

Grandpa would 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 locally at Cope’s Hardware. Often Grandpa talked of trying a new fishing spot on the river or a journey up nearby Deep Creek, and if it was wintertime we would get several cane poles rigged and ready for our 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. That was one of his most enduring and endearing qualities.

Grandpa Joe never saw the ocean, but he fished in pristine mountain 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 the meaningful application of the words gee, haw, and whoa. I’m pretty sure he never left the state of North Carolina, but he lived a full life in the Smokies, mountains so lovely they make the soul soar. To my knowledge 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, and other fixin’s the likes of which no high profile chef ever prepared.

He never drank a soda pop, but he “sassered,” sipped, and savored pepper tea he prepared from parched red pepper pods like a connoisseur of the finest wines. He never tasted seafood, but he dined on speckled trout battered with stone-ground corn meal. 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 had grown, adorned with butter his wife churned, and covered with molasses made from cane he raised. He never ate eggs Benedict, but he dined daily on eggs from free-range chickens with yolks yellow as the summer sun. He was marginally literate, but he read the Bible faithfully every day. He seldom went to church, at least in the years I knew him, but he was an intensely religious man.

In short, Grandpa Joe was not, in the grander scheme of things, an individual who garnered fame or fortune, accolades or grand achievements. His life was one of limitations in many ways—geographically, technologically, economically, in breadth of vision, and at least in the eyes of some, accomplishments. To my way of thinking though, he epitomized love; the magic of mentoring; liberal dispensation of that most precious of gifts, time; and sharing of down-to-earth wisdom redolent of the wisdom inherent in singer/songwriter John Prine’s suggestion that “it don’t make much sense that common sense don’t make no sense no more.” He was, in my small world, the most unforgettable character I’ve ever known or will likely ever know.

I don’t quite think, to echo a refrain from a poignant Randy Travis song about his grandfather, Grandpa Joe walked on water. Yet seldom has there been a day since his death, now encompassing the passage of almost half a century, I haven’t thought about him. Invariably those thoughts bring a wry smile to my face even as they produce a hitch in my throat. He blessed me with treasure beyond all measure, not the least of which was providing me an endless fund of anecdotes and tidbits of information to use in my writing. For that I owe him a debt of gratitude which can never be paid.

[Back to Top](#)

FEBRUARY RECIPES

Although he was lean and withy as a seasoned hickory sapling, Grandpa Joe was a trencherman of the first rank. He greatly enjoyed his food and was blessed in the fact that Grandma Minnie was a splendid cook. There are many things I fondly remember about mealtimes with them—Grandpa “sassering” coffee or tea so hot it would

have scalded the lips and tongues of most folks, his drinking pepper tea made from parched red peppers he had grown, his love of anything cooked with streaked meat, and a sweet tooth which left him feeling no meal was complete without a hearty helping of dessert. Incidentally, he felt the same way about bread. You simply didn't sit down at the table without having cathead biscuits, biscuit bread, or cornbread available. I also think the simple but heartfelt way he ended every blessing prior to eating is worth repeating. Grandpa would offer words of thanks and conclude by saying: "You'uns see what's before you—eat hearty." He did eat hearty, and the recipes below come straight from the type foodstuffs he enjoyed.

POT LIKKER

In mountain parlance pot likker is not the savory juice left in the bottom of a bowl of turnip greens, boiled cabbage, turnips, or something similar. It's a dish in and of its own and often, in combination with cornbread, was a meal. It was occasionally made with greens or turnips, but as a rule pot likker featured cabbage. Here's the way Grandma Minnie made it.

CABBAGE POT LIKKER

Put a ham shoulder, backbones and ribs, or maybe the bone left over from a Thanksgiving or Christmas feast (you will want to be sure there's a good bit of meat on the bone) in a big pot of water and let it simmer for a couple of hours. Then wash and core a head of cabbage. Cut it into quarters and add them to the pot. If you started with hambone from a cured ham you will not need salt; otherwise, add a tablespoon of salt. Sprinkle in black pepper, red pepper, or both to taste. Let simmer for two hours, being sure to keep the level of liquid up by adding water as needed.

When cooked you can pour off the pot likker and serve it separately or, as Grandma Minnie always did, leave the cabbage, meat, and juice together. When served with a pone of cornbread or maybe hoe cakes, along with a bowl of stewed apples, this makes a hearty and exceptionally satisfying meal.



Turnips can form the basis of pot likker as a substitute for cabbage, and they make a mighty fine dish.

TRADITIONAL MOUNTAIN CORNBREAD

Since pot likker and cornbread form a culinary marriage for the ages, it seems only appropriate to provide a recipe for the mate to good pot likker. The keys to making really good cornbread are: (1) Cook it in a well-greased cast iron skillet, (2) Grease the skillet with streaked meat or

bacon, and (3) Use stone-ground cornmeal. Most store-bought cornmeal has been ground at too high a temperature and this does something to the flavor. Also, stone-ground cornmeal, even if it is sifted, has more body or "crunch" to it.



A pone of cornbread.

2 cups cornmeal (white or yellow corn, although I think the best meal comes from a white field corn such as Hickory Cane)
 1 cup buttermilk
 ½ teaspoon baking soda
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 beaten egg
 3 tablespoons grease from streaked meat

Prepare skillet in advance (using the streaked meat you cook to get grease). Mix the buttermilk, salt, baking soda and egg with cornmeal and stir thoroughly. Pour streaked meat grease into the batter and stir in well. Pour batter into pre-heated skillet and bake at 425 degrees for a half hour or until the top crust is golden brown. The bottom crust should be dark brown and the whole pone perfect for crumbling up in a bowl of pot likker. You can sop with cornbread if you wish, but for the ideal marriage of pot likker and cornpone, a big soup bowl is the way to go.

Pork was the staple meat of my boyhood, and that was true not just in my family but for folks of the Smokies in general. While a pig offered plenty of variety in terms of "meat on the table," with dishes including liver mush, backbones and ribs, pork chops, fried tenderloin, cured ham, sausage, and more, the part of the critter which saw the widest use was unquestionably what we knew as streaked meat (also known as salt port, fat back, side meat, streak o' lean, and by other names). Few indeed were the vegetable dishes lacking some streaked meat as a part of the cooking process. Here are two examples of ways in which it was used.

STREAKED MEAT MILK GRAVY

Fry several pieces of streaked meat until they are crisp and brown. Remove the meat from the frying pan and set aside. With the grease still hot add flour and stir steadily, reducing heat if necessary to be sure the flour does not scorch, until brown. Once your flour is brown (the Cajuns call this a roux but I have never heard the term used in connection with making mountain gravy), add milk and stir until the desired thickness is reached, keeping mind that the gravy will continue to thicken after you remove it from the pan. You can, if desired, crumble the fried streaked meat and add it to the gravy just before removing it from the pan. Serve piping hot with cornbread or biscuits.

STREAKED MEAT DUTCH OVEN POTATOES

Thoroughly scrub five or six good-sized baking potatoes and then quarter them. Place in a Dutch oven and sprinkle black pepper to taste over them. Cover with strips of fatback and cook at 400 degrees for about an hour. Check while cooking to be sure they aren't overheating, and use a fork to make sure the potatoes are done. You may need to add salt but do not do this until after the potatoes are cooked. The streaked meat will usually contain enough salt to season them.

SOUPER STEW

Since February is an ideal time for soups and stews, and given that a venison cookbook is this month's special, it seems appropriate to offer a simple but supremely satisfying recipe that fits the bill to a "T."

2 pounds of venison, cut into chunks
 (this is a good way to use rib or neck meat, both of which are too often discarded)
 1 can cream of potato soup
 1 can cream of mushroom soup
 1 can cream of celery soup
 1 package dry onion soup mix
 1 can water

Place venison chunks in a Dutch oven. Mix all soups and water and pour over venison. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer until tender (about 1 ½ to 2 hours). If too thick, add a bit more water as needed.

Serve over rice or pasta or with a pone of cornbread.



Soup and a pone of cornbread makes a hearty February meal.

[Back to Top](#)

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