80. Down on the Farm

May 15, 2011

Thank you Charlie

My mother painted, "The Old Slave Cabin," where Charlie once lived. There were a row of these cabins at one time along this old farm road connecting the property of two kinfolks.

In a person's life there are some people who are special, and there are those who are super- special. Charlie was super-special. Charlie was more than just a worker on the farm, he was my friend. I had known Charlie longer than I had known my wife. I said a final goodbye to this friend of nearly a lifetime one day in December some years ago.

Not only does his name appear on his tombstone in the little church cemetery along a winding road in the mountains, but more importantly, there are wonderful memories of Charlie etched in the hearts of those who worked around him: his big smile, his spontaneous, arms opened wide in a "glad-to-see-you" wave, and his optimism. Then there was his love for the farm, for he loved it dearly.

When Charlie's family came to work on the farm, they lived in a log cabin, a survivor of the slave era of the mid 1800s, because there was no other building on the farm available. Soon there was a better home for them and then in later life he and his family saved up money to build their own home on a corner of the farm.

We loved to reminisce about the "old times"—the brakes giving out on the truck as he was driving to Lynchburg one day to get a truck load of block ice for the peach cooler. Charlie and Jim made it, blowing the horn as their runaway truck miraculously came to a halt at a gas station. Another time, Tatum called for help one night when I was busy packing peaches and Charlie came to her rescue. He tip-toed upstairs, scared, as he searched for the "intruder" that she heard walking around. Later they realized it was probably just an old possum prowling around on the creaky tin roof.

Back in the late 40s we had worked together on a surveying crew. One day, Charlie split his leg open with his sharp bush axe. It was a big long gash made when the axe ricocheted off a sapling he was cutting. Uncle Dick took Charlie to the doctor and got Charlie's leg stitched up and, he was ready to go again. At other times we experimented with spraying water on open peach blossoms in the black-dark on cold springtime nights, hoping to save the crop.

One day as I went down the road searching for Charlie I found him sitting on the front porch. I thought, "What is Charlie doing?" He was sitting, in his hand were his sunglasses and in his lap was his Bible that someone gave him. Charlie's education was limited and how much he could read, I really don't know. He never apologized for it, nor did he need to, it did not make any difference to me. He was born in a large family back in the mountains and they did not have much opportunity there. Holding his Bible was his way to let the world know where he stood with his Jesus. He was as proud of his Bible as anything a person could own. It was his hope.

Somewhere along the way, the Master had touched his heart. He was at peace with himself, at peace with his Jesus, and at peace with the world. He had discovered along the way the priceless joys of life.

Conditions arose where Charlie had to go to the nursing home and he carried his precious red Bible with him. The red cover had become so worn it was turning brown. In the front of the Bible he placed a picture of himself standing in front of his church and he kept it in his bed-side table there. He probably spent a couple of years in the nursing home, always ready for someone to come and go for a little trip around the farm or to go across the mountain to see another of his old buddies.

Here is Charlie on one of those glorious afternoons near harvest time standing amidst the trees that he had sprayed countless times. This was the Blake Orchard at Aunt Jennies; the fruit, big, red and ready for picking. It was fruit like this that made you love being an orchardist, and it was men like Charlie who worked here, who were equally proud and made farming so much fun for all of us.

Late one fall, we got word from the nursing home that the rescue squad had taken Charlie to the hospital. Charlie had developed an intestinal blockage and he had to have major surgery. He was in critical condition for weeks. Many times Tatum and I traveled to see our friend in the hospital and we could do no more than squeeze his hand and hope that Charlie would squeeze back.

Charlie slipped into a coma. Then his eyes could follow us around his room no more. One day as I left his room at the hospital, as I walked down the hall, I turned around and went back to see him just one more time. I did not want to leave Charlie. What do you say in times like this? There was a knot in my throat and tears in my eyes. The nurses had told us how sick he was, so I knew that at any time the phone might ring that the end had come—and somehow all of sudden—I clasped his hand and said three words that summed it all up—Thank you Charlie.

Thank you Charlie for being a dependable worker for a lifetime!
Thank you Charlie, for the wonderful friendship we developed!
Thank you Charlie, for your witness of the Bible!
Thank you Charlie---

Charlie was buried on the slopes of the Three Ridge Mountain, a stone's throw from the church where he had his picture taken. A neat marble slab marks his grave. Inscribed on it are his name and the dates of his birth and death. An inscription below his name reads, "A Friend!" That summed up his life to so many. He understood what being a friend was all about.

So long for now,

Paul Saunders

"Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.
Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.
Just walk beside me and be my friend"
Author unknown

Here is Charlie as he drove by my home with the peach sprayer in the summer of 1969, just before Hurricane Camille. He is holding two of the children. Robert is trying to steer the tractor and John is just anxious to get this picture taking over.