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Battle of the Bugs

Jack Wayne Furbee

Olivet Nazarene University, jckfrb@gmail.com

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Battle of the



Between New Martinsville and Paden City, about two miles east into the hills, was Van Camp, a pre-Civil War settlement with combined post office and store, a church, and a school. It was named after some of my ancestors, members of the Van Camp family of Wetzel County. Deep in my file of family photographs was a 19th-century Van Camp farmhouse with my great-grandparents, grandmother, and the family dog posing in front of a paling fence, which kept sheep, cattle, and chickens at bay. The picture showed open upstairs windows with no screens, open to insects from barnyards full of domestic livestock, like Mike and Leck, oxen raised by my great-uncles. It was springtime, and the ladies were cleaning house. Pillows lay in the screenless window sills, exposed to the sunlight for airing.

Early Van Camps could kill wolves and snakes, befriend the Indians, and clear the wilderness, but insects could only be endured. Bugs beyond counting plagued them. They had only their folklore and ingenuity to use against the insect multitudes. Keeping food safe from insects, the pantry was a dark windowless area where a door opened only at mealtime to get victuals and return them to shelves after the meal. Some essential condiments remained in the center of the kitchen table, securely

covered by a cloth to prevent insect visitation between meals. Also there was a dark cave cellar built into the hillside behind the house, where ladies kept food items cool. Insects could not penetrate the cave with its only opening being a heavy door.

Screen doors, common for nearly 150 years, were rare before 1870. Coping with the biting and stinging fury of droves of obnoxious pests attacking their pioneering efforts resulted in the inevitable invention of the modern screen door.

The welcomed screen door incorporated screen mesh to block flying insects from entering while admitting air and light. After the metallic screening was patented on April 22, 1884, by John Golding of Chicago, Illinois, the screen door was invented in 1887 by Hannah Harger of the University of Central Florida. My ancestral family was probably the first in Van Camp to obtain a screen door. Buying it was rather simple since the sale of miscellaneous farm produce covered the cost. Hanging it wasn't a problem since hinges were plentiful having been salvaged from discarded doors. Opening and closing the screen door was easy since there were homemade wooden handles both inside and outside. But the door was severely limited in that it never remained tight against the door stop; it hit the stop upon closing and eventually settled in

an open position a few inches from the stop. This allowed insects to enter, defeating the purpose of the screen.

The Van Camps were fastidiously clean people, a trait inherited by Grandmother Van Camp Long, with whom the Furbees lived. Combating the tendency of doors to settle slightly open, they fashioned buttons, snaps, and dead bolts to maintain closure. But these devices depended on consistent human behavior, remembering to use the contrivance for keeping the door shut tightly. To make absolutely certain the door was closed, multiple closure maintenance devices were sometimes used on one door. But human forgetfulness prevailed; doors relaxed in an open position.

Often the unattended door remained open for hours until someone used it again. The house might fill with insects in the meantime. Not only did insects gain free admission, cats, dogs, and a variety of poultry could enter. If the screen remained open after dark, a greater variety of varmints filled the house. In my father's bachelor days, an open kitchen screen door once attracted an innocent and hungry horse who adopted the Long kitchen for a stall where he treated himself to water and leftovers.

After selling some butter and a few dressed chickens to customers in New Martinsville, my folks



BUGS

By Jack Furbee



purchased a welcomed addition to the screen door at Wells Hardware, a metallic coil spring 12 inches long. It attached to the center of the door and then stretched and attached to the hinge side of the door frame on the inside, the purpose being to draw the open door shut. The person exiting

or entering continued on his or her way with the door closing because of the spring's tension.

The Longs were quite happy with the spring as it drew the door shut, accompanied by its loud slam against the doorstep. However there was nothing to hold the door tight. Again

they found themselves using the snaps, buttons, and bolts to tighten the door against the stop. The ladies found flies pestering the household since they flew through an opening caused by the inadequacy of the spring. In disgust and disappointment that their screen door with its spring was



John Marshall Van Camp, seated, with daughter Euna Brady and wife Margaret Ann Martin in the 1880's at Van Camp, Wetzel County.

less than perfect as a fly deterrent, reluctantly they adopted other fly elimination techniques of a less mechanical variety but very popular in the Van Camp community. A flypaper or glue fly ribbon was inexpensive and simple to install. The ladies simply untwisted the ribbon and hung it with an enclosed thumbtack in the desired location. Ribbons emitted an unpleasant vapor for a few days, but eventually the odor subsided. The sweet, sticky ribbon about two feet long was generally attached to the ceiling in areas where there was less traffic below, with care taken to avoid food preparation areas. Soon the ribbon was covered with flies, mosquitoes, and many airborne pests.

Some insects avoided the flypaper to become survivors of human attempts to exterminate them. Another direct attempt to battle the bugs became part of the household insect arsenal. In 1905, Dr. Samuel J.

Crumbine, a member of the Kansas State Board of Health, set out to rid the state of a bumper crop of flies. While attending a Topeka softball game, Crumbine was inspired by the crowd's chant of "swat the ball." The next issue of his Fly Bulletin bore the headline "SWAT THE FLY." This inspired schoolteacher Frank H. Rose to construct a device from a yardstick and a piece of screen. The holes in the screen were essential because a fly can sense the air pressure of a solid object like a hand. Rose called his invention a "fly bat." Dr. Crumbine renamed it "fly swatter."

Before a meal was served, the Long ladies of Van Camp patrolled the eating area determined to eliminate flies that had somehow evaded the screen door and fly ribbon. These women had perfected a quick motion of the hand, wrist, and arm in order to eliminate one fly after another with a fly swatter.

Their skill amazed me as a child as I waited with stomach growling for the delicious meal sitting on the table.

The ladies had come a long way from early days when there were no screens. Unaware of the disease-carrying danger of flies, they worked intently toward a clean house free of insects. Admittance of insects through any crack or opening was strictly unacceptable.

Another closure device, second only to the spring and a bit more mechanical, the door catcher ensured that the screen door would remain closed. The closing action of the door engaged a catch or rubber roller, having a strong steel spring that closed the door tightly and held it in a shut position by a second rubber roller. With its stout construction, especially the strong short spring, the door catcher was a sure sign that the inhabitants were serious about what entered their



A pair of oxen at the Van Camp farm, date unknown.

house. With this final contrivance the ladies seemed pleased, although flies would probably exist indefinitely long after screen doors, flypaper, and ribbons have vanished from the earth. They would survive even as the Long ladies fought valiantly for their extermination.

In one last attempt to discourage insects' future in the Long house, my grandmother crept silently away from the family as they listened to their nightly radio programs over Wheeling and Clarksburg radio stations. Quietly and cautiously she carried a glass of leftover soapy dishwater in her right hand and a kitchen chair in the other. Looking upward toward the white wallpapered ceiling aglow with the soft rays from the oil lamp, she paused and rested her rotund form before undertaking the most daring part of her exploit. With major effort and caution, she climbed up on the chair as she gingerly balanced the glass of soapy water, clinging tenaciously and somewhat uneas-

ily to the back of the chair. For an elderly lady of scarcely over five feet, this act was comparable to that of a beginning tight wire walker taking his or her first steps over a chasm below. Keeping her eyes ever upward, she gently raised the glass to within one inch of the ceiling. Above the glass was the object of her quest, a fly resting from a day of annoying humans. Suddenly Grandma stretched her chubby arm upward to its full length, a move and posture uncharacteristic of her, so that the rim of the glass touched the ceiling surrounding the fly. Dropping into the soapy water, the fly met its end as did several others as Grandma relocated her chair and repeated her gymnastics going from one room to another. Holding the glass containing the last fly cadavers for that day, Grandma descended from the chair, quite pleased with her catch. She almost complained aloud about her arthritic knees, but silent suffering seemed more appropriate.

Winter provided a rest period for the screen door since insects were dormant. Still hinged, it retired in an open position fastened to the adjacent wall. The spring was released to fall along the main door frame where it rested until another fly time. The door catcher remained open in its released position all winter, waiting to grasp the screen door upon its first closing in the spring. Within a kitchen drawer lay retired weapons of warfare, the flypaper and fly swatter, eager to serve at the behest of Long ladies for one more season, one more battle of the bugs. ❁

JACK FURBEE was born in 1934 in Wetzel County. He holds a master's degree and a doctorate in education from West Virginia University and served 35 years as an educator, counselor, and administrator. He now lives in Bourbonnais, Illinois, where he is professor emeritus at Olivet University. Jack is the author of the book *Growing Up Appalachian in the Van Camp Community of Wetzel County, West Virginia*. His most recent contribution to GOLDENSEAL appeared in our Winter 2014 edition.



This hog pen at the Van Camp farm must have been a haven for flies and bugs. Date unknown.