

Charles goes fishing

By Rick Henderson

Charles was different. Some would say Charles was not right, then usually followed up by saying “Bless his heart”. Back in the 1950’s growing up in the south in the small cotton mill town of Porterdale, Charles would be described as being mentally retarded. Today we would say Charles is a special needs person. Back then and to the day he died, I called Charles my friend. We grew up as neighbors, his family lived across the street and both of our family houses were located on street corners. Life was simply and pleasant for us boomer kids of the 50’s. Our community had three bustling cotton mills, a river, and community schools, all in walking distance. We had an Olympic size swimming pool built to keep us out of the river I am told. We had a softball field, a baseball field, parks, playgrounds, a huge gym and of course the “woods”. It was a children’s paradise. In the center of the town was a block of buildings that contained a grocery store, a department store, barber shop, beauty parlor, the post office, offices for the police, mayor, with offices located upstairs for a doctor, the company’s accounting and various administrative offices. Down stairs on the main street next to the grocery store was the Pharmacy, “drug store”, where mill workers could get their checks cashed, buy sundry items, get their prescriptions filled and in the front of the drug store was the soda fountain, the town’s epicenter. On the outside were newspaper boxes, a scale where you would put a penny in to get your weight and fortune told, and on the inside one could buy coffee, cokes, lemon sours, ice cream, milk shakes, candy, cigars, cigarettes, snuff, chewing tobacco and hear the best gossip in town. Where everyone in town would pass through, hang out, or go to and find out what was going on. It is in that setting my favorite “Charles” story begins.

Charles and I grew up walking, running, playing in backyards, back alleys, the woods together. We sat on each others front porches and would swing in the “swang”, eat banana sandwiches, his with mayonnaise, mine with peanut butter, share a coke and buy ice cream from “Hunky John” when he drove his ice cream truck up and down the streets. We just grew up together. As time past and we started to school, Charles attended with me, we would walk to school with hundreds of other school kids and it was the first time

I really noticed he was different. Charles was allowed in the class rooms and he usually sat quietly or with his head down waiting patiently for recess or lunch or the end of the school day where we would get together to play, talk, walk, run and laugh. As we got older Charles would get up and leave to go home for part of the day however he would always be there for recess, lunch or when the school bell rang at the end of the day. In the sixth grade my family moved out of town however my grandmother moved into our old house and I would continue to go to school there until I went to high school. I would visit both sets of grand parents all during the week and generally would stay many weekends and summer days with either of them. I would get to see all my school chums as well as Charles.

In high school I got a car and went to work in the drug store at the soda fountain. We would be very busy with the school children coming in and out before and after school, the mill shift changes and of course on Friday and Saturday when the mill workers would come in to get their payroll checks cashed. Even in the summer when school was out, we had kids going to and coming from the swimming pool at different times of the day and the mill workers came in and out during shift change. It was during one of those summer days, when the pool had opened up, and office workers had already came down stairs for break or lunch and gone back to their offices. I had just finished readying the soda fountain for the mill shift change. The ice cream route man had delivered our order of various 5 gallon buckets of ice cream, I rotated the buckets with the newest on bottom and the oldest on top with the lids open to be ready to dip and serve the ice cream, I had filled the coke fountain machine with coke syrups, the ice was crushed and put into the containers behind the fountain to fill the fountain cups up, the cigarette rack was filled by brand and ready to sell. I made sure the candy counter was filled with bubble gum and boxes of candy. I was ready and still had a few minutes so I waited behind the counter propped up on one of the ice cream freezers. A couple of customers had come in and was standing around talking after I had served one with coffee and the other with their order of coke or ice cream. TA, another “different” and local legend, had come in for a cigar. I unwrapped one of his brand and gave it to him and I lit a match as he bent over with cigar in his mouth and puffed on it until it was good and lit. Then one of the most loud and obnoxious of the town bullies came in. Two of the customers went ahead and left, TA

went over to his usual corner to smoke his cigar. The town bully then slapped a nickel down hard on the counter and said in a loud voice, SERVICE BOY, I NEED SERVICE, I straightened up and asked what I could get him. He ordered a small coke, not much ice and a squirt of cherry in it. I got his order and he took the drink and he started sliding the nickel off the counter back toward him with his fingers when I told him that would be a nickel, please. The owner and pharmacist walked up about that time and told him hello and he quickly slide the nickel toward me. I took it and rang it up on the register. The pharmacist walked over to TA and was talking with him when Charles came in with a fishing pole still in the wrapper and a small brown bag. He came up to the counter and ordered a coke, I got it for him and he paid me and I asked what he was up to. Proudly Charles said, “ Me going fishing” and he promptly showed me his rod and reel he just bought from the Department store with his birthday money, he also opened the paper bag that contained some fishing tackle. The rod and reel was the cheapest you could buy back then, it was attached to a piece of cardboard and wrapped in plastic, and it came probably with a 5 lb fishing line. Charles then asked me, “what kind of bait do me use?” I was studying the rod and reel and the tackle, when the local big mouthed bully started...with his chest held out and standing as tall as possible he began taunting Charles by saying...ME GOING FISHING...ME GONNA GET BIG FISH...and then bellowed out his ridiculous laugh...then he said..SO THE VILLAGE IDIOT IS GOING FISHING and again started his bellowing laugh....Charles was looking at him and I could see his fist starting to ball up...I reached over the counter and tugged on Charles’s shoulder and said to him. Charles don’t pay him any attention, come on let’s go down to the other end of the counter so I can rig up your fishing rod..so we went to the end of the candy counter and I pulled Charles around the end of the counter and out of sight of the bully. I opened the rod and reel and Charles begin to watch what I was doing. I figured I would rig it up for bottom fishing by using a Carolina rig, so I proceeded to add the weight to the line, tied up the leader and put on the hook. I showed Charles how to put the hook on the one of the rod’s eye while carrying it and he watched as I showed him how to click the reel, take out some slack and said the best way for him to fish would be to just grabbed the weight and drop it out into the water and let the line go until it hit bottom and to click the reel to lock it in place. I told him to go to the grocery store and buy a small can of corn

and bring it back, which he did all the while the bully continued his tirade... When Charles came back with the can of corn I motioned him to the end of the counter where I opened the can of corn with a can opener and drained most of the liquid and put the corn and rest of the liquid into an ice cream cup and put on a lid. I did keep some kernels out and slid them on the hook and then presented the rod and reel to him and told him, Charles you are ready to go fishing and with that he beamed a great big smile as only he could..I patted him on the shoulder and told him to go down to the local fishing spot and I was sure some folks would be down there as it was just walking distance from the store to the river and dam. I put the rest of the tackle and bait into the brown bag and gave it to him and he took off, I told him to go out the side door as so the bully wouldn't see him and off went Charles.

I went back behind the counter and washed my hands as some of the mill shift workers started coming in. Soon the place was packed, we got busy filling up cokes, making milk shakes, lemon sours, dipping ice creams, selling packs of cigarettes and really going at it when the pool crowd came in as the in coming mill shift folks had gone and then the off coming mill shift came in. After awhile the crowd thinned to a few customers, I started the clean up and emptying the trash cans and getting the soda fountain back in order.

When everything was in ordered I looked up and saw TA puffing on the remainder of his cigar, I got him a coke and set in front of him and got me a bottled coke for myself when I noticed the town bully was outside holding court. Another 30 minutes or so had passed and our sleepy little town was soon in its' late lazy afternoon summer routine. Most folks were home getting ready for supper, the pool had closed and would open again shortly and some of our regulars were dropping in, like the mayor, chief of police and some of the office workers beginning to leave work and come in for a coke, coffee and get caught up on the local gossip. Since it was a hot summer day, and the drug store being one of the few places with air conditioning, people didn't stand outside too long under the shade of the overhang of the second floor of the building that hung over the sidewalk. So the bully and one or two of his court came in. They had just came up to the counter when TA called out...LOOK YONDER...and pointed toward the red light and corner of the street. There was Charles holding his fishing rod AND..one of the biggest carps I have ever seen...He was carrying it but most of it was dragging the ground. As he came up to the

front door everyone piled outside to look at the fish, I took a look around and saw everyone was outside and then went to the front door and opened it. Charles was soaking wet from river water and sweat, his shoes and the bottom of his pants were coated with mud. Everyone was asking him questions, talking about the fish, wondering how much it weighed, when the Pharmacist told Charles to put the fish down and get on the scale as he dropped a penny in it...Charles got up on the scale and he weighed 120 lbs literally soaking wet, then someone handed him the carp, the scale went up to 134 lbs, that meant the carp weighed 14lbs and he caught it on a \$9.95 rod and reel with a 5 or 6 lb test line. It was simply amazing. I was laughing and people were patting him on the back. I stepped down and took the rod and reel, unhooked the leader and told him I would bring the rod and reel to his house after work. Charles started heading home with some of the guys following him and helping him in carrying the carp. I went back in as the crowd was breaking up and I went and put the rod and reel in the room behind the soda fountain and went back behind the counter and washed my hands as people came back in as this would be the topic of discussion this afternoon. The Chief of Police, Mayor and a few of the office workers as a couple of people that were driving by and stopped when they saw Charles with the fish came in to hear the about Charles's fish. They were all talking and laughing all except the town bully. I saw him at the edge of the crowd as he slowly went out the side door, then my attention focused on waiting on customers and listening to the town gossip about Charles going fishing. We were all laughing and going on when TA said out loud "Look Yonder" and pointed and we all turned and there was the loud mouth TOWN BULLY with two paper sacks and a package holding one of the same type rod and reel Charles had bought and he was hunched over and scurrying down the side walk toward the river. Well, we all busted out laughing as TA pointed toward the town bully and said..LOOK the town idiot is going fishing.....I laughed until tears rolled down my cheeks.

I went by Charles's house that afternoon after work and took him his rod and reel. At his house the front porch and front yard were full of people and kids looking over at a huge wash tub filled with water with half the carp hanging out, people were talking and looking and listening as Charles talked about him catching that fish. Charles was drinking

a big glass of tea eating a piece of fried chicken when I sit next to him on the swing, we had a good old time talking about that fish.

I would go away for many years and come back to Porterdale only to visit my grandmother and on occasion I would see Charles and we would sit in the swing and talk about growing up. And sometimes he would ask me, “Remember when Me caught that big ol fish?” and we would swing back in that “swang” and laugh and laugh.

GOD bless those special people in our lives and thank you GOD for letting me be a part of their lives no matter how small or insignificant it may seem. AND GOD, ask Charles if he will save a place on the swing for me.....

By Rick Henderson – excerpt from a collection in the works titled “Tales from the banks of the Yellow River”