

## Tell Us About the Rabbits...Pleeease??

There was a time when my two kids, now in their 30s, were young enough to be tucked into bed, yet old enough to cultivate the art of prolonging bedtime. They would often beg, “Tell us about the rabbits....Pleeease??”

The yarn about the rabbits was not even a real story; there was no plot. To me, it was just stuff that happened while growing up in the country near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in the early 1960s. My kids thought the rabbits were all cute and quaint, like our own *Little House on the Prairie*. My wife Deb claims it was more like *Little Shop of Horrors* and wonders how the kids could ever sleep.

I was about six years old, shoveling dirt onto a Tonka truck, when my wide eyes spotted a huge black rabbit shamelessly chomping on the leafy lettuce in my mom’s garden. As I babbled with unfettered excitement, my father squinted over his newspaper, musing, “I wonder who he belongs to...”

I’d never heard of a rabbit belonging to someone. I just thought they all ran around in the woods. Intrigued, I inquired, “Really, people have rabbits?”

Before my father could answer, my mother appeared with a juicy carrot, conspiratorially sliding it into his hand. My father passed the carrot to me, with an amused nod in the direction of the rabbit, “Walk slowly...maybe he’ll eat from your hand...”

I crept toward the garden, gently holding out the carrot. I squatted. The rabbit stared, seeming to be more curious than frightened. I suspect that I was more scared than the rabbit. The rabbit skittled toward me, blinked, then snatched my offering. The crisp crunch of sharp teeth into the carrot startled me. I tried not to jump. The rabbit gnawed away. I relaxed. Soon I was stroking soft fur and scratching behind long ears.

My father gathered a cardboard box, a water bowl, and a pile of fresh clover. I watched with awe as that rabbit, seeming to not mind the box, munched on the clover. This quickly led to, “Can we keep him? Pleeease....?”

I’d already named him Blacky. My father then uttered that dreaded ubiquitous parental filibuster, “We’ll see...”

But he did offer hope...and conditions. He explained about how we would have to try to find the people who had lost the rabbit. He also proclaimed that the required waiting period for the owners to claim the rabbit was precisely two weeks. I got sent down the road to knock on all the doors to inquire if anyone had lost a rabbit.

My kids would always interrupt with, “You went all by yourself? Where was Granddaddy?”

“Well, I think he was sitting on the front porch drinking some iced tea.”

My solitary mission seemed perfectly normal to me, but ludicrously unsafe to my pampered modern children.

Anxiously marking off the days on a calendar, I cringed every time a car seemed to slow down in front of our house. I was thrilled when the mandatory two weeks expired. My father found time to convert a cob-webbed wooden packing crate into a rabbit hutch by sawing out some windows and adding some chicken wire. I happily took on the daily chores of feeding Blacky, changing his water, and lavishing him with vegetable scraps from the kitchen. Blacky always seemed to enjoy my visits. I just liked to pet him, scratch under his chin, and watch his nose wiggle.

For reasons I still wonder at, my father appeared one day with a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he proposed, “Let’s go for a ride.”

On the way, he explained that he’d met a guy who had a whole bunch of rabbits. “We’re going to pick out a friend for Blacky.” Of course, I understood very little about boys and girls being friends. Rabbits were about to provide me with a wealth of knowledge.

The long row of rabbit hutches at the farm, with dozens of cuddly rabbits poking their noses curiously toward us, was thoroughly stunning to me. My attention was quickly drawn to a fluffy brown and white bundle who I already knew would be named Wiggles.

When Wiggles and Blacky were introduced to each other, I was both shocked and puzzled by the squealing, frenzied wrestling match that went on between them. Blacky seemed to be the winner, as he wound up on top. But Wiggles somehow looked content. Whatever commentary I received on what had just happened, it all made more sense to me a month later, when Wiggles produced a squirming litter of nine babies. They were so many different colors, it was hard to believe that they all belonged to the same family! Spot had brown spots; Pokey and Dalmatia had black spots; Cinnamon and Ginger were light brown; Snowball and Frosty were white; Midnight was black with one white foot...and there was a cute gray one with a white chin that I named Robert E. Lee.

Thus followed an idyllic summer of petting baby rabbits, rubbing their bellies, and romping with them in the clover patch. A favorite chore for me was when my father would hand me two dollars with instructions to go buy a bag of rabbit pellets. I’d happily drag my wooden wagon with red side rails a half mile down the road to the feed mill to haul home a

tightly stitched 25-pound sack that I could barely lift. I never understood why the guys at the feed mill got such a kick out of the little kid with the wagon. How else would anyone pick up a big bag of rabbit feed? My kids seemed to already know the answer to that question.

They would ask, “How come Granddaddy didn’t pick up the rabbit food in the car?”

“He wanted me to be self-sufficient.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to be self-sufficient?”

I’d just say, “Do you want to hear the rest of the story, or not?”

When our family packed up for a two-week vacation to a lake in Canada, all the rabbits were loaded into the back seat of my father’s tank-sized 1957 two-tone green Oldsmobile, along with three kids and some luggage that didn’t fit into the trunk. The rabbits were going to stay with my grandfather, whose house was two hours into the road trip north. Along the way, the rabbits got passed around between seats. Rabbits that didn’t fit in someone’s lap got lined up on the shelf behind the back seat. We all giggled hysterically as people in cars passing us slowed down to do a double take at the gallery of furry wiggling noses staring out the back window.

Rabbits, of course, grow very fast. I don’t remember thinking much about what was eventually going to happen to all those rabbits. I also don’t remember any fits of tears that may have occurred. Looking back, I think we all just understood that we lived in the country and things happened. After all, many friends and neighbors had named their adorable pigs and calves.

So one day in the autumn, I helped my father load nine fully-grown baby rabbits into a crate. That was the last time I saw them, at least with their noses wiggling. The rabbits were returned to us a couple days later packed into several plastic bags. I watched my mom empty the bags into the kitchen sink for scrubbing before she wrapped them individually to be stored in her big freezer.

A peculiar detail I remember is that I could still make out the shaded markings on the meat where the spots had been. Since I knew every spot, I could recognize every rabbit by name. I insisted that each package that went into the freezer be labeled with a grease pencil to identify the occupant. Roasted rabbit turned out to be delicious, usually served with mashed potatoes and gravy. Before dinner, we thanked God for Pokey, or whoever was on the platter.

Besides the meat, my father arranged for us to keep all the rabbit pelts, though we were on our own to do all the tanning. I soon learned how much grueling work is required to scrape, salt, and rub down a pile of rabbit hides for proper preservation. My shoulders ached, my

fingers blistered, and my nostrils burned. Many times, I was certain that the job must be finished. But my father would roll the still-too-stiff hides between his hands and say, "One more round and these will be soft enough to last a lifetime."

Somehow, one more round turned out to mean at least three or four. Callouses replaced blisters. I wondered why we would want the hides to last a lifetime? Wouldn't a couple of years be long enough?

The grand plan for those rabbit hides was to make fur hats. Dad was the designer. Mom was to be the seamstress. I was supposed to get a Davy Crockett-style cap, made from Cinnamon and Ginger. However, no rabbit fur hats were ever actually completed, due to an apparently unresolvable argument between my father and my mother. The argument revolved around the style of hat that my father envisioned for my mother. The argument was sparked right after our family had been to see the 1960s epic blockbuster movie *Dr. Zhivago*. My father wanted my mother to wear a fur hat like the one sported by Lara as she was swept across the frozen Russian countryside bundled into a horse-drawn sleigh.

Though my mother protested the idea of dressing like a literary home-wrecking mistress, she staked her refusal to make a hat like Lara's on a more diplomatic argument: "People will think I look like Nikita Khrushchev's wife!" The blustering Soviet Premier evoked visceral emotions in the early 1960s. So the rabbit pelts were quietly packed away among mothballs in a cedar chest in our attic.

A handful of years later, just before ragged youthful crowds began flocking to Woodstock, those rabbit pelts re-emerged with some flair. My older sister Karen was a teenager by then, starry-eyed for her high school prom. My mother created an elegant satin-lined bunny fur shawl, a popular fashion accessory at the time. Of course, bunny furs purchased at a department store were uniformly white and totally fake. Karen proudly wore the only real bunny fur anyone had ever seen. It was also the only one with black spots. As Snowball and Frosty only added up to half a fur shawl, both Pokey and Dalmatia were also required.

That hand-sewn rabbit shawl is still safely packed away in a cedar chest. It's as soft and cuddly as ever, and still gets dragged out for admiration at least once a year. Granddaughters in clacking over-sized heels take turns strutting an imaginary runway, then beg, "Tell us about the rabbits...Pleeease??"