

John Edwin Oates

John's feet were firmly planted on solid ground. Honest, dependable, forbearing, and suffering an occasional fool. He was a voracious reader, especially of Wild West stories. Oh! if only those magazines had been saved for today's collectors, instead of going the way of most disposable paper in rural areas of the time.

John acquired a storehouse of knowledge about varieties of trees, also cross-vine and "rabbit tobacco". He cut the vine about three inches long and split it, by the cross in quarters. His ever present pocket knife was keenly sharpened on a small whet stone held on his knee.

The trick in smoking cross-vine, I discovered, was to take shallow "drags" to avoid burning the tongue as the vine has long pores and a wicked sting. Rabbit tobacco, a colloquialism I suspect was rolled in paper or pipe smoked. A weed about 18 inches tall, with narrow green leaves several inches long, grows in semi-open areas around the edge of woods, usually on "poor" land. In the fall, when it is "cured" the leaves curl, turn to a metallic gray and hang limp along the stalk. It has a very pleasant fragrance and is ready for "harvesting" by the more adventurous individuals. I was always amazed at John's ability, and daring, when he lifted his right leg and struck a match across the tightened seat of his bib overalls. He could also light a match from many feet with a twenty-two caliber rifle. John was dead on target with his sling-shot. The brace was made from the fork of a small hardwood limb with the bark removed. The sling consisted of strips cut from a discarded innertube and the projectile pocket was sometimes made from the tongue of a worn out shoe.

He knew the location of the most productive hickory trees, wild grapes called bullis and sweet gum, from the tree, for chewing. Favorite hobbies of hunting and fishing provided extra food for the table.

In our teens, Young Swamp and Goshen Swamp were the places for fishing and swimming. In those days the road N.C. 50, was dirt and the bridge across Young Swamp was made of wood. The stream today is barely recognizable due to fallen trees caused by storms but more deplorably the bad habits of loggers.

It is a wonder that one of John's theories did not get us killed. He believed, and who was I, a mere slip of a boy, to question him, that over a given number of feet, water flowing in Young Swamp "cleaned" itself. When we were thirsty, John cut two sections of reed, between the joints, and we got as far out in the run as possible, inserted the reeds and had a drink. To this day, I am mystified as to how he knew at what point it was safe to drink. I don't recall, perhaps he stepped it off. As he often said, "that's rich".

In retrospect, I am convinced that the accumulation of knowledge growing up on the farm and enduring the "Depression" helped to mold the character that gave my cousin, John Edwin Oates, the courage to prevail on the Philippine island of Mindanno in 1945.

Jack