



REMEMBERING

BILL SHAKESPEARE

& THE BANJO BOY

WRITTEN BY SKIP MILLER

Jimmy had big ears, and he could wiggle them. He could dance like Groucho Marx, and was prone to saying hilarious things that he didn't know were hilarious. Nobody called him handsome. He looked about as goofy as he acted. He was the son of my father's oldest brother who himself was a rare bird.

He played the four-string banjo, guitar, mandolin, harmonica, piano and the Jew's Harp. He wrote songs and poems and once self-published a madcap book that was a conscious flow of being in the hospital with a rare disease. This was after he played minor league baseball and served in Vietnam.

Mostly, though, Jimmy was an incurable dreamer. When he talked about making a million, my father would snort and growl, "You couldn't make a bed."

One day my father saw him trying to walk a rabbit on a leash.

"Congratulations," my father said. "You just made your father the second dumbest man on the planet."

Jimmy was one of the main reasons I started working on the family tree. I wanted to know if there was anything like him hanging from one of the branches in the back. Nothing came close, but I did find some fellows who had flair.

Way back when, in the fifteenth century, Robert Arden took Mary Webb to be his lawfully wedded wife. Both were from Warwickshire, England, and came from good families. Arden was the more noble of the two names, stretching all the way back to my 40th great grandfather, a man name of Cenred Wessex who was born in 644 and was of the Anglo Saxon House of

Wessex, which I have been told is a good thing.

Robert and Mary had a daughter named Mary Arden. She married a leather merchant named John Shakespeare, and they had a son named William. Yeah. That William Shakespeare. My first cousin 11 times removed.

About the time Bill started sloshing ink, there lived a maiden named Anne Rogers. She was from a family that moved around a lot. It started in Norway, settled in Normandy for a few centuries, participated in a couple of the Crusades, moved to southern Italy during the Normans' conquest, and then to France, Holland and finally England.

Anne became my 10th great grandmother by marrying Thomas Odell of the knightly Odells who were demoted because they were Protestants during the reign of staunchly Catholic Mary I. So staunch, in fact, she had a bunch of people torched, including some Odells.

William Odell realized the situation wasn't going to improve so he set sail for Boston and then to hiked to Fairfield, Conn. He didn't like Fairfield. He moved on to become one of the founding fathers of Rye, N.Y.

Col. John Odell was a close friend of George Washington and helped out with that independence uprising. While some of the Odells settled in Pennsylvania and New York, including the parents of my great-great grandmother, most moved on to Michigan and Wisconsin.

Clinton Odell was born in Michigan. He developed a brushless shaving cream he called Burma-Shave. His son Allan was the real genius. In 1925 he spent \$200 of his father's money to buy recycled lumber and build

sets of signs along Route 35 near Minneapolis. The signs were spaced along the roadside, two or three words to a sign. Reading all of the signs delivered a humorous jingle about Burma-Shave, like this: Does your husband / Misbehave / Grunt and grumble / Rant and rave / Shoot the brute some / Burma-Shave.

Burma-Shave became immensely popular and by the 1950s, 7,000 jingles were posted along highways in 45 states.

My grandfather was a pianist and glassblower when he was drafted into World War I. He was assigned to a machine gun unit and fought at the Argonne. By the time he returned home he was usually drunk and always annoying. He was gassed and shot and otherwise violated, which were the reasons the government gave him a \$42 per month pension. He supplemented that by playing the piano in dance halls, silent movie theaters and upscale joints where slinky people cuddled. He was good enough to prod folks into commenting, "It's a shame, what happened to him."

That brings us back to the second dumbest man on the planet. He drove a truck for a casket company and wrote country songs on the side. He owned a hound that was too lazy to hunt ... he said it was being selective. He carried the worms in his shirt pocket when he went fishing. He was never far from a reason to play honky tonk piano.

And he gave the world his only son, Jimmy.

Jimmy's car ran out of gas one time. He walked miles to borrow a can of gas from his uncle. Rather than pour all of it into the car's tank, he decided to save some in case he ran out again.

Shakespeare would have loved that. ☐