

Crazy Joe

Every small town in Texas has a crazy old man who tells tales so fantastic people think he's a liar or a lunatic. Or possibly telling the truth.

People weren't sure what my grandfather's real name was, but he told stories from the many jobs had. He had rough-necked in the oil fields where he helped bring in some of the greatest gushers in west Texas. He fished on the Gulf three years, a leisurely life after nets are prepared and before you strike a run of fish. Then it's pure hard work till you're too tired to lift a pole or drag a net.

He was a wrangler, a cowboy, and anyone who knows about the real West knows that that job required many skills. He could preach a little fire and brimstone, and he never failed to take up a collection.

One Sunday in church, he began a tale. As quickly as Grandpa began a story about a cowboy jumping from the top of one mountain to the top of another, even Texans used to tall tales lifted an eyebrow.

Texans knew about flash floods, they knew Texas had hills, but not mountains. The way Grandpa described it, there were two mountains, side by side. Heavy rains created a rushing stream between them, washing away the soil at the base of each. They began slowly tilting towards one another. As the bases continued to wash away, the mountaintops moved closer and closer.

When the rain stopped, the cowboys gazed in wonder at the two peaks, once far apart, now remarkably close. The soil underneath those two points gave little assurance of support for the arms reaching for one another like long bony fingers.

But "Crazy Joe," whose name had always bothered him, bragged he could jump from one mountaintop to the other. He figured if he succeeded, no one would ever call him "Crazy" again. Maybe they'd change it to "Hoppin' Joe," or "Jumpin' Joe," or some such other title. Anything besides "Crazy."

The gap was not great, but neither was it small. Crazy Joe was known to win footraces, but he would have to get a good run to make the leap. The cowboys began placing bets. Some bet against Crazy Joe, figuring the distance between the two points was too great, and the ground, soaked by the rains, could collapse at any

moment. The other side knew it was risky, but if Crazy Joe made it, they would double their money, and if he missed, they wouldn't lose much.

Crazy Joe, with no idea how long the opportunity to change his name would last, told them he'd make the jump at daybreak the following morning.

In the early light, the men drank strong, dark coffee around a campfire. Soon after sunrise, they gathered on the side along with Crazy Joe. His eyes bugged out, and he rolled them like they were two shiny marbles. A path was cleared, and he walked it a couple of times to be sure no loose sticks or stones might impede his progress. He got rid of the extra weight: his pistol and belt, his double D Stetson (revealing hair that had not seen soap or a comb for a while), even his shirt. He kept on his hand-tooled boots because the ground was rocky and uneven. Giving it his approval, he walked back from the gap about 25 or 30 paces and crouched down for a race against time and space.

"Crazy Joe. Like a bird! Like a bird!" The chant transfixed him. He could fly—like a bird!

As he picked up speed, the chanting got louder. He shot between the two lines and flew into the air like a missile, first up, then down, his legs flailing. As he landed, a cheer went up. He made it!

He lit flat-footed, spun around, and raised a hand in the air to acknowledge the cheers. When Grandpa opened the bag holding the bets, they heard a resounding crack. The top of the mountain where Crazy Joe landed began to collapse under his weight. They watched as Crazy Joe threw up both hands in a helpless gesture and disappeared into the chasm below without a sound.

"He made it," my grandfather told his audience. "So I divided the money to those who won, and we got off the mountain quick."

"About two months later," Grandpa went on, "I was up about 20 miles east of McKinney, near the Red River. It was a fifth Sunday, and the preacher never showed up. We waited a respectable time then after some gospel singing, I rose to bring the message. It was near Easter, so I chose my text: 'Though he were dead, yet shall he live.'"

"I was just getting warmed up when I spied a man a few rows back whose face looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. He was scratched up as if he had recently fought a bear. Suddenly, I recognized him. It was Crazy Joe! I interrupted my sermon. 'Crazy Joe! You're alive!' I exclaimed."

"Yep," he said. "It's me."

“I told the folks to sit down and get ready to hear the end of the story. I told them to the part where Crazy Joe disappeared. ‘We all saw you go down. What happened?’

“Well, just after I landed, I heard the loud snap. I was goin’ down. I shouted, ‘God, save me.’ I wound up at the bottom in mud up to my chest.

“It took me most of the day to get shed of the mud and dig my boots out. It was ‘most dark when I was able to walk. When I got up on a small rise, I saw a light a good piece away. I walked till I was all tuckered out. The light went out, but I kept on going. When I saw a little shack, I kept hollering till a light come on.

“A man yelled, ‘I got a shotgun aimed at the door. What do you want? Who are you?’

“That’s the last thing I remember because I went down like a rock. When I come to, they told me they waited a while, then they come out. They washed me off, doctored me, and put me to bed. They kept watch on me for days.

“Soon as I felt good enough, I helped ‘em by splittin’ some wood and mendin’ fences. Today’s the first chance I got to go to church. I wanted to be in the Lord’s house on the Lord’s day, seein’ as how He saved me like He did.”

“Folks sat frozen till a deacon stood up and said, ‘Praise the Lord!’ I said, ‘This is Crazy Joe’s testimony.’ They all let up a shout.

“I said, ‘Amen. Let’s eat and rejoice.’ Some spread out lunches on a few grassy spots; some picnicked in their wagons; some visited and ate standin’ up.” I was sure we’d never hear another story to match that one.