

RHAPSODY

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THE 1992 CLACKAMAS COLLECTION

ONIONS

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200 onion starts. Farmer's idea was to use a one inch wide stick, two feet long, to poke a hole in the ditch, then stuff the onion plant in. Only about a half-inch of the green shoot was to stick up above ground. The distance between the plants were to be measured by the boot, from heel to toe, plus the width of Thad's fist. A flat contained enough plants to do one row. Watering was from the five gallon square cans, each with a stick-plugged hole at the bottom of one corner. Pull out the plug and a half-inch wide squirt of water could be directed to the planted ditch. Two cans were needed for each row.

Planting onions, to Thad, was hard and cruel work; however, it did give a guy time to think and maybe plan a future. Bermuda Sweets - imagine an island, only 20 miles big, somewhere in the western Atlantic ocean, where they grew nothing but onions. Doubtful that pirates would stop there to bury treasure in the onion fields, the smell was almost as bad garlic. Guess the people there only had fish and onions to eat; kind of like the Hawaiians on coconuts and fish. Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat the dirt around the shoot.

How to escape? Which way? Took from Monday through the following Thursday to plan an escape. The creek would eventually empty into the White river and the White into the Missip'. Tom Sawyer built a raft. Measure, bend over, poke and

pork, and the other always of peanut butter and jelly. Ona liked peanut butter and jelly.

Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat the dirt around the shoot. Was this like being alone before a confession, had to think up all those sins and then tell them to the priest? Was this penance for saying 'God damn' too much? Grades weren't so good in school, had worked hard to even get "C's".

End of the row. Tote two five gallon cans of water to the row end, look both ways along the highway. Why farmed out? Why here? How did Mother find out about this farm-hand stuff? There was that time last summer when the gang swiped a box of Babe Ruth's and got caught by the cops. So, 20,000 plants grow into onions, and probably sell for a penny each, how many dollars would that be? Jeez! \$200. Mother was earning a dollar a day making shirts in the factory. Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat the dirt around the shoot.

Then there was the time he got in a fight with that nigger kid; cost three dollars to have a doctor straighten Thad's busted nose and sew up his upper lip. And Thad was supposed to have won that scrap. He wasn't sure which was the most important lesson learned: either don't fight with niggers, or don't fight with a kid bigger than yourself. One thing learned, forsure and forever, was to refer to them, nowadays, as Negros. Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat dirt around the shoot.

Big Eddie often clipped two to three dollars a day hustling pool marks. Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat dirt around the shoot.

Farmer and Mule were working the other one-acre field, harrowing and ditching. Both plodding along as if they were in each other's dream-world. Wasn't the farmer that plowed the straight furrows, it was Mule; all Farmer could see was the mule's tail and rump. Since Mule took pride in his work, Thad guessed he should too, but could only average three rows in the mornings and four rows in the afternoons. Took 14 days to do the acre of 100 rows with 18,900 onion plants.

And Ona sung her songs that made a guy feel good. Misty rains came, when she called them, but only after Saturdays' sundowns, and then stopped about noon on Sundays. Monday mornings, after Ona's gentle rains, shining diamonds with sparkling rays clung to the blades of the planted sprouts.

And then there was the potato acre. Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat dirt around the shoot. As Thad moved from each row he left it with a decision to one of his problems, and a sense of relief.

This work was the shits — there was a way to escape, but down inside, Thad really didn't want to. He could be a lot worse off being somewhere else, after all — there were only 100 rows for potatoes. Farmer looked over the plantings each evening, always saying the same thing, "You did a good job. They're going to grow just fine."

The onion and potato acres were planted. To further delay an ending, and without being asked, Thad hoed away new weeds and grasses from between the rows of corn. Summer "vacation" was near-gone. The boots were brushed and rubbed with the same oil used on Mule's harness, and left on the floor below the nails on the wall. The book of The Black Rose was left on the shelf of the bed-side

"stand," just in case another onion-planter might need it, someday.

Thad walked slowly down the lane, occasionally stumbling from looking at the acres of onions and potatoes. Thad's Onions. A job done good. There was a feeling of sadness; he knew he would never see Farmer, Ona and Mule again. At the highway's edge Thad looked to the direction Mother and the Man had taken, could that way be more rewarding? Perhaps lead to the Missipp' and makin' a raft?

Smart thumping nudges between Thad's shoulder blades moved him to the center of the highway. Mule had quietly followed, and was again offering reason and direction. Thad crossed the highway as Mule returned to the lane and retraced their steps from the house. Thad began trudging north.

A Dodge sedan with a strong sounding six cylinder engine rolled to a stop beside Thad, the car was heavy and without squeaks. The driver nodded his head, opened the passenger-side front door as an invitation to ride.

"Springfield?"

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"Yup!" The driver had an aura of a moonshine runner. "What'cha been doin' out here?"

"Plantin' Bermudas and spuds."

The miles slipped quietly by. After asking where Thad wanted to get out, Driver offered his advice: "Hit's a hell of a lot easier plantin' than hand pullin' 'em in the fall." Then reflectively added, "Wors'en pickin' cotton, 'cuz them gunny's of taters and big whites gets awful heavy draggin' the sacks 'tween your legs. I lit out once too, was a couple of years older than you, though. Go to where you can get edikated, keep to the book learnin' and you won't bust your back." The driver let Thad off in front of Pete's Pool Parlor.

Entering the apartment, Thad found Mother and Teener sitting at the kitchen table lunching on store-bought three-day-old donuts and tea. Thad tossed his suitcase under his cot in the kitchen, raised his eyebrows, mustered a sheepish smile and said, "Hi, I'm ...", the sentence wasn't even out when Mother said, "There aren't any donuts left, there's some cheese in the icebox and bread in the box to make a sandwich." Thad wondered which one of them had remembered to empty the icebox drip pan while he was gone.

Making a living being a farmer might not be too bad, especially considering that Big Eddie was now in the Boy's Reformatory in Jefferson for using a pool cue on a mark.



stuff, then hand-pat the dirt around the shoot.

End of the row. Tote two five gallon cans of water to the row end, look both ways along the highway. Water the row, 'way back to the first plant. Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat dirt around the shoot.

Better not lay down on this job. Buzzards might swoop down. Thad knew, from movies, that buzzards ate cowboys and dead horses. He had never seen a buzzard up close because they were always soaring in circles, maybe a mile high. How big is a city block? How many rows? How many plantings? How long to do an acre? Measure, bend over, poke and stuff, then hand-pat the dirt around the shoot.

Each noon Ona would waddle down the row where Thad was planting, squinting so hard against the sunlight it was a wonder she could even see the rows. Her straight long black hair was twisted into a ball, up off her neck, onto the back of her head. To toe her way in the plowed furrow, Ona would straddle the planted onions, leaning heavily to one side and then the other as she swung a leg forward for the next step. God, if she fell over she would wipe out three rows of plantin'. Even with his back turned away from Ona, Thad could feel her approach like a warm and comforting breeze, and then could hear her singing or chanting praises and thanks to the spirit of mother earth, the wind, the sun and rain. Lunch was carried to Thad in a woven reed basket. A pint jar of buttermilk, a little bit salted and with flecks of black pepper; two biscuits, one with a slab of ham or side

Rhapsody is a collection of literary works done by students at Clackamas Community College. Our intent is to further our community's awareness of the literary arts. Portland and its surrounding areas are a virtual cultural mecca. No where else in the United States is there such a widespread and ever-growing acknowledgement of the arts. Many great writers, poets and painters are flocking to this region, attracted by the beauty and serenity of the Pacific Northwest. In true fashion, many locals are discovering that within themselves exists a passion for creation and expression; we are seeing a large emergence of native artists. In short, the arts are alive and well here at home.

We hope you enjoy this first of the Rhapsody inserts. All the writings included were winners or finalists in the writers' club contest, with the exception of Snowboarder. Rhapsody looks to become a monthly Clackamas feature next year so be sure to continue writing throughout your Summer vacation. We thoroughly hope you enjoy these lovely works.

Editor
Robert A. Hibberd

Assistant Editor
Melissa Freels

Onions Artist
Lorin Arendt