

The Whale House
The Whale House and What Really Matters
UCG Retreat Story, April 26, 2009
Larry Reimer

When my dad John Reimer was a little boy, he was called Johnny. He had an older brother Alvin and an even older sister Olga. They grew up in Kansas during the great depression. I'm sure all of you children have heard on the news, at school, or from your parents, that we're living in tough times right now in terms of money. This is called a recession. I don't know exactly what that word means. Sometimes it just means going back.

For example, after a flood, water recedes, it goes back. After a wedding, when the bride and groom walk back down the aisle, that's called a recession.

In terms of money, recession money seems to flow backward. There isn't as much money around as there used to be. Often you'll hear people wonder whether this recession isn't actually a depression. Depression is a long, bad recession when people have even less money. Depression is also when people feel very sad for a long time.

My dad, Johnny, grew up on a farm in Kansas during a depression, a long, sad, recession, when nobody had much money at all. He used to tell me stories of the depression that I really got tired of, all except one. The stories I didn't like were stories of how they had no toys at Christmas, how instead of butter on their bread they ate lard which is thick white grease. I didn't like those stories because they made me sad for my dad, and made me feel bad for what I had.

But remember I told you there was one story I loved, and this is the one I'm going to tell you. I'm not sure it happened exactly this way, but I do know that it was true.

My dad, Johnny, his brother Alvin, and his sister Olga had a secret. Their parents didn't know their secret. No one in the whole town of Buhler, Kansas, where they lived, knew about it.

When times were so hard and people had so little, Johnny, Alvin, and Olga had some special luck. Here is how their luck happened.

There was a stream on their farm called the Blazefork. When it rained hard enough to turn the dry Kansas dust into big bogs of mud, the Blazefork River would flood half the farm.

One day, far away from Kansas there was a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico that blew into New Orleans and the Mississippi River. Stuff from the Ocean blew into the Gulf of Mexico which washed into the Mississippi River, which washed up to the Missouri River, which washed into the Kansas River which eventually flowed back into the Smoky Hill River that backed up into the Blazefork.

That hurricane was so bad that a whale had been blown from the Atlantic Ocean into the Gulf of Mexico, into the Mississippi River, into the Missouri River, into the Kansas River, into the Smoky Hill River, all the way into the middle of Kansas, and washed up on the banks of the Blazefork in the back forty acres of their farm.

Now, sadly, given all it had gone through, the whale had just died when Johnny, Alvin and Olga found it. They wondered what to do about it. And guess where they got their idea? Since they were so poor, they only had one book to read in their house. It was the bible, and that's where they got their idea. In the bible there is a tale of a man named Jonah, who fell off his ship and was swallowed by a giant fish. Jonah lived in the fish for three days until the fish spit him up on land.

Alvin, Johnny, and Olga knew that story, because they read their bible a lot, and they thought of Jonah as soon as they saw that whale. They figured if Jonah could live in the belly of a big fish, they could have some fun inside this whale.

People back then knew how to do things that we don't much remember any more. Their father, my grandfather, Abram Reimer, had taught the Indians - the Wichita, Shawnee, and Cherokee tribes of that area how to read, and they in turn taught him things like how to tan and preserve skins of animals they hunted for food. My grandfather taught these things to Johnny, Alvin, and Olga, so they figured they could preserve a whale.

First they found a secret place, a cave in the side of the riverbed, and there they hollowed out the whale, sort of like carving out a pumpkin and cleaning a fish. They then found a special oil that they could rub all over the whale, inside and out, to keep it from stinking. The whale had huge bones, so they took tree vines and branches, and supported the bones so they wouldn't collapse.

They turned the whale into a houseboat. They got an engine from a junked Stanley Steamer car that ran on wood and coal being fed into a burner that boiled water that produced steam that powered the whale house boat.

They found a table, chairs, a few beds, and an oil lamp and set up the cabin of the whale house. They built a platform up by the whale's eyes and turned the eyes into windows. Then they built stairs to climb up to the platform where they could see out the windows, and this is where they drove the whale from with a steering wheel from a broken down John Deere tractor. They rigged pulleys to make the mouth open and close so they could get in and out.

So even though Johnny, Alvin, and Olga, had no toys, no television, or video games, they had the whale house to play in. Whenever the Blazefork ran high, they would go to their cave in the bank of the river and take the whale house out for a ride, mostly early in the morning or at night so no one else would see them. And if it looked like

someone might spot them, the whale house could actually sail underwater, like a submarine.

Long after the whale house was gone, when I was a little boy, my dad would tell me a whale house story every night when I went to bed. He told me how in the beginning they just sailed around to have fun. But soon they started to have adventures.

Here's one of my favorite adventures. One day they heard about a deep, wide place in the river where people were catching catfish. They got in the whale house and sneaked up on this fishing hole underwater. They could see hundreds of catfish swimming around. They stopped the whale house for a minute, and then they charged up from under water, opening the mouth of the whale house just before they hit the surface and scooped up exactly one hundred and thirteen catfish. They also scared the people fishing so badly that they all dropped their fishing poles and ran. Of course no one believed them when they tried to tell the fish police that a whale rose out of the Blazefork and took their catfish.

Johnny, Alvin, and Olga didn't know what to do with all those catfish. As they were wondering, Olga opened that bible, their only book, and read from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 7:12 where Jesus said, "In everything do to others, as you would have them do to you."

"What does that mean," Alvin asked? "That's the golden rule," Olga said, "It means that we should think of what we would want someone else who had caught a hundred and thirteen catfish to do for us?"

Johnny said, "Well nobody around here has much of anything. I think if somebody else had a bunch of catfish, I'd want them to share them with all of us."

So that's just what they did. They put up signs all around Buhler, saying "Catfish supper 6:00 tonight – free." They were worried about two things.

First, they worried that because people were so poor, and ashamed of being hungry, that no one would come to their supper.

Second, they worried that everyone came and they wouldn't have enough catfish. The town was small, sure, but it did have four hundred people living there which was a lot more than one hundred and thirteen catfish. What if everyone came and they ran out of food and some people went home hungry?

Johnny, Alvin, and Olga decided to go ahead anyway. They had two potatoes in their garden, and made a little bowl of potato salad. And they made up some hush puppies out of their cornmeal. Then they fried up all those catfish and waited.

Six o'clock came and about five people just casually passed by. Then one or two took a bite, and said "Mmm, these catfish are g – o- o- d good!" And they saw the little bit of potato salad and hush puppies and went right home. Johnny, Alvin, and Olga were worried now. The next thing they knew, those first five people came back with five friends, and then those five with five more, and you get the idea. The place was

packed. The Schmidts were bringing more potato salad. The Zielkes brought fresh picked corn. The Johnsons, who didn't even have any potatoes or corn to share, made these terrific yeast rolls. Some of the Yoders and the Kreiders must have been out fishing that afternoon too, because they brought catfish to fry as well.

All four hundred people from Buhler were there. They were doing what really mattered. They were sharing, and because they were sharing there was enough for everyone.

This reminded Johnny of another bible story. What do you think that was? In Matthew 14, Jesus was speaking to 5,000 people, it was time to eat, and all they could find was five loaves of bread and two fishes. Somehow, when everyone sat down to eat, there was enough for everyone. Maybe, like this catfish supper, people began sharing.

Life was still hard for the people of Buhler Kansas for a while after that catfish dinner, but it was never as hard as it had been before. Even when the depression ended and people had money again, they never forgot that first catfish dinner, how they learned to do for others what they wished others would do for them, and how when they shared, they all had enough.

That's what really mattered. And that made Johnny, Alvin, and Olga smile.