

Uncle Chas Cole's Talk with the Mule and other Matters of a Spiritual Nature

Don Casada 13 Dec 2022

Precious to the memories of Christine Cole Proctor and Leonard Cole is their Uncle Chas – and their recollection of a conversation he had with a mule.

William Chastine Cole (1886-1973) and Margaret Monteith (1888-1950) were married in 1909. They raised their three sons, Vernie, Kelly, and Rondall, at their home on the head of Brewer Branch, a stream which emptied into the Tuckasegee River just upstream of the mouth of Forney Creek. It was land which Chas purchased from the WT Mason Lumber Company in 1913. The deed referenced “the old Brewer tract.” This likely referred to one of two land grants issued over seventy years earlier – one to John Brewer and the other to Thomas Brewer, both issued on December 2, 1842. Chastine Cole was a grandson of the patriarch of the Forney Creek Coles, William Bryson (Buchanan) Cole, who appears to have arrived in the Forney Creek section not long after the conclusion of his service in the Civil War. Ironically, Chas acquired legal ownership of land on Brewer Branch prior to his father, Joseph Cole.



Figure 1. Joseph and Cynthia Hoyle Cole family, around 1910. Front, L-R: Prichard, Theodore Cole, Cynthia Hoyle Cole, Joseph S Cole, John Cole. Back, L-R: Chastine & Margaret Monteith Cole, Margaret & Jesse Cole, Sarah and Nellie. Photo courtesy of Christine Cole Proctor.

Chastine (also spelled as Chasteen and Chastain in various records) rigged up a system to provide running water to the [home he built](#) by a gravity flow system which ran continuously from a spring box at the head of Brewer Branch through an unregulated spigot into a sink on the back

porch of the home. The sink drain was piped to the front (east side) of the house where it could be rigged up to water fruit trees and the garden, with runoff going back to Brewer Branch.

Chas also constructed an exceptionally [fine can house](#) which stood west of the back porch, partially dug into the side of the ridge which separates Brewer Branch and lower Forney Creek. Other than the fact that the roof is gone (likely “melted” – i.e., burned – by TVA), the structure is in perfectly fine shape today.

Chas Cole was clearly a man who knew how to get things done. That included getting a mule to plow.

Most everyone knows about the three letter directional commands “gee” for right and “haw” for left, used with horses, mules, and other draft animals, and of course there’s “giddy-up” and “whoa.” But at times, mules – known for a propensity to be stubborn – required the application of a broader vocabulary to get them to work. Such was the case one fine spring morning on upper Brewer Branch, when Uncle Chas had the mule in harness to turn the soil in preparation for spring planting. The mule was being uncooperative, so Chas let fly with some unrestrained mule talk; as mules are wont to do, with a nod of the head, it got to business. Unbeknownst to Uncle Chas, the [Forney Creek Baptist Church](#) preacher was passing close enough by to hear.

The next Sunday, the first topic on the business meeting agenda after conclusion of the service was Uncle Chas’s verbal wanderings from the straight and narrow. As was often the case back in those days, it was found needful to “church” him – i.e., remove him from the church rolls. There was no clearly defined list of rules which might lead to a churching, but profanity – even when it came to cussing mules – was apparently among the offenses.

Churching was a fairly regular matter in those days, and Forney Creek Baptist was certainly not alone in its strict discipline. In the late 19-teens, my Grandpa Joe Casada was dispatched by Deep Creek Baptist Church to confront a member of the church regarding some unnamed waywardness. Grandpa was a church deacon at the time. But it was only a couple-three years later that other men were sent in search of Grandpa Joe – again for some unnamed offense. It appears that no one still above ground was above churching every now and then.

But back to Uncle Chas....As time went by, Uncle Chas’s presence was being sorely missed at Forney Creek Baptist. So the deacons discussed the matter with the pastor, and Chas was invited to come before the church – an invitation he accepted. In a church business session, the preacher spoke:

“Brother Chas, you are a beloved member of this community. If you will confess and henceforth abstain from profane ways, letting your ayes be ayes and your nays be nays, we would like to restore you to fellowship.”

Chas confessed to waywardness in a moment of heat, and nodded his assent to abstention in the future, though there seemed to be a bit of uncertainty regarding the latter. At that point, a deacon knowledgeable in the ways of mules and sensing Chas’s dilemma, furrowed his eyebrows, leaned over and whispered to the fellow seated next to him:

“Brother, how in the world you reckon Chas is going to get that mule to plow from now on?”

As noted above, Grandpa Joe Casada was, for a time, a deacon at the Deep Creek Baptist Church. In his later years, of a Sunday morning, Grandpa was as likely to show up at one church as another. A man set in ways that were his own and no one else's, Grandpa was what mountain folks might call a "bit quare." Well, he came by it honest.

Grandpa Joe's daddy, William Ambrose Casada, was a Baptist preacher. Around 1892, he and his wife Sarah and family moved from the Sandymush area of northern Buncombe/southern Madison Counties to the Governor's Island section of Swain, where family tradition has it that Will and family were tenant farmers for well-heeled lawyer Kope Elias. Will also did some preaching and other pastoral work, including marrying folks in Swain County. But he also had some trouble with the law shortly after arriving. In the 1892 fall term of Superior Court for Swain County, Will, his cousin Jim Teague (who would become Swain County Sheriff a few years later) and two Thomas boys – Cas and Dock – were found guilty of affray. Apparently Will Casada and Cas Thomas were the principals, since both were fined \$10. Teague was not fined and Dock Thomas got off with a fine of \$5. Exactly who was fisticuffing with whom wasn't indicated in the court record; neither was what led up to the affray.

After about a decade in Swain County, Will, Sarah and family moved on and settled in the Shooting Creek section of Clay County. According to the story told by my father, Great-Grandpa Will talked the community into erecting a non-denominational church building, to be shared by the various branches of the Christian faith in the area. But apparently once the structure was finished, he led the effort to turn it into – in my father's words – "hard shell Baptist." In that capacity, Rev. Will was again called on for typical pastoral duties of preaching, marrying, and conducting funerals.

Once, when a community ne'er do well passed on, the family came to Will to ask him to preach the funeral service. He reluctantly agreed. When it came time for the service, the deceased was lying in a coffin at the front of the church, below the pulpit, and his family was seated in the first couple of rows. Will began by reading a passage from the Old Testament and another from the New Testament. Then, with a solid whack of the Bible on the pulpit he pointed down toward the coffin and said "Now there lies one that's gone to Hell." Then, redirecting his pointed finger toward the family, he continued "And that's where the rest of you'uns are headed if you don't straighten up."

I've always figured that Clay County funeral service shed suggestive light on who had most likely gotten the ruckus back in Swain County stirred up.

But there was another side to Will Casada that the grave marker for his youngest son, Laddie, speaks to. Laddie was, to use a mountain term which I've always thought to be particularly appropriate and tender, "touched." Laddie was simple-minded, but there was something special about him which animals recognized. Grandma Casada said that birds would come and light on his shoulder. After he died and was buried at Union Hill Cemetery, the family dog left the house and went to lie on his grave. Brought back home, he continually returned to Laddie's grave. He quit eating and died there, next to Laddie, not long afterward.

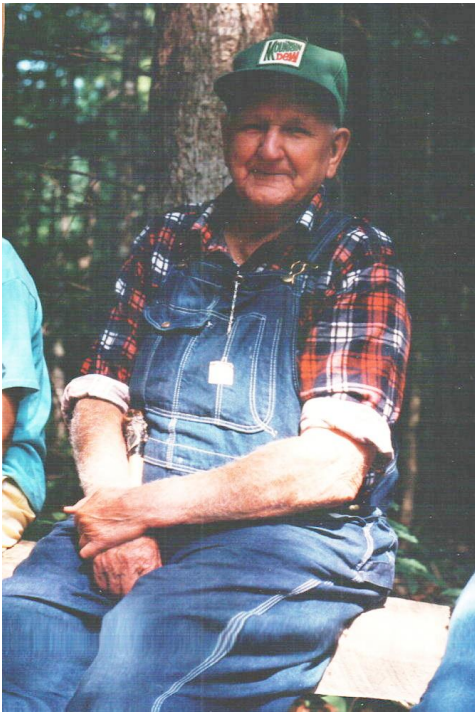
On the simple tombstone for Laddie, these words are inscribed:

"W.L., son of W.A. & S.A. Casada, Born Sept 5, 1893 Died Jan 16, 1907.
Of such is the kingdom of heaven."

I never knew Chas Cole, but did know another fellow for whom some Forney Creek discipline was meted out, George Monteith. When President Roosevelt came to the Smokies in 1940 to officially dedicate the Park, George, a first cousin of Chas's wife Margaret, got up early in the morning, walked from his home just above the mouth of Forney Creek (200 feet above Forney Creek Church) up the Forney Creek road & trail to the parking area at Clingmans Dome, then down to Newfound Gap where he joined a few thousand others, including my father, to see and hear Roosevelt. When the celebrations were over, George walked back home, almost certainly finishing the walk in the dark. That was about 42 miles of walking and over 6,000 feet of climbing (and a similar amount of descending).

George was one of the walkingest men in the country, but he learned that when his foot moving was done to the tune and rhythm of music, it was an offense; George was churched for dancing. He viewed that discipline to be more offensive itself, and refused to go to Forney Creek Church from that day on, with rare exceptions. However, after the Fontana removal, he did join the Franklin Grove Baptist Church, a church which was stalwart for gospel ways during George's days. George served as a pall bearer when Chas Cole's memorial service was held in that church.

George was given – and exercised – the Biblical gift of Hospitality. There's no telling how many teenage boys George helped keep out of trouble by welcoming them to congregate and just be boys at his home on Bryson Branch, not to mention taking them on backcountry trips to upper Forney Creek – a section he dearly loved.



George Monteith, photo courtesy of Christine Proctor



George Monteith and mule, plowing a hillside on Forney Creek. 25 May 1943 Source: [National Archives at Atlanta](#), TVA Kodak Collection. Photo ID 25096-E

Like that of Chas Cole, precious is the memory of Brother George Monteith.

Concluding thoughts

My intention here has not been to condemn, nor is the bit of light heartedness meant to be a poking of fun; on the contrary, while I might not completely gee-haw with the way our forebears attempted to set boundaries for public behavior, there is a great deal to be said for the maintenance of accepted standards and norms. Those forebears deserve to be honored, not condemned, for their fundamental, underlying desire to see all things done decently and in order, just as Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians.

I will admit that my initial impressions of “churchings” or exclusions were that they were judgmental and harsh. Upon further consideration, I’ve come to the conclusion that, by and large, those first impressions couldn’t have been more wrong. Local church discipline of the late 19th and early 20th century was an attempt to practice what we now call tough love.

In local church records of that period, examples are found where individuals were “churched” – or to use the more official term, *excluded* from church fellowship for such matters as profanity, intoxication, lying, gambling, fighting chickens in public, fornication, and dancing.

Now, I certainly don’t fault George Monteith; at least in my view, it wasn’t George, but the church body which needed to do some repenting in the case of his dancing. But I suspect most of us today would accept that none of the other causes of exclusion listed above represent characteristics we would want to imbue in our children or would embrace ourselves as acceptable norms. The churches of that era had what were, with a few exceptions, quite reasonable standards of behavior which were in the best interest of both the individual and the community. In an effort to sustain those standards, they rigorously required that those who were to remain in fellowship with the church follow them.

Yes, failure to live up to those standards could result in exclusion, but that wasn’t the end of the story. If the excluded party came before the congregation and publicly admitted that their behavior had been wrong, fellowship was restored. Public confession may have been humiliating, but then humiliation is a pathway to humility; it enabled reconciliation and restoration and confession is, indeed, good for the soul. The act of confession was itself a testimonial in which the individual offered their implicit approval of the rightness and righteousness of the standard which they had violated.

Have the times ever changed....and in my view, largely not for the better. Today, laxness and even absence of standards and the logical extension – wokeness – prevail. We’re in an exceptionally poor position to offer a presentism-based critique of the strict practices of congregations of a century ago.

Comparing standards (or lack thereof) of today and those of yesteryear, please:

[Give me that old time religion](#), It’s good enough for me.

A footnote: [Listen to Herbert Hyde in the North Carolina State House regarding a bill related to cussing in Swain County](#).

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