

THE YOUNG MAN AND THE TRAMP

Perhaps it was in the summer of 1875, that would be about the year, a young man was walking from Columbia on the old road that made a steep curving ascent up and over the rock. Chiques Rock, standing where Chiques Creek flows into the river, is a great outcrop that forms a bold escarpment at the Susquehanna. The river is known as the long-crooked river in Indian lore and Chiques Rock has its own legend. But it is not of that that I would tell you now.

As the traveler reaches the top of the curving roadway, he is rewarded with a scene below him of fields and farmhouses spread out to the north over the valley of Chiques Creek. A patchwork of fields unified into homesteads by the presence of the big red barn and a brick or frame house, each with its own woodlot of cool green trees, is mapped out before him. The tree lined meandering of the creek marks the boundaries of Rapho Township.

The young man sat down on a stump at the roadside to catch his breath and think over the course of events which had altered his life so recently. He had been born on a farm on the ridge north of Mount Joy where his great grandfather, a German Swiss from south of the Zurich See, had in the mid 1700's purchased a 219A farm from the earlier Scotch-Irish owner. He was thinking of his aged father who had been a progressive farmer in his day. Paw, as he called him, had been the first to use the reaping machine in perhaps the whole of Lancaster County. He had used one at the harvest of 1847 and yes, he thought in 1846 as well. That was the year McCormack built his Chicago factory. But Paw had a hard time understanding why his boys wanted to leave for the West after the Civil War, and the ones who remained in Lancaster County didn't want to farm.

Now he had sold the farm and moved to town. This mood of contemplation was broken into by the appearance of a tramp who greeted him and seemed glad to pause and talk. In the nineteenth century and when I was a child in the early twentieth century tramps were not unusual members of the everyday scene. The tramp made a wandering life his daily habit. A barn or haystack of a friendly farmer was his shelter. A plate piled high with meat, potato, bread, and gravy served up from the farm kitchen surplus was his sustaining meal. To this day, seeing such an overflowing plate, I have been known to remark that it looks like a tramp's plate. For this bounty he would gladly chop wood or perform other useful chores. At hay making and harvest time when the farmer needed extra hands for the field work a tramp might earn a goodly wage.

These tramps soon learned along their summer route which farm homes showed the true spirit of brotherly love. There they would stop regularly and be greeted with understanding concern for their welfare. I know one kindly farmer's wife who would store change of season clothing for such a traveler and at his suggestion opened a barn savings account for him. He could draw on times in lean times and at last it served to give him a decent burial.

Perhaps I paint too rosy a picture. While writing this I came across a song in a school notebook of my mother's. The title is "The Poor Old Tramp" and the refrain goes like this:

"Only a poor old wanderer, I've no place to call my home / No one to cheer me, no one to pity me / As friendless and sadly I roam."

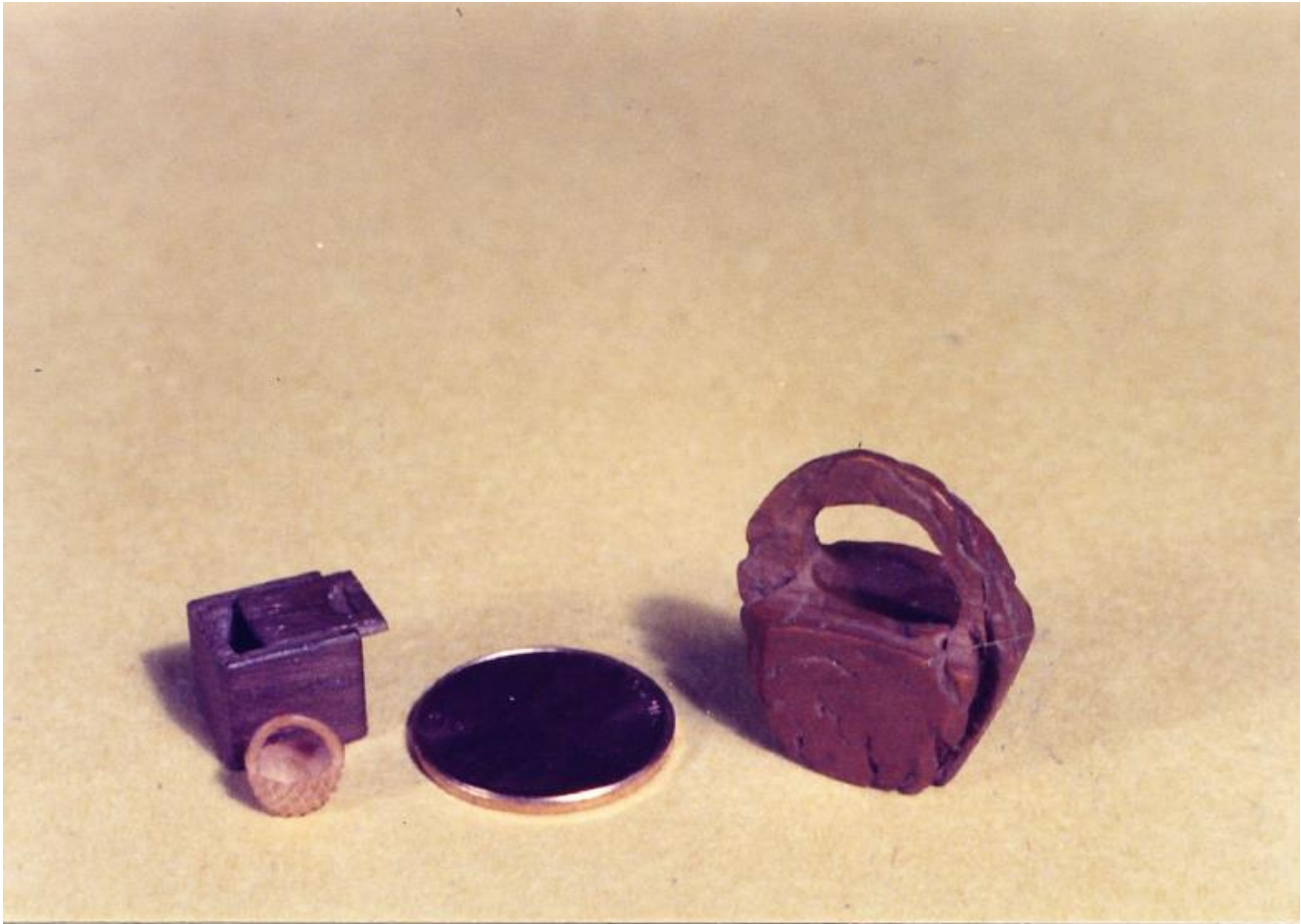
Some had good homes, but their feet had the wanderlust and come a nice spring day they would not resist the call of the open road.

Such tramps covered a wide range of personalities. At one extreme was Texas Jack whose visit through town usually ended with him spending the night in the town lockup in a state of noisy inebriation. Very different was the little fellow with a bobbing gait. (He asked Emily and me for scissors and a piece of newspaper, from which he proceeded to cut a connected strip of paper dolls.) Mother said that Father had given her special instructions regarding this ancient character. "He must never be turned away from our door hungry." Father could remember this tramp Paddy coming to the home farm when both were many years younger. Mother wondered if tramps marked the houses where they could rely on a good meal. As a child, hearing her say this, I searched the corner of the house near the back kitchen door for some such cabalistic sign but never found one.

And so, the young man and the tramp conversed at the side of the road. Glad for a willing ear the young man poured forth his troubles. Life had been good to him. He had married a fine young lady from Marietta and with her father's help they had started a small business on Third Street. Their marriage had been blessed with two boys. The store had prospered but they thought they would do better on Locust Street opposite the new Opera House in Columbia. The move was made and there a little girl was born. When Loly was three years old another boy was born, but things did not go well for the mother and soon both the young mother and the baby were taken from him. What could the young father do? He could not take care of three small children without a woman's help.

So, he had moved his little family to the parent's home in Mount Joy where his mother and a maiden sister could make a caring place for them. He was still working in Columbia and now he was on his way to visit the children. His words took on a more cheerful note as he described the four-year-old little Loly with her soft blond hair and her loving ways.

They sat silent for a few minutes when each started on his way. However, the tramp, touched by the story, drew from his pocket a tiny box with the words, "Give this to your little girl." And then they parted. Today I have read in hobby magazines of a whole category of Tramp Carvings which are considered collectibles. Yet in none of them have I seen anything as delicate as the contents of that tiny box.



Box and cherry seed

Penny

Peach seed

In a craftsman's booth at the Kutztown Fair I saw a peach seed carved to look like a basket. Its very grossness reminded me of this story my mother had told me and of the tramp's box. The box is a cube carved of walnut, fitted with a sliding lid into which was carved a miniature crescent to open the box with the thumb nail. When the lid opened out there nestled into a space perfectly fitted to its size was a cherry stone a cherry seed carved to look like a woven basket with a handle. Every detail of the carving was in perfect proportion. Little Loly treasured the box all her life. Now more than one hundred years after the young man and the tramp sat together at the top of Chiques Rock through this story and the picture may I share her treasure with you.



Grandma Strickler: Mary Cecelia Haverstick Strickler