

# Candy Boxes

Life on Possum Creek,  
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by Doug Cogburn  
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## 1992

Papaw Lewis Cogburn was looking at all the Halloween candy that Jessica and Lillie had collected during the night. There were two grocery bags apiece for them and they were going through it to see what they got. Papaw had told them that they'd get more if they kept a grocery bag in the van to empty their candy into because that way everybody would think they hadn't been getting much candy and would feel sorry for them and give them more.

Jessica was being generous and offering him and Nanny Cogburn some of the candy that she didn't especially like.

"Did you get that much candy when you were our age, Papaw?" Jessica asked him.

"That's more candy than I ever got in my whole life. When I was your age there wasn't that much of anything around. When we wanted candy we had to make it ourselves or," he paused and grinned, "we had to work for it."

"What kind of work?"

"Oh, different things, just this or that. Well, that's enough about that, what's in that little treat bag there?"

"And you had to work for it!"

"Sure did, and it some of it was real dangerous work, too."

## 1937

The three little Cogburn boys looked over their shoulders and all around before they went down to the cellar. If Mom caught them, they'd likely get a terrible whipping. James was six years old and he could probably get away with it if they were caught. Little Louis probably could too. He was three and had big innocent dark eyes. If he'd look up at Mom there might not be a switch for him. Ralph, who at eight years was

supposed to know better than to do such things, was the one who would be in trouble.

They thought they could probably get away with it, though. Mom and Pap were still working in the field with their older brother and sisters. Grandmaw was in the kitchen and not paying attention. They used some excuse to get back to the house for a minute so they could carry out their secret mission. Quietly, they sneaked to where the molasses were being kept. They quickly cracked open the lid on some of the molasses jars just enough where they couldn't be seen. If the lids didn't get discovered and fixed, then the molasses would turn to solid sugar and they'd have a treat: their very own candy. Mom couldn't figure out why so much of their molasses turned to sugar, but she just kept feeding it to the younguns. They didn't seem to mind very much, and they always seemed to know when to go look to see if any had turned. She reckoned younguns just had a way of knowing such things.

### **1944**

The boys laid in wait hidden behind bushes and trees. They were on an adventure. Louis, age 10, was the point man for the mission. It may not be as exciting as the ones that his older brother Alvin was having fighting in the war in the Navy, but it could be about as dangerous. You just had to ask Thurman Jones to find that out. He'd been the point man for the last mission that involved Mr. Seaton's rolling store.

The platoon of boys had been on a search and rescue mission with prisoner exchange. They were searching for some eggs at Mary Lize and Jack Jones' that they intended to rescue and to hold them prisoner until they could be exchanged with the rolling store for candy. They were successful in capturing a good supply of eggs, but they had to hide them somewhere until the rolling store came around. They found a rotting

stump that would hold the eggs, then they pulled up a pokeweed plant to cover the evidence. That seemed to be very good camouflage at the time, but as the day went on the plant wilted, and Pap Cogburn came walking by that part of the woods. He thought it odd that a pokeweed, wilted or not, would be growing out of a stump, so he checked it out and found the eggs. He knew that hens didn't lay in stumps and then hide the nest with a pokeweed and he knew that it was about time for the rolling store to come by so he hid and waited. The platoon selected Thurman to pick up the prisoners, and it was Thurman who wound up as Pap's prisoner. Pap had been in the first World War, but evidently he hadn't heard about the Geneva Convention or that POWs weren't supposed to be beat, and Thurman got whipped until he and Pap and the eggs got back to Mary Lize's hens. Evidently Pap had not heard of the free enterprise system either. Thurman knew enough about the war from listening to the few radios in the community that he was only supposed to give his name, rank, and serial number, so he wouldn't tell who his accomplices were. He knew enough about his friends to know what would happen to him if he did.

With that mission a failure and nobody willing to risk another egg heist just yet, they had decided on their other plan for getting candy from the rolling store man. Louis and James and maybe one of the other boys would stand along the road like they were waiting on the rolling store to come by. When the rolling store man drove up, one of the other boys would either push Louis or he'd pretend to fall. Either way, he'd wind up getting hit by the rolling store. He was picked for this part because he was the best "injured man" that they had. He could cry and roll around on the ground and hold his arm or leg so well that the other boys would have to remind themselves that it was just an act. They'd pretend to be all upset and concerned about their injured comrade, and when the rolling store man jumped out of the truck and was trying to help the boy he'd obviously just killed, the rest of the troop would load the truck from the rear and make

off with as much candy as they could carry, then they'd dash back into the woods and brush to hide until Louis made a sudden and miraculous recovery and would bravely go limping home under the worried eye of the rolling store man and the helpful arms of his comrades. It wasn't the same as stealing eggs for trade. After all, the chickens would just lay more eggs for Lize the next day, but the rolling store man had to replace the candy himself. Sometimes it just couldn't be helped. One of Pap's beatings tended to take away your initiative for more honest theft.

### **Disclaimer - 2001**

Lest any should think that we're recommending or commending such behavior by retelling the tales, it should be noted that by and by the Cogburn boys and other neighborhood fellows grew up and met Jesus and stopped stealing candy and eggs and cracking lids on molasses.

They all got married and became fathers and later grandfathers and wouldn't have tolerated their children and grandchildren acting the way they had. Once when several of them were together and regaling in some of their youthful misadventures they were asked what they would do if their own children tried some of the things they had and they each supposed that those children would have been spanked and grounded to the extent that the law would allow.

In fact, one of that youthful gang, now a venerable grandfather in his early sixties, recently picked up an eleven cent piece of candy at a restaurant out of town and absentmindedly walked out without paying for it. He worried and fretted over how he would rectify this and didn't get a good's night sleep until he mailed the restaurant a note of apology and the eleven cents enclosed.

## **1968-1980**

Lewis Cogburn (whose name was changed from Louis when the Army misspelled it) was ready to go do his Christmas shopping. After all, it was the evening of December 23rd, so most of the crowds should be gone. And most of the good stuff too, his wife would complain when she noted that he was going shopping for her. "Just once," she'd say, "I'd like to get something that everybody else in Greeneville hadn't already picked over and actually have it under the tree before time to unwrap it."

But Cogburns aren't much swayed by the suggestions or objections of others, so year after year Lewis and his son would go out on the chilly evening of the 23rd and look for the best of the picked over. At first, they would go to the department stores in the downtown, parking the car along the street and then going from store to store, finding an electric skillet here, a new outfit there, something she'd mentioned wanting a few years ago at another store. Doug was always good help to have around; he'd agree with whatever Lewis wanted to buy and would sometimes make his own suggestions. Once he insisted that Momma would just love one item and talked about it until Lewis finally bought it. As they were pulling into the driveway, Doug told his Dad that he knew Momma would really like that one thing they got because she already had one just like it and she really liked that one. Now she'd have two.

Later, as Doug and the town both grew, the shopping opportunities increased, and Lewis had more stores to choose from, and he especially liked when the larger stores such as Howards and Sky City came to town because then he could do all his shopping at one store. By this time he'd also started asking Betty for a list so they could choose from the things she actually wanted and didn't already have one of. He and Doug would take the list and head to one of the bigger stores and then buy everything on the list and a few things that weren't on it so she'd be surprised. Some

years they even had their shopping done as early as the 20th or 21st of December, but one thing that stayed the same every year was the big box of candy. They'd look all over until finding the biggest box of candy in the store and that's what they'd buy. They'd sign the dog's name to that because they knew that Betty would fuss when she shook the box and it rattled: "Oh, I thought I told you not to buy any candy this year.

Why did you buy this big box? You know I'm on a diet, and here you come in with five pounds of chocolate that you know I'll eat. That wasn't on the list."

"I know it, Momma," Lewis would tell her, "we tried to tell the dog that but he got it anyway."

"And I suppose the dog just walked over to the store with the money in his mouth and carried the candy back home, did he?"

"Well, you know he can't write checks, so I guess that's the way it happened."

"Next year I'm going to put on that list, 'no candy.'"

"Yeah, me and the boy seen that on the list this year, but the dog can't read."

Another frequent purchase was a new camera about every two years. Betty would complain that she couldn't take good pictures, so whenever a new camera was advertised on T.V. as being nearly foolproof, Lewis would remember and buy it. When that camera didn't work he'd buy another one in a couple of years.

Another frequent purchase was the clothes that were too big. Betty would write down sizes on her list, but most of the clothes that she got weren't the right size. She tried underlining the sizes on the list and writing them bigger, but nothing seemed to help. The reason was simple; Lewis was in a hurry, and when they'd go to the clothing section or to Fox Tipton (Momma's favorite clothing store) he'd go through and select the clothes

on the basis of what he thought she'd like or would look good in. The size of the clothing wasn't a consideration:

"She's been wanting a new coat, throw that one in the buggy."

"What if it's not the right size?"

"How many sizes could a coat come in? She'd like that sweater, throw it in the buggy."

"What if it's not the right size?"

"Get a big one, it'll probably shrink. She looks good in that color, throw it in the buggy."

"That's too big."

"Well, look there, they've got plenty, she can bring it back and swap it for one that does fit."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to look through them now and get the right size?"

"Who's got time for that? Besides, she enjoys coming here, now she'll have a reason to. Throw a pair of them pants in there too."

After going through her packages and opening up her new large sweater, medium pants, extra large coat, and other articles of varying sizes, small or extra small, Betty would be asked, "Momma, why don't you wear your new clothes to church this Sunday?"

"If I thought I could without them falling off, I would. Just look at that coat, we could all three fit in that."

Another annual custom was for Lewis to take Betty's gifts to one or both of his sisters so they could wrap them for him. If they weren't home he'd just leave them on the porch and assume they'd know what to do. Doug thought he did that so Momma wouldn't see what she was getting until one year when Hazel and Pauline were both sick and Lewis had to do his own wrapping. He and Doug got the paper and tape and presents in the middle of the floor. Doug wondered why Lewis hadn't brought any scissors with him but soon found out that his Dad was such a good

wrapper that he didn't need scissors. The Lewis Cogburn method of gift wrapping was to unroll an entire roll of paper, place the package in the middle of it; whether it was the size of a shoebox, a refrigerator box or a ring box made no difference; and then fold and squeeze and shove the paper into some semblance of being tucked under and then tape it until most of the paper bulges were lying fairly flat.

"You know, if we used the scissors we could wrap more than one package with a roll of paper."

"Who's got time for that? We've got to get this done before Momma gets home and our time is worth more than any cheap old paper."

"Momma always folds the paper like this and this and makes two points on the end."

"We did better than that. I counted seven points on that one end alone."

"This side doesn't look to good."

"Then turn it over and slap a bow on it."

"You know there's at least five feet of extra paper we used on that small box."

"Good, that'll make the package look bigger. Besides, when she picks them up and shakes them all that paper will muffle the sound and she'll won't be able to tell which one is that big box of candy that the dog got her."

"Momma, did you notice that you've got presents under the tree early this year?"

"Not yet, I've been looking for wrapping paper. I had fifteen rolls of paper just the other day, why do we not have any left?"

"I don't know, we just got you fourteen things, so there should be one roll left. Come and see them!"

"What happened to those presents?"

“Those are yours!”

“I can tell, I sure hope Pauline and Hazel aren’t sick next Christmas.”

“Do you want to shake them and see which one is the box of candy from the dog?”

“Oh, I thought I told you men not to get any candy this year, but maybe later, I’ve got to go town and get some more wrapping paper right now.”

### **1987-1992**

More time passed and Doug grew up and went away to school and later got married and had his own family to shop for. But every Christmas Lewis would call him and ask if he’d gotten Momma’s list yet and when were they going shopping. Then they’d head to Wal-Mart and grab a buggy.

“That’s not the right size.”

“She can swap it, that’s her color.”

“Does she need a new camera?”

“She ain’t doing too well with the one she’s got.”

“That’s everything on her list.”

“Then let’s vacate the premises. Wait, we purt near forgot, where’s them big boxes of candy?”

“I thought she said she didn’t want any more candy?”

“Well, we can’t help what the dog does.”

### **December, 1993**

Lewis was lying back in his recliner, trying to find a comfortable position, when Doug came in and sat down on the couch next to him. Jessica, Lillie, and Lydia came along to see their Papaw, but before long he shoed them to another room. Christmas was a time for secrets.

“Did you get... Momma’s list?” he asked Doug.

“Here it is.” Doug read the list to Lewis, who listened with his eyes closed.

“You’ll have to go do.... the shopping for... me this year. She said that... she’d like to have one of them set of Christmas houses with the little people,... be sure and get her... one of those to remind her of me. And she needs a new camera, that one... she’s got just don’t take good pictures.” he stopped to rest and catch his breath, “And get a card that says something like...well, you know what it should say. And don’t forget the biggest... box of candy they’ve got.”

“We don’t have a dog to blame it on now.”

“Then put Santa Claus’ name... on it, surely she won’t temper up at him.”

### **December, 1999**

Jessica, Lillie and Lydia were at the dining room table, trying to help wrap Christmas presents. Lillie asked, “What did we get Nanny Cogburn?”

“That stuff over there, a puzzle, and a new outfit, just everything that was on her list.”

“And don’t forget the big box of candy!” Lydia added.

“Yeah, and Santa Claus got her a box of candy.”

“I thought she said that she didn’t want any candy this year.” Jessica added.

“Yes she does. Now, let’s hurry up and get these things wrapped so we can take them over and put them under her tree; she likes to have her presents under the tree so she can look at them.”

“I’m having trouble with this big package. It’s too hard to wrap.”

“Hand me that paper, I’ll show you how to wrap a big package.”

“Do you need the scissors?”

“Who’s got time for that, just start folding.”

“Mom won’t like that. She likes for her points to be nice and even.”

“Well, she’ll have plenty of points to choose from, some of them’s bound to be even.

### **December 24, 1999**

Everyone had gathered in the basement around the Christmas tree and bounced and whined and waited impatiently while Nanny Cogburn passed out the presents. They unwrapped and cheered and threw paper in the air and had to be reminded not to open up anything with small pieces; then Lillie shouted, “Open yours, Nanny!”

Nanny Cogburn went through her presents, carefully avoiding the one box. When all her other packages were opened, she picked up that last box and shook it. “Well, I know what this is.” She turned to one of the visitors and explained, “I used to cry but I don’t anymore. Lewis started this years ago. Every year, here’s this big box of candy.” she turned back to the family, “I thought I told you not to get any candy this year.”

“Well,” Doug told her, “when you read the name tag you’ll see that’s not from us. We can’t help what Santa Claus does.”

Lillie and Lydia ran over to her and jumped in her lap. Lydia knocked her glasses crooked and Lillie nearly knocked them all into the tree. “Don’t worry, Nanny, we’ll help you eat it!”

“I’m sure you will.”

They sat the candy box back under the tree and everyone watched the twinkling lights. Pizza for supper, paper everywhere, friends dropping by, and candy boxes under the tree. Papaw Cogburn always seemed very near at Christmas.