

# “Family is always embarrassing, especially the dead ones\*”

By David K. Coleman a.k.a. Majik of the Misty Highlands "Vagabond Bard and Magician At Large"

My father is what I refer to as the "unofficial family historian." I like to think that he has been training me to take over in that capacity. He has told us kids about relatives that predate the revolution; the only thing we can't figure out is who was the first Coleman to come over from Ireland and/or Wales.

The story that has always intrigued me most is the one regarding my great-great grand father, Charles Riggs Coleman. His name survives in my cousin "Chuck" and my brother whose middle name *is also* Riggs.

This particular story takes place in the late 1700's and early to mid 1800's. At the time of Charles birth the Colemans were really quite well to do. They owned a lot of land in what is now West Virginia. They ran a plantation of some sort, most likely tobacco, and consequently owned a few slaves, which was common enough in those per-civil war days. But, little did the Coleman's know that was all about to change.

At that time the family had a lot of children running around the place. Mostly because they could afford them but more probably to help run the place. The number of offspring varies, depending on who's telling the story, but nine seems to be the general consensus, of which Charles was the youngest. Things were hectic in those days and with all those kids and a plantation to run Charles's mom and dad just hadn't gotten around to having him baptized until much later in life. In fact, Charles had started school without the benefit of a name; everyone just referred to him as "the boy".

One day "the boy" came home from school crying. No one was home at the time except for one of the "coloreds" who was allowed in the house. The story goes that he was in the kitchen at the time peeling potatoes. When he asked the boy why he was making a fuss he was told it was because all the other children at school were making fun of him on account of he didn't have a name yet. That black man stopped what he was doing, thought for only a second, and then said, "The next time anyone asks you what your name is you stand up tall and you stand up proud and you tell 'ern your name is "Charles" ", which of course was *his* name.

Charles and my great-great granddad became good friends over the next few years. The older of the two had no family of his own so he was more than happy to take the younger one fishing with him whenever the need arose. They spent hours on the banks of the Kanawha River together, fishing for catfish while Charles the slave told Charles the owner's son all kinds of stories. It was because of this friendship that my *great grand dad* would eventually become the black sheep of the family, at least in those days anyway.

The fact that Charles was friends with a "darky" was thought of as being kind of cute at the time. Everyone liked both Charles' very much. The older of the two played fiddle and would whittle little animal figures for the young-uns. The younger one was almost always in a jovial mood and tended to make friends easily wherever he went.

My great great grand father grew up opposing slavery because of this friendship. So, when *his* father died when he was nineteen, instead of helping to continue to run the plantation, he took *his* portion of the inheritance and brought himself a little parcel of land in Fayette County.

He opened a little blacksmith's shop just off the Gypsy Trail near a place called Gypsy Rock and got himself married to "Hattie".

This was a prime spot for a shop of this nature as the Gypsy Trail was a main thoroughfare for anyone headed south into Kentucky and beyond. The near-by rock of the same name was an outcropping big enough to get a half a dozen wagons under in times of bad weather and was therefore almost always occupied by one group of travelers or another. Consequently, Charles made a pretty decent living shoeing horses and repairing wagon wheels. He even bartered with the local Indians, trading iron arrowheads and knives for food.

The story goes that Hattie Riggs, as everybody called her, was quite happy as the wife of a blacksmith with one minor complaint. She didn't mind the occasional gypsy dropping by because they never stayed around long enough to become a nuisance. Besides which they tended to barter with some really nice willow branch chairs that she was kind of fond of. She didn't even mind the local "Injuns". She said they seemed clean enough and always paid their way one way or another. No, the problem she had was with this one white fella who used to drop by every six months or so. Charles would always let him sleep by the forge out in the shop on account of Hattie wouldn't let him into the house.

She was often quoted as saying he was one of the foulest human beings she'd ever come across. He chewed tobacco and would spit on anything that didn't move and even somethings that did. He tended to cuss a lot as well. She also didn't like the kind of influence he had on her otherwise tolerable husband. Whenever the two of them got together they would waste the day pitching horseshoes, sipping corn whiskey and telling lies. The reason Hattie wouldn't let him into the house was the fact that, according to her, "He smelled so bad that either he hadn't bathed in months or that coonskin cap of his hadn't been killed proper". That man's name was none other than Daniel Boone.

Anyway, in 1849, Charles and Hattie Riggs had a boy who they named George Sylvester Coleman. George learned a lot from the locals and all the passers-by. Most of this learning had to do with the art of folk medicine. He was so enamored by the topic that he even got himself some books on the subject. From his father he learned that no one human being was any better or worse than the other, no matter what color his skin was.

It wasn't until the civil war broke out that George was ostracized from all but the most immediate of the Coleman clan. That's because at the age of twelve George Sylvester Coleman joined the *Union* army as a drummer boy. He went to war never to see his family again.

His talents as a healer were recognized by an army surgeon, whose name has been lost over the years of the retelling of this tale. He took George off the battlefield and into the operating room.

After a few years in the war, and an honorable discharge, it only seemed right that George put all this knowledge to good use, so he became a doctor. The only problem was that he didn't feel the need to burden himself with a license to practice medicine.

Folks didn't seem to care too much in those days that he was a "jack-knife" doctor; after all, the hills were full of them. All they knew was that he knew how to pull teeth, set bones, birth babies, perform appendectomies, stitch up wounds and saw off offensive limbs. Because of the fact that he no longer had a home to speak of he would wander from one logging camp or coal mine to another prescribing homemade tonics, poultices and tinctures for whatever ailed you.

No, the thing that got everyone up in arms was the fact that he was getting married wherever and whenever the mood struck him. It didn't matter to George what race or color they were; he loved them all. I don't think he was ever legally married to a woman of color but I do know that there are an awful lot of black folks in them hills with the surname Coleman. That could well be a hold over from the slave days; we're not really clear on that point. I do know that there was at least one Native American girl because one of them begot my grandfather.

Anyway, more than one little hamlet in the hills found out about this kind of behavior. I know for a fact that he was tarred and feathered and ran out of town on more than one occasion. Here is how my father found out about one incident.

It seems my dad had made a date with a girl he knew in high school. In those days you didn't take a girl anywhere without meeting the father first. The father was an elderly fellow, closer to the age of a grandfather rather than a father, but that was common enough in that place and time. When my dad shook his hand and introduced himself as David L. Coleman the mans eyes narrowed. He said, "Coleman, Coleman, Coleman. You any relation to a George Sylvester Coleman?"

Now my father had heard a few stories about his granddad, having met him only once at the age of four, none of which were good. According to everyone in the family George Sylvester was an unruly boozing good for nothing vagabond who had left more children fatherless than the civil war. So, without thinking too hard my dad piped up and said, "No sir, I can't say as I've ever heard of a George *Sylvester Coleman*."

The man's voice rose as he said, "Well it's a good thing for you your not! That no good son-of-abitch! He had been married to my aunt in Boomer for a year before one fella from Shilow rode through and recognized him as his sister's husband. We held him down, had him branded and then ran him out of town on a rail." Needless to say my dad was glad to get out of that house with his skin on.

As for George Sylvester, everyone just assumed that he'd gotten himself killed in a gambling related incident or ran afoul of somebody's father, because nobody had seen him in decades. Then one year, it was in 1937, he showed up at my grandfathers house for Thanksgiving dinner. He was eighty-eight years old and not in the best of health. He told everyone that he was "still travelin' about the backwoods helping' folks get cured wherever he could." Everyone had a real nice supper and at the end of the evening George got into his old Ford pick-up and left.

That was the last time anyone in our family ever set eyes on him. We're not even sure if and where he got himself buried. Some folks in the Coleman clan say he probably got himself a jug of corn squeezin's, crawled up into the woods, set himself down under a tree and died there. They figured that having showed up at the house after all those years, and being a doctor of sorts, he must've known he wasn't long for this earth, and that it was his way of making amends and saying good-bye.

I like to think that all the healing he did made up for all the bigamy he committed, kind of a karmic balancing act, and that in the end he found his paradise.

\* The title of this essay is taken from a line in Douglas Adams' The Hitchhiker's Guide to Galaxy, which many of you may know is (in Revelwood anyway) considered the ultimate repository for the sum of all the knowledge in the known universe.

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## Irish Logic

Contributed by Cheron of Wolfe - First Lady of Revelwood

An Irishman named O'Malley went to his doctor after a long illness. The doctor, after a lengthy examination, sighed and looked O'Malley in the eye and said, "I've some bad news for you. You have cancer, and it can't be cured. You'd best put your affairs in order."

O'Malley was shocked and saddened. But of solid character, he managed to compose himself and walk from the doctor's office into the waiting room to his son who had been waiting.

O'Malley said, "Well son, we Irish celebrate when things are good, and we celebrate when things don't go so well. In this case, things aren't so well. I have cancer. Let's head for the pub and have a few pints."

After 3 or 4 pints, the two were feeling a little less somber. There were some laughs and more beers.

They were eventually approached by some of O'Malley's old friends who asked what the two were celebrating. O'Malley told them that the Irish celebrate the good and the bad. He went on to tell them that they were drinking to his impending end.

He told his friends, "I have been diagnosed with AIDS."

The friends gave O'Malley their condolences, and they had a couple more beers.

After his friends left, O'Malley's son leaned over and whispered his confusion. "Dad. I thought you said that you were dying from cancer? You just told your friends that you were dying from AIDS!"

O'Malley said, "I don't want any of them sleeping with your mother after I'm gone."

