

### "Simple Tommy"

Tommy was just the same as other children until he started to school at the old "Dutchtown" School located on the northeast corner of what is now Peterson's Lane. The "Master" of the school showed him one of the block letters he had made and asked Tommy what letter it was. Tommy looked it over carefully and said: "It's a bullfrog!" The teacher tried him again and got the same answer. The teacher then went to the "Whiprack", a rack where the whips were graded in size, small ones for the children and big ones for the big boys, picked out a little one to use on Tommy but there was no Tommy in sight. He had gone home. His mother, Lucreta Van Zandt Skillman, refused to send him back as she said she was not paying the teacher to lick her child, she was paying him to teach him, and Tommy never went to school again. He was a spoiled child. When the "Meeting House" was built at Blawenburg, Lucreta refused to leave Harlingen Church and go to Blawenburg, although her husband Abraham had been the Committeeman from Harlingen Consistory to arrange the organizing of the new building Committee at Blawenburg, since she said she had always gone to Church with Van Zandts and wanted a change as all the Van Zandts were living at Blawenburg. After his parents died Tommy lived with his brother, Jos. A., on our Mountain homestead but walked each Sunday back to his mother's church at Harlingen. The older people would drive if from a distance, perhaps if "well-to-do" in a "phaeton", but all the young people would walk and Tommy always joined up with them. Time seemed to move slowly for him. As they went bare-footed in those days they would carry their shoes and stockings and all sit beside the brook at Harlingen to wash their feet, put on their shoes and then go to Church. But Tommy could not stand wearing his shoes

in church and would take them off as soon as he got in Church. This gave the boys a fine chance to put toads, chestnut burrs, or any thing of that kind they could think of in them. As the boys always sat in the Gallery as soon as half grown and could chake their mother's apron strings until they were married, Tommy always sat with them, he never out-grew them. and stayed there from "father to son".

When the boys were married they would have to leave their good times sitting in the gallery. The first Sunday after their marriage he and his bride would make their "appearance" at Church and sit as near the front of the Church as possible. When George Mettler and his bride made their "appearance" they were somewhat late and had to sit up in front on the very first seat of the old box pews which had no pew in front of it. When they sat down there was for some reason enough room between them for a person to sit down. The boys saw this at once and during the "long" prayer Stryker Hoagland (grandfather of our Terhune family) leaned over to old Tommy and gave him a silver half dollar and told him he could have it if he would go up there and sit the rest of the service between the bride and groom. Tommy bit on the money and found it good silver and accepted the offer. Now since the boys were always putting things in his shoes Tommy always held them on his lap, with the socks draped over them. The old man went carefully up the aisle with every kid and lots of older ones watching and carefully sat down between the bride and groom with his shoes and socks one on each knee as usual.. Old Dominie Gardner said he could feel there was something unusual in Church before he finished his prayer and that he found it the hardest sermon to preach of his life as he said for some reason it was the funniest thing he had ever seen in Church. As was his custom during the singing of the

last song Tommy tugged and pulled at his shoes and socks so he could wear them from the Church and as soon as he got safely outside pulled them off again and started the long walk home, one shoe in each hand,

It seemed at that time nearly every family in the neighborhood had a "backward" man in the family that they called "simple". On one occasion he got several of them together to decide which one was the biggest fool, and claimed thereafter that beyond all doubt her was it. My mother always said he was a fakir and put on a lot of his dumb ways just to get out of doing any real work, and that he managed to have a pretty easy time all his life.

Tommy liked to go visiting every day, and also nights. He would start up the mountain and stop for a while at Peter Gray's saw-mill (near the Froidman place) then up to the next Saw-mill of Aaron Peeks now known as Plump's Place then to Hankinson's store for awhile. But where he liked best was the old gristmill at Rock Mills where the road branches. One day the miller got tired of having him around or perhaps just was in a bad humor. Tommy would stand in the upper door and watch the big water-wheel go round by the hour. The miller told him to get out and when he made no move to go gave him a push. Tommy who was a powerful, big man just picked up the miller, stepped to the open door and held the miller out over the wheel and millrace and said, "I guess I will let you go first." The miller talked fast and pretty to get put back in the mill, and no one ever bothered to start anything again.

He liked to visit the blacksmith John Belue hights and would stay late. Grandfather tried to break that up. He sent Uncle Steve and my father one night to lay along the road and scare him. Stephen was wrapped in a sheet. They got the old man running at first but

when he got to a big heap of stones he turned on the boys and threw so well that he soon had the boys running. He was much pleased over the affair. Said a big white and a little black devil chased him but he licked 'em both.

My mother said that in his later days he would seem to enjoy putting on an act that he was dying, but that soon got to be an old thing and no one would pay any attention to him, but one day he fooled them all and really was sick and died, and at the end seemed to feel he had fooled them once more.

My folks always spoke of him as "Uncle", the neighbors as "Old Uncle".

Fred T. Skillman