


T H E
I N D I A N A
H O M E



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R . E . B A N T A

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FOREWORD

In memory of Dr. Logan Esarey, late Professor of History at Indiana University, who devoted most of his life to the study, teaching and writing of Indiana history, these essays on Indiana life are published. In rough draft they were found among his very miscellaneous notes and papers. They were never intended for publication but merely as outlines from which he read to college and historical groups. Although prepared primarily for young folks—his students and grandchildren—they were enjoyed quite as much by those whose years provided memories of earlier days in Indiana. In the editing no important changes have been made in the informal language of the author—the homely language of the pioneer.

Publication of this little volume was made possible through the interest of Mrs. Logan Esarey, the Indiana Historical Society, members of the Indiana Historical Society, colleagues, friends and former students. The dedication is as Dr. Esarey would have wished it.

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Bloomington, Indiana
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THE BULLFROGS OF REILY HOLE

This yarn dates from about my tenth or eleventh year of existence and has to do principally with the conduct of a homely bullfrog. You perhaps have heard among the natives down around Branchville of a famous pool of water known as the Reily Hole. It was entirely on our land and was therefore classic water to me. My father told me often that in his younger days it ran from eight to twelve feet in depth. It had gradually accumulated mud in the bottom until in my early days it was not so formidable, although there were places where the depth was still at least ten feet. The flood of '88, however, cut the bottom out of it down to a heavy blue mud and left it again ranging in depth from eight or nine feet up to fourteen.

Along its banks when I was eight or ten years old could be found on a sunny day in spring or summer anywhere from twenty-five to fifty huge bullfrogs. In the daytime they were quiet, in fact seemed to sleep most of the day, but at night they sounded like pandemonium. Nobody ever harmed a bullfrog in those days, and one might sit and bellow within a dozen feet of a fishing boy without being in the slightest danger. These frogs were hopelessly ugly, awkward and useless. If you touched one on the back with your fishing

THE INDIANA HOME

pole, he would make as much racket as a young calf getting into the water. Maybe if you scared him enough he would squawk like a chicken when he jumped. There were plenty of the little streamlined graceful green frogs, but they were as agile as the bullfrogs were awkward.

Naturally a great many stories were told about the size and conduct of these big frogs—especially by the fishermen who came to the Reily Hole at night to fish. In fact, it was hard to convince a stranger when you had scared one of these big boys and he had scrambled into the water that it was not an alligator.

I think the climax of the bullfrog stories was reached by our romantic friend, Newton Braxton Pollard. Newt was a carpenter or cooper, and an all-'round wood-workman. Besides that, he was an all-'round sportsman. Much to the disgust of his neighbors he generally chased foxes or fished in season every Sunday. He was a particular friend of mine, for he had an endless repertoire of marvelous stories which I pretended to believe implicitly. He kept a shop in Branchville which was a kind of headquarters for hunters and fishermen. Although Newt seldom stopped work, he joined in the story-telling.

One of the regular loafers had been telling us about his experience down around the Reily Hole. The fellow made out a pretty good case, I think. The facts were that the bullfrogs scared two or three grown men so badly that they left the water in some haste. I remember that he said one

A TALE OR TWO

of the frogs deliberately dragged a fence rail down into the water and got astraddle of it and proceeded to paddle across the creek.

Whatever the provocation, if any, Newt stopped and sat down on the top of a barrel which he had just hooped and began to tell one of his own. I should say that part of the attraction of Newt's stories was the beautiful, deep voice in which he delivered them—not loud, but just a deep, musical voice that would have made anything interesting and entertaining.

Enter Newton B. “I hearn what yu been sayin’ ’bout them frogs at th’ Reily Hole, but I’m one that’s doubtin’ nary a word of hit. I chased one of them thar frogs one night, but nobody acts like they wants t’ believe it, so I don’t hardly ever say nothin’ ’bout hit. But I hope to never see Jerusalem effen it wuzn’ jes’ like I tells hit.

“Jim an’ I (Jim was his brother) wuz huntin’ tolerable late in th’ fall, but hit had been a hot day an’ wuz still a hot night. We wuz ’way over on th’ back side of th’ Reily Ridge next to Al Guillaume’s an’ pert nigh t’ th’ head of th’ Ollinger Holler. Nick an’ I walked over thet groun’ many a time huntin’ foxes, squirrels an’ coons. We never seed nothin’ strange, day er night.

“We wuz strollin’ erlong on this side o’ th’ holler an’ th’ hounds, Lute n’ Ranger, over on t’other side of th’ holler an’ right above us, kind o’ sidlin’ toward us. All t’ onct Lute put up ’er nose, an’ I reckon she thought she wuz

barkin', but I never hearn nothin' make no noise like that afore. She wuz th' trailer o' th' two an' that's th' way she does on a cold fox trail—sticks her nose down in th' groun' fer a little bit o' time an' then sticks it up in th' air an' barks kind o' slow like.

“Jim said, ‘Huh! What’s th’ matter, Lute?’

“Jes’ then, Ranger bellered, er howled, er whatever it wuz he wuz doin’. While we wuz wonderin’ so, them dogs didn’ move; they wuz jes’ standin’ over thar. We could a hearn ’em effen they had bin in front o’ us drivin’.

“Then somethin’ pert nigh straight acrost ’n a littl’ above us come down kerswish on th’ groun’. Sounded mos’ like somebody had thrown a rotten punkin out on th’ groun’, an’ while we wuz turnin’ aroun’ t’ look over in thet direction (course it wuz so dark we couldn’ see nothin’) somethin’ kersplushed agin down th’ hill kin’ o’ anglin’ towards th’ crick, an’ then them houn’s, they come erlong down thet way.

“They didn’ appear to be tryin’ t’ ketch anythin’ er even chasin’ anythin’. But ever’ time they would come t’ whar thet thing had hit th’ groun’ they would stop an’ boo, sometimes a time er two. Best we could make out, whatever it wuz they wuz after—wuz jumpin’ ’bout ten, twelve or fifteen feet ahead of them. But heck! them dogs could of got erlong better’n that effen they had tried.

“Jim said they barked like th’ thing didn’ smell good. But yu know it couldn’ of bin a polecat. Ten polecats couldn’ of

A TALE OR TWO

made a noise like thet thing did when it kersplushed on th' groun', an' besides you couldn' of drug one of them dogs after a polecat. They jes' wouldn' pay no attention to 'em. I axed Jim what in th' heck it war but he never said a word. An' th' houn's got down below so we started erlong our side o' th' branch. We reckoned they'd come right down th' holler makin' fer Windback Cave down at th' mouth o' th' holler, er down in some o' them other caves erlong th' bank o' th' crick.

"We couldn' keep quite up with th' dogs but they never did get over a hunnerd yards ahaid o' us. I noticed thet they wuzn' tryin' t' ketch nothin' cause them dogs could run. They still wuz jes' a booin' ever' little bit. 'Stead o' comin' down the holler this thing cut acrost on th' crest o' th' ridge an' down in front o' us.

"O' course it could a come acrost thet way an' jumped over th' clift down t' th' big caves, but it didn'. It went right on by th' hole at a big rate towards th' ol' Reily house an' then right crost th' road down to th' ol' Reily orchard fence, headin' right toward th' Reily Hole o' water.

"As I said before, it wuz only a hunnerd yards or so ahaid o' us. We went down acrost th' orchard to th' low gap in th' clift. Th' clift wuz only 'bout five feet high, plum easy t' jump over, but yu couldn' get up it without a rail or somethin' to climb on. But this thing o' course jes' hopped right over it. So did th' houn's. An' so did we when we got down thar.

"Jes' as we jumped over this clift Ol' Ranger barked

THE INDIANA HOME

treed. Jim an' I never could either ary one of us remember whar, or whether Lute barked treed er not. We got on down towards him as fas' as we could, but yu cain't see very much on th' groun'. Th' moon wuz ol' and jes' comin' up a little in th' east. Ranger wuz standin' in back o' th' apple tree. We allus called it th' Greenapple an' it must of bin two foot to three in width (diameter) an' 'bout five, maybe six foot from th' groun' whar it forked. One o' th' branches wuz a great big limb six inches through that went off kin' o' level. Right on thet 'bout three four foot from th' forks wuz somethin' a-settin', looked fer th' worl' thar in th' dark like a ol' Dominicker rooster roostin'. I would a' bet anythin' he wuz bigger; at any rate wider out.

"When we got down on th' groun' I reckon we mought a' bin forty, fifty foot from th' tree. Th' dogs both come back waggin' thar tails t' us an' says I t' meself, 'Air our two houn's gone crazy?'

"Jim jes said, 'What th' heck!'

"If it had bin any varmint them houn's had chased they would a' bin rarin' roun' so trying t' git up thet tree, an' makin' sich a hollabaloo yu' would of thought shore thar wuz another war broke out in Chicago. But jes' when they got back to us waggin' thar tails, th' thing loped outen thet tree full twenty foot down th' hillside. It looked as big as one o' th' dogs. Course it wuz dark and yu' couldn' see much 'bout it. It lit right on top o' th' bluff; next jump it went over a rail fence kerspludge right int' th' middle o' th' road. Thar wuz a

deep holler jes' acrost th' road, but it wuz only 'bout ten foot wide. It went acrost that one in one leap an' nigh over th' fence int' th' medder field which wuz only twenty, thirty steps acrost that t' th' high bank o' th' crick, an' jes' as we got acrost th' holler we hearn 'im goin' offen thet high bank kersplush right int' th' Reily Hole.

"Shore as I'm a tellin' yu' boys, effen thet had bin a hunderd-poun' calf it wouldn' hev made any more splash in thet water. We went right over thar but thar wasn' nuthin' thar when we got thar, but th' waves in th' crick.

"Yu' know them dogs never tried t' follow thet thing after they come back t' us. They jes' trotted erlong with us. Course I dunno what it wuz, but I hev allus had my min' made up clar thet it wuz nothin' but one of them big bullfrogs. Yu' axes me what it wuz a doin' way up thar at th' Reily Ridge two miles from th' Reily Hole. Well, I tells yu I dunno, but effen it wuzn' a bullfrog, what wuz it?

"Jim said as we wuz comin' home he 'lowed hit war one o' them thar gangeroos. They have 'em in shows, yu' know, an' Jim said he didn' know nothin' 'bout it, but it jes' done like one orter."

Exit Newt.

So far as I know that was the biggest bullfrog on record. Newt never changed countenance in the least, got down off his barrel and slowly went to work. We had a cobbler there in town named John Robertson. He was a believer of all things. I think he had never batted an eye while Newt was

THE INDIANA HOME

telling his story, but after Newt went to work, John pulled himself together and commented:

“Do you suppose that was a bullfrog shore 'nuff?” Then, answering himself, “What else could it a' bin? If it had bin any kin' o' varmint er animal they could a' seen it in th' water atter it jumped in.”

Another commentator averred, “Hit don' seem a bit strange t' me. Didn' nobody never hear o' one o' 'em big bullfrogs a-dyin'? After they's sixty er seventy years old yu don' know how big they git. Course they's harmless an' don' bother nobody. Nobody bothers 'em.”

So endeth the bullfrog story. I don't think I have ever prodded one of them into the water or even fished along the Reily Hole after that but what I have not had an eye out somewhere along the bank to see one of these big frogs, but I can't say that I ever really saw one. At least not in the daytime.