

The legend of Grimm's knob

Hank Murphy

Eldred Grimm pushed aside a pale green curtain and peered out from a dingy window. From inside the saggy old cabin, he squinted as he gazed into the sunlight, out through leafy stands of sugar maple, beech and basswood. Eldred, who generally made it a point to go fishing in his trout stream every morning during the season, grumbled to himself as he waited for his brother to arrive. Wyatt apparently had important news to share.

Until last week, he hadn't heard from Wyatt, Southeast Wisconsin's King of Retail Space, in six years. He wasn't sure why his only and older sibling felt compelled to tear himself away from his luxurious digs in Whitefish Bay – his five-bedroom Victorian on the shores of Lake Michigan replete with tennis court, swimming pool, sauna and Jacuzzi – and drive four hours in his \$60,000 Cadillac Escalade to visit his poor, strange, hermit brother.

But off-the-grid Eldred figured it must be important. Wyatt had gone to the trouble of phoning Eldred's closest neighbor, Ralph Moody, the one who lived a good four miles away, and beseeching him to pass along the message of Wyatt's pending arrival.

Eldred yawned and poked his shaggy head outside the cabin door. He heard what he thought was the sound of tires crunching on forest road about a quarter mile away. He quickly lit a fire in the cast iron wood stove to heat some water for coffee. Then he saw a pearl white SUV creep up the narrow driveway toward the cabin.

"Well if it ain't Wild Wyatt Grimm," Eldred said as he greeted his brother. "They run you out of all the malls down there or what?"

"Not yet," Wyatt replied as he extended his hand to shake Eldred's.

"The drive okay?"

"Yeah, pretty uneventful. Nearly hit a deer outside Pembine. But otherwise it was okay," Wyatt replied.

"Kids and wife all good?"

"Yeah, kids are fine." Eldred took note that Wyatt made no mention of his wife, Joy.

"Well I'll get some coffee brewing inside," Eldred said.

"Actually, I picked up a six-pack on the way," Wyatt replied as he opened the car door and reached into a cooler.

"Kinda early isn't it?" Eldred said as he glanced at his watch, which read 10:42 a.m.



Wyatt shrugged. "Since when did you become a slave to time?" He snapped open a can of Budweiser and handed it to Eldred; then he cracked one for himself.

"Cheers," Eldred nodded as he took a drink.

The brothers drained their beers and then had another as Eldred showed Wyatt around the grounds. It had been almost 10 years since Wyatt had been up to the family's Northwoods getaway, which encompassed a cabin, a woodshop, a few tattered sheds and a privy. The structures stood amid 300 acres of timber bisected by a Class I trout stream. The property was left to the brothers by their deceased parents.

In fact, it was at the funeral of their father, Harold Grimm, in Milwaukee that the brothers last saw one another; it was where Wyatt had told Eldred that he didn't care if Eldred made the old family cabin his home.

"Love what you've done with the place," Wyatt deadpanned now as he regarded the dilapidated old timber structure, which was more than a century old. One end sat higher than the other and half the roof was covered with moss. A few spindly maple seedlings sprouted near the peak. The cabin's window glazing was crumbling, screens were rusting away, and several porch planks were rotting.

"But the good news is I won't be entering into the Parade of Homes 'til next year," Eldred replied with a smile. Truth was, Eldred could give a rip if

his house failed to measure up to someone else's standards. It kept him and his bird dog Jasper warm and dry, and that's all that mattered to him.

"Yeah, it's pretty much how I remembered the place," Wyatt said as his eyes fell on the cluster of decrepit old buildings situated among the ferns

and towering trees.

Eldred declined a third beer and then watched with an arched brow as Wyatt popped open his third, followed quickly by a fourth.

"Well let's go inside," Wyatt said after slugging down the final Bud. "Suppose I should get to the point of my visit."

Having just watched Wyatt – never known to be much of a drinker – just hammer down four beers in 20 minutes, Eldred led his brother into the cabin with trepidation.

Wyatt took a deep breath and then let loose with his news. "I'll come right out and say it Eldred, I need to sell this place, all of it – lock, stock and barrel."

The declaration hit Eldred like a freight train.

"Sell it?! Wha-da-ya mean sell it? Why on earth, Wyatt, would you want to sell this place? This is my home! You said I could live here for as long as I like. And I like it here just fine, thank you! I'm not going along with any hair brain plan to sell it. Forget it! Not happening!"

Wyatt had expected an angry reaction from Eldred, and he didn't disappoint.

"It's not that I want to sell it, Eldred. I know what this place means to you. But I'm in a tough spot. I know a guy who'll pay \$300,000 for this place, and that's after we've logged it. Shoot, that's another \$50,000 to \$60,000 for us to split."

"Not on your life, brother. It's not happening!" Eldred replied angrily.

"Well, it is happening I'm afraid. Dad put the deed in my name, but he stipulated that we split any proceeds 50-50 were this place ever to sell. For cyin' out loud Eldred, you could walk away from here with \$175,000 in your pocket. You could buy another place somewhere – just as remote, just as ... rustic."

"I don't want another place, Wyatt," Eldred replied. "What's wrong with you? This place has been in

the family for 115 years. It's our heritage, yours and mine. You get in a little pinch and you want to sell off something that our granddad and our father passed on to us, that you can pass on to your kids. Are you nuts!?"

Wyatt closed his eyes and slowly shook his head from side to side.

"Eldred, I'm in more than 'a little pinch.' Joy and I are getting a divorce. She's getting the house in Whitefish Bay. She's also getting \$5,000 a month in alimony and child support. And that's not even the worst of it. The IRS is coming after me. With penalties and fines, they say I owe them \$250,000 in back taxes. I either come up with the cash or I go to prison. Business has been in the toilet – no one's buying or leasing retail space. The firm is going under."

Eldred listened intently to Wyatt, and he honestly felt empathy for his brother's plight. Still, he wasn't about to relent and

hand over the one thing he loved more than anything else in the world. He knew every piece of slate rock in the stream, every eddy that spit froth, and every hole that yielded fat brownies and writhing rainbows. He knew the vagaries of every deer tail, and he knew each variety of fern that grew in the moist, black soil. He knew the trees – those that stood tall and straight and the ones that grew crooked and gnarled, whose roots bulged and spread along the forest floor like serpents.

Eldred recalled as a young boy walking in the woods with granddad Marvin, a lanky, warm-hearted man who used to regale him and Wyatt with stories about mysterious fairies and wood sprites that hid among the sugar maples. He remembered one late summer afternoon as granddad Marvin, he and Wyatt

See page 7



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