

The Life and Times of Rip Jackson Growing Up Southern

And Other Works

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Old Mountain Press

In this sample you will find four of the 22 humerus short stories about a boy growing up in a small southern town in the 50s. There are an additional six short stories and two poems found in this collection.

All illustrations included in the book are in black and white.

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Above graphic is in black and white in the book.

The Beginning

Special Agent Hoyt Jackson had given up smoking. There had been no choice. Mary Ann would not budge. That was a year and a half ago. Admittedly, he felt better, but now he had an addiction to ring-fiddling, with the callouses to prove it. Nicknamed “Lightning” because of his slow, easygoing manner, Hoyt was at this moment anything but calm.

World War II had ended only three months ago, and winter now gripped Cleveland, Mississippi. Weathered pecan trees stretched bare branches toward a granite-gray sky. A chilly north wind gnawed at holiday shoppers as they rushed from store to store.

Hoyt sat on a green naugahyde sofa counting tiles on the small room’s floor. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he tried to join the Marines but couldn’t put enough weight on his six foot frame to meet the requirements. His next choice was the FBI.

His wife in the delivery room was only nineteen. She had quit college her freshman year and married Hoyt. Mary Ann’s face was sharp, but not hard. Light brown hair cascaded down and brushed her shoulders.

A baby. We aren’t ready for this. Too late now. We’ll just make the best of it, Hoyt thought, gazing absentmindedly around the waiting room.

His in-laws sat on a sofa opposite him. Mayme, a Southern aristocrat, possessed a will of iron tempered by a heart of gold. Her husband, Lee, a short, stocky, red-faced cotton buyer, was known across the state for his love of good jokes and good bourbon.

Mayme picked a piece of lint off her skirt, rolled it between her fingers, dropped it inconspicuously on the floor. “What does she see in him?” she whispered. “I guess they’ll move to that little south Georgia town, and he’ll practice law. Won’t make a dime, much less amount to anything. Mary Ann could have had her pick. Where did I go wrong?”

The man the grandchildren would affectionately call Pop shook his head, smiled, and watched as his son-in-law nervously turned his wedding band. “That boy needs company.” Lee walked over and sat down.

Hoyt nodded toward Mayme. “Reckon she’ll ever think I’m good enough for Mary Ann?”

“Probably not. Hell, Hoyt, no man’s good enough for your little girl. You’ll see.” Lee laughed.

“I guess so.” Hoyt inhaled deep and sat back.

Changing the subject, Lee slapped Hoyt’s leg and said, “Seems like only yesterday I had to get her down from that magnolia in the backyard. Climbed all the way to the top. Now, why would she do that? Showing off, I guess. I remember one time during a touch football game with her brother and his friends, a knee caught her in the face. Busted her lower lip. The boy tells her that girls shouldn’t play football anyway. On the final play, Mary Ann breaks his leg with a flying tackle.” Lee shook his head and chuckled. “What say we slip out and take a nip.”

Hoyt shot Lee a questioning look.

“You’re right. We’d never get away with it. Mayme could shame a bloodhound.” Lee wiped his hand across his mouth and licked his lips.

THE STETHOSCOPE HANGING from Dr. Jack Russell’s neck swung as he approached the waiting room. “It’s a boy,” he announced.

Hoyt leaped up. “A Boy? A Boy! Mayme, Lee, did y’all hear that? It’s a Boy! Dr. Jack, how’s Mary Ann?”

“Fine. You can see her in a little bit. Want to take a gander at your son?”

“Well, Mayme, what do you think?” Hoyt peered through the large glass window.

“I think you two have something to be proud of.” She dabbed her eyes with a crumpled Kleenex.

“We all do.” Lee beamed.

THEIR FIRST NIGHT at home Hoyt stared into the crib. “Who do you think he looks like?”

“You.” Mary Ann sat in bed supported by a big blue prop pillow they had just bought at Kaplan’s.

“A son. I’m so proud I don’t know what to do. Who do you think he’ll take after?” Hoyt leaned for a closer look.

“I don’t know. I hope you—calm, dependable, and handsome. I can’t deal with what I’ve put Mother and Dad through. Lord only knows if I’d been a boy.”

“Stop exaggerating. You couldn’t have been any more trouble than he’s going to be. You cold?” Hoyt walked toward the old gas heater.

“You don’t know, Hoyt. I got into more trouble growing up. One thing after another; I never did learn. I just couldn’t help it.” Mary Ann pulled a red comb through her hair.

“So what’ll we call him?” Hoyt knelt in front of the heater.

“How about Raymond if he takes after you and, uh. . . Rip if he takes after me?” Mary Ann set the comb on a nightstand and flipped the covers on Hoyt’s side.

Hoyt turned the heater’s knob. White, orange, and blue flames sputtered as they licked artificial logs. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m sure Raymond’ll be a model child.”

THE FAMILY’S NEW addition had been home only four weeks. Sleeping through the night, their baby was well on his way to becoming the “model child” Hoyt predicted.

Armed with a neatly folded diaper and a mouth full of Donald Duck safety pins, Hoyt struggled with his son.

“You sure are a cute little thing.” Hoyt bent down.

Without warning a yellow stream arched up, splattering his starched white shirt and red and black striped tie.

Frustrated, Hoyt asked the question he’d repeat for the next twenty plus years, “Now, son, why did you want to go and do that?”

As he dabbed his shirt and tie, he noticed a twinkle in the baby’s eye.

“Mary Ann, come here!”

Mary Ann rushed into the room, hair still wet, towel in hand. “What’s wrong? What’s that all over your shirt?”

Hoyt shook his head and sighed, “Just wanted you to catch *Rip*’s first smile.”



The Truth About Santa and Sex

Johnny told me about Santa Claus. Pat, one of his older brothers, told him. It happened about a week before Christmas. As soon as he could, Johnny hightailed it over to my house. We were best friends, so I was the first one Johnny told.

“No way,” I said. “It can’t be.”

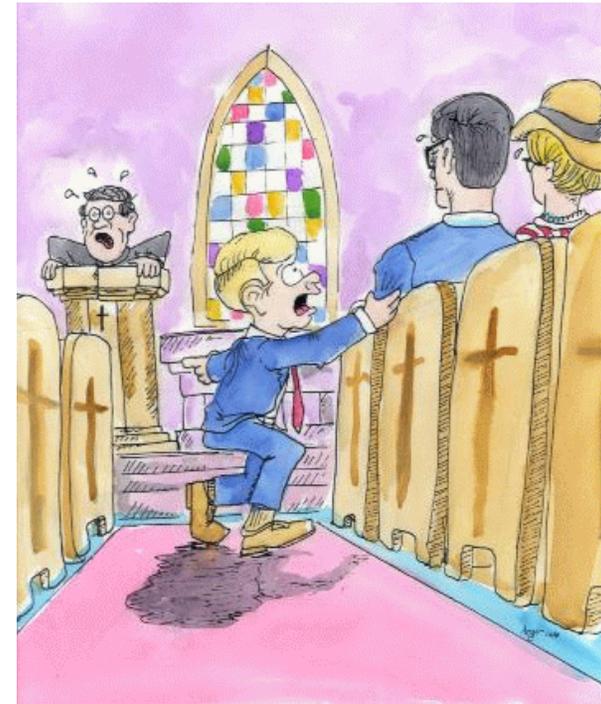
Johnny nodded, then said that when he told his mama, she laughed, hugged him, and said Pat was teasing and it wasn’t very nice. Sounded right to me, but then Johnny said when Pat got in from doing the chores, his mama snatched him up by the collar of his blue-jean jacket, dragged him to the bathroom, and tore him up with his daddy’s whipping belt.

We didn't know whether to believe it or not, so we decided to stay up Christmas eve. If it was true, all that stuff about Santa Claus not coming while we were awake — well, we'd just see.

I never could sleep the night before, so staying awake wasn't a problem. Sure enough, after Mama and Daddy thought I'd gone asleep, they started pulling stuff down from the attic.

I saw Johnny on Christmas afternoon and asked if he'd stayed awake. He said he hadn't but didn't look at me. I said, "Me, neither," and didn't look at him.

I felt sick at my stomach. I felt disbelief. I felt betrayed. Just like the time when I found out how babies were really made. Johnny told me. Pat told him. Since we were best friends, I was the first one Johnny told.



Above graphic is in black and white in the book.

Demon Rum

“A Christ-coming revival will be held at Vienna's First Baptist Church beginning Monday the fifteenth through the nineteenth. This year's revival is led by the Reverend Dr. Harold M. Calhoun, Jr., of Macon, Georgia. The theme is 'The Temptations Of Man.' Dr. Harold...,” began the lead column in the Vienna News.

“Mama, do I have to go?” Rip's blue eyes flashed beneath a gold cowlick.

“You should want to, sugar.” Mary Ann popped a wrinkled white shirt across the ironing board.

“But do I gotta?” Rip churned his face into a picture of pure pain.

“You'll enjoy it. All your friends'll be there. In any case, it won't hurt.” Mary Ann pushed the iron over the shirt.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes. You have to.”

The hot iron swished as it slid down a shirt sleeve.

“Morning *and* night?” pushed Rip.

He knew services would be held from 7:30 until 8:30 a.m. and from 7:00 p.m. until God-only-knew-when.

"I think it would be nice if you went with your father and me." She smiled.

"Morning and night?" Rip persisted.

Mary Ann propped the iron upright on the end of the ironing board. It gurgled and hissed as small swirls of steam hovered above its tip.

"You'll go to the opening prayer breakfast and every night service. No further discussion," she said, grasping the iron.

Opening night Rip and his other reluctant friends sat up front. Dr. Calhoun smiled as Dr. Cutts, the regular pastor, introduced him to a packed room.

Dr. Calhoun's lanky frame weighed no more than 150 pounds soaking wet. From his long neck protruded a huge Adam's apple that bobbed like a cork with a small bream nibbling at the bait. He wore a black suit, starched white shirt, and thin black cotton tie.

All in all he gave the appearance of being a hell-fire-and-brimstone preacher, and as he opened the first service with a prayer, no one could doubt. His voice flowed rich, strong, and sincere. From the first "My good Christian people" to the last amen, Reverend Calhoun held the congregation in awe. The aisles flooded with folks rededicating themselves.

As customary, different ladies of the church invited the visiting preacher into their homes for meals, each one trying to outdo the other with fine Southern cooking.

"Hoyt, Dr. Calhoun is coming for lunch Thursday. I want you here. And you, too, young man." Mary Ann fixed Rip with a stare.

"Thursday, huh?" Hoyt, putting the finishing touches on a Windsor knot, tried to think of somewhere else he could be. "I'm not sure. I might be trying a case for Mr. Lassiter. We've been trying to get it on the docket for some time and—"

"I don't want to hear it. You be here."

Seeing his father cornered and told "what for," Rip didn't even try a protest. As unlikely as it seemed, he, too, was enthralled by Reverend Calhoun's inspiring voice.

That Thursday at noon a platter of golden-brown fried chicken; bowls of mashed potatoes, turnip greens, stewed corn, and butter beans; and a basket each of cornbread and homemade biscuits covered the wide table. The rich aromas mingled and floated into Rip's nostrils. He swallowed hard.

"Would you say grace?" Mary Ann asked the preacher. Five minutes later they ate.

"DR. CALHOUN, WE enjoyed having you."

"Mary Ann, it was an exquisite meal. I'm going on a diet when I get back to Macon. I don't think I've ever eaten so much scrumptious food prepared by so many gracious and wonderful Christian ladies. I'll see y'all tonight, won't I?"

"Looking forward to it." Mary Ann closed the door behind the preacher.

"I can't understand how he stays so skinny," said Hoyt. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone pack away food like that in my life."

Retrieving his coat from the old bentwood rack, he turned and grasped the door knob. "Later, honey."

THAT NIGHT THE sermon began right on time. Reverend Calhoun, preaching his finest, enlightened the congregation on the sins caused by "Demon Rum." Rip, engrossed, sat perched on the edge of his front row seat.

"The evils of drink have turned loving homes into living hells, pitted husband against wife, and parent against child. It has ruined many good people, separating them from their Lord. No other substance possesses the power to send YOU to hell's eternal fires faster than this most hideous demon," Reverend Calhoun's eyes blazed as he pointed toward the rear of the congregation.

Rip's heart pounded, his breath grew shallow and rapid, his stomach churned, and his hair bristled. He pictured his father's bottle under the kitchen sink.

I've got to save Daddy! thought Rip, craning his neck to search the back of the church.

"Repent! Cast out that Demon Rum—"

Before Reverend Calhoun could finish, Rip tore from his seat and dashed rearward. The congregation rippled.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Rip raced up the aisle. Stumbling beside the pew where his mother and father sat, he gasped. "You got to get rid of that bottle you keep under the sink."

Rip's parents stared at each other in disbelief. The congregation's shock warmed to amusement at the predicament their Chairman of the Board of Deacons found himself in.

Mary Ann's face flared crimson. Hoyt removed his glasses, closed his eyes, massaged the bridge of his nose, and whispered, "Lord, you really know how to test a man."



Above graphic is in black and white in the book.

The Gator

“What would happen if your mama ever found out what we’re doing?” Rip asked Johnny, his country friend.
“Whip me from now ‘til Sunday. How about yours?” Johnny asked, crinkling his brow.

“Probably do the same,” Rip said through a slight overbite. His voice scratched with excitement.

It was midnight, and the two friends were walking down the Slosheye Trail, an old dirt road paralleling the Flint River. Over his bony shoulder, Rip carried a bamboo pole nearly six feet long. On one end, affixed with two wood screws and baling wire, was a three-pronged frog gig. A burlap crocus sack smelling of dried corn was tucked into his belt. Johnny packed his brother’s flashlight. Inside the long, ribbed, silver cylinder were eight brand new Eveready batteries.

“What’s the deal with the frogs?” Johnny asked, sawing his nose with his finger.

“Gladys said she’d clean and cook ‘em for us if we’d give her half.”

“She won’t tell?”

“Heck no. She’s great. She’ll even slip me cigarettes.” Rip produced a wrinkled pack of Camels, pulled out a crooked cigarette, and fired it up. The Zippo’s flame danced shadows on his face.

“You’re lucky. How long she been with y’all?”

“Ever since I can remember. She’s my second mama. I’d die if she ever quit us. Wanna drag?” Rip offered the dull red ember to Johnny.

“Yeah.” The ember glowed brightly, then was passed back. Johnny continued, “Know what my brother Pat heard the sheriff say?”

“No. What?”

“Last Saturday a man killed the biggest copperhead ever seen in these parts. Ran over it with his John Deere. It was crossing this very same road heading for your Cuddin Charles’ duck pond. It was pretty near seven feet long; head on it big as Mr. Yow’s fist; body big around as your leg; fangs two inches long! When it was cut open, know what they found? A whole chicken, feathers and all!” Johnny moved in close for effect.

“Aw, go on.” Rip shoved him away.

“I swear.” Johnny crossed his heart and spit.

“I didn’t come down here to listen to snake stories. Especially not about the place where we’re going frog-gigging,” Rip said, hiking his shoulders to keep out a shiver. He pulled one last drag and flipped it into the ditch.

The two friends arrived at their destination—a large pond. Towering cypress trees bearded with strands of Spanish moss covered its far end. Cypress knees rose from the water like stalagmites. Giant cattails and platter-sized lily pads, interlaced with long reed-like grass, ringed its bank. A small field road hugged its western side. The dank smell of swamp, river, and midnight dew churned in the air as a whippoorwill cried its sad three-note song.

The boys found the meandering path leading down to the old dock. Beside it were two boats, one flat-bottomed and wooden, the other V-hulled and aluminum. Moonbeams painted them an eerie glow.

“Which one?” asked Johnny.

“The wooden one. Aluminum’s too noisy.”

Rip was about to step into the old flat-bottomed johnboat when Johnny grabbed his arm.

“Remember that copperhead? I’ll shine the light.”

“Yeah.” Rip hesitated then stepped back.

Johnny directed the powerful beam into the boat. Finding nothing, he then shone it around the outside. “Looks okay. Get in. I’ll push.”

“Wait,” said Rip. “Get the paddle out of the other boat. We might need another one.”

“Oh, yeah. Here.” Johnny thrust the paddle at Rip.

The little dingy slid over swamp grass and mud parting a thin layer of fog. Before long the boys were cruising the edge of the lily pads and cattails.

Johnny paddled.

Rip, shining the light, held the gig. “What’s that?” he whispered a shout.

Off to their right in the swamp grass an eye glowed red.

“That’s one! Keep the light on him. I’ll get closer. Can you get him?”

“Yeah, hold steady.” Rip held the light on the red glow, took aim, and let fly the bamboo pole.

The gig found its mark, and the red glow went out. The pole fell and shook rapidly as the big bullfrog kicked his last.

“Hot dang! You got him!”

“Sure did,” said Rip.

As he leaned over to retrieve the spear, the boat tottered. Rip lost his balance and squatted down, grabbing its sides.

“Holy cow, we almost tipped over!” White showed around the dark of Johnny’s eyes.

“Yeah, we gotta be careful.” Rip mopped his forehead with the back of his hand.

As the two moved along the edge of the pond, they heard a distant moan.

“What’s that?” asked Rip, his voice tense as a tight strung banjo.

“A gator! You know there’re bunches of gators this near the river. Hey, did I ever tell you about what happened to this little girl playing at Penney’s Bluff two summers ago?”

“No. And I don’t wanna hear it,” said Rip, raking his fingers through straw-colored hair.

“Yeah, her daddy heard this big splash down by the river. When he got there she was gone. A search party hunted for her more than a week. Dragged the river and everything. Didn’t find her until six months later when they opened the gates on the dam and let the river down. Some old man digging out a gator den found her skeleton.”

“Aw, come on.” Rip’s face churned in disgust.

“Yeah, that old gator dragged her into the water and carried her off. They don’t chew their food like a dog. They bite down, roll over, and tear hunks off. Then they hide the chunks in their dens and let it rot. Know what else they do?” Johnny beamed a grin.

“No! And I don’t want to. I didn’t come down here to listen to gator stories all night. Paddle me closer to those weeds.” Rip pointed the gig toward the shore.

Before long the boys were half way around the pond. The crocus sack bulged with over fifteen bullfrogs.

“Paddle toward that clump of lily pads.” Rip pointed his chin toward the middle of the pond. “I’m tired of giggling these frogs through the weeds.”

They were almost seventy-five yards from shore when the beam lit a large red eye among the lily pads. “Hey, look over yonder. That’s gotta be the biggest dang frog in the pond! Hurry, get in closer. Oh, no! He’s gone. Yeah, there he is! Swing around!”

Johnny was maneuvering the boat so Rip could get a good throw at the granddaddy of all bullfrogs when he noticed something strange.

“Hey, wait, that ain’t no. . .” But before Johnny could finish his sentence, Rip heaved the gig, aiming it just behind the large red eye. Instead of hitting the frog and falling down, the bamboo pole stuck straight up, rocking from side to side like the arm of the clock Mrs. Ryner made Rip keep time to during piano practice. Seconds later, an alligator’s head crashed the surface. Its tail sent white spray hurtling.

Both boys jumped back. The small boat flipped. Rip’s back slapped the water. As he sank below the surface, the moon broke into a thousand tiny pieces, then disappeared.

He fought his way up. To his front, Rip could see the overturned boat. A rope snaked out from its bow. He grabbed the frayed anchor line with both hands and began kicking and pulling himself towards safety.

A sudden squeeze around his chest felt like the time Jimmy Burton sat on him and wouldn’t get up. Rip was jerked down deeper and deeper. With strength he didn’t know he had, he yanked the rope. Two terrified faces broke the surface gasping.

Johnny clawed and crawled his way over Rip and onto the overturned boat. Kicking with his feet and pulling himself with his arms, Rip followed.

“God almighty, Johnny, I thought you were that gator!” Rip’s eyes went wild like a scared horse.

“I . . . I . . . I,” Johnny stammered, as swamp water drained from his nose. “Sorry. Thought I’d had it. Ya know. Couldn’t see. . . scared. . . .”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I . . . I think so. How about you?” Johnny asked, as he snorted water from his nose.

“I’m okay.” Rip shivered then heaved.

They were breathing normally when Johnny edged slightly left. Bubbles came up the side. The small craft dropped.

“Freeze,” said Rip.

“What?” Johnny’s head flapped like a shutter in a storm.

"The only thing keeping this boat up is trapped air. When we move, it leaks out."

"Oh no! What are we gonna do? That gator's waiting under this boat. We're gonna get hauled down into his den and eaten!"

"Hold on, let's think," said Rip. After a few seconds, he concluded, "We gotta swim for it."

"No wait! Only one's gotta swim for it. When he gets to shore, he can paddle back in the other boat."

"Good idea. Who do you think it oughtta be?"

"Don't know. Who do you think?" asked Johnny cautiously.

"Your idea. It oughtta be you."

"Wait a minute! You're a better swimmer. You oughtta be the one."

"Not that much better," Rip said.

"Well, you owe me."

"Owe you? How?"

"Remember three summers ago when you were swimming out to the raft at the Dooly County camp ground and started drowning?"

"Yeah."

"Clark saved you."

"What's your brother saving me gotta do with anything?"

"Well, you ain't ever gonna pay him back. So pay me back instead."

"Well, I uh. . . well. I guess so. . . uh."

"Good! It's settled. You go. When you get into the water and start swimming, dog paddle. If you splash your arms and feet, that old gator'll think you're a beaver or something. You'll be a goner."

"Hey, you know so much, you swim."

"We already decided."

Rip eased off the boat and began swimming through the moss-thickened water. He had only swum a few yards when he ran into a slim covered log floating just beneath the surface. As it rolled downward, a limb reached up.

Rip let out a blood-chilling scream as he clawed his way over the log. He imagined the alligator at his heels, jaws gaping with huge white teeth poised. His arms thrashed the water like windmills in a hurricane as he sprinted the fifty yards to the shore. His hand sank into the pond's slimy bottom, releasing foul-smelling bubbles of swamp gas. He clawed his way through the tall reeds until he reached the field road.

Rip rolled over and looked up. The fire in his arms, legs, and lungs died to a flicker. He watched a giant cloud that looked too much like an alligator's head swallow the moon.

"You okay? You make it?" he heard Johnny wail.

Leaping to his feet, Rip shouted, "I'm okay! Heading to the boat! Be there in a minute!"

When Rip reached the aluminum boat, he remembered they had taken its paddle with them. His eyes darted about searching for something he could use. Ripping off a board covering the dock, he scrambled to the bow of the boat and began paddling.

As Rip's boat slid alongside the overturned one, Johnny leaped in. With the sudden shift in weight, the johnboat bobbed twice, then disappeared bubbling and gurgling. Rip lay on his back, sucking air like he'd run a marathon. The large cloud passed, and the moon smiled a face of stunning gold.

"Johnny, know what I forgot to do?" Without waiting for an answer, Rip continued, "Check for snakes!"

Both boys leaped onto the seats and searched the bottom.

"Look under here." Confidence replaced the squeak in Rip's voice. "See these metal boxes? They're air tight. This boat could fill with water and still float."

"I don't wanna think about boats filling up. I wanna go home. Come on, get paddling," Johnny said.

As Rip paddled, Johnny mumbled, "I knew we shouldn't have done this. I knew we'd get in trouble. Every time I get hooked up with you, I get in trouble. Pat's flashlight's gone. He's gonna kill me. I've really learned my lesson."

"Yeah. . . me too," Rip agreed, "Next time we come frog gigging down here, we're gonna use this aluminum boat. I don't care how noisy it is."