THE AMERICAN STORYTELLER
RADIO JOURNAL
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Text Version of Audio Story: Walter Dunn

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Most days you could find him sitting at the counter drinking coffee at Shirley's Restaurant in McAlisterville. On his 90th birthday, Shirley baked him a cake. The newspaper came and even took a picture of him cutting the cake. Old Walter Dunn, he hardly knew what to do with himself.

He would laugh and say, "I get up in the morning with nothing to do and go to bed half finished."

Walter was the oldest person I knew. Walter was the oldest person in town. He was so old he could remember holding my grandfather when my grandfather was just a baby, and my grandfather was old. When Walter was 90, I was nine.

What Walter wanted more than anything was to tell stories. That's why he went to Shirley's Restaurant hoping there would be someone there who would want to listen. Everyone liked Walter, but you know folks were awfully busy. I, on the other hand, couldn't get enough of what Old Walter Dunn had to say. Walter had fingers missing on each hand and it took two hands to hold his coffee cup. It wasn't uncommon to see old guys minus a few fingers from farming or timber accidents or whatever.

If I saw Walter was in the restaurant, I always went in. He would see me coming and he would smile that big smile that was minus a few teeth. I would sit down beside him and I would always start out with, "C'mon Walter, say it. I wanna hear ya say it, Walter."

"Well, Nelson I've said it everyday this week for ya. Ya oughta know it by heart."

"I do, Walter. I do, but – but I like it best when I hear you say it Walter."

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"OK, I guess I can say it again."

He would take a big slug of coffee and then a deep breath.

"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

In the year 1905 with a wagon hooked behind a team of mules, Walter Dunn with an immense sense of duty, went to work making his appointed rounds.

For 45 years, in the worst of blizzards, in the most torrential of rains, on days when the sun could blister a man's skin and often late into the night, the United States mail got through. Steep mountains and twisty valley roads, muddy roads, icy roads, choking dust; it was rural delivery McAlisterville, Walter Dunn at your service.

I often waited until he had talked himself tired. He seldom told the same story twice. More times than not, as I stood up to go home, he would hand me a dollar.

"Nelson, give this dollar to your daddy and tell him when he gets to Mifflintown to buy me a bottle of port wine. Have him hide it in the same place in Tippy Knauss' shed and, and for heaven sakes, don't let my wife find out."

My dad would always smile when I handed him the dollar. A bottle of port wine probably costs a dollar back in 1920. My dad enjoyed keeping Walter in wine. Every afternoon about 3 o'clock, Walter would slip into Tippy Knauss' shed and enjoy a glass of port.

Mrs. Dunn was never far behind. She could see Tippy's shed from her back porch. She could see Walter slink and sneak in the door. Up the alley she'd go at a full tilt. She would stand outside beating her cane on the locked wooden shed door and hollering, "Walter Dunn, I know you're in there."

She would admonish him on the evils of drink and somehow he was able to sit in there and enjoy his port, as if, as if he couldn't hear her, as if he could turn it all off. He often referred to their marriage as "70 years of wedded bliss."

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My old friend, Walter Dunn, died in 1976. He was 94 years old.

From somewhere behind the radio with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.

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