

Hoof Prints

Kevin O'Madden

In the many entities of my life that I have embraced or endured, there is one that stands prominent in my memories.

I once found myself in the employ of a cattle company.

My job was driving a feeder truck to the different pastures, filling feeders. These pastures were scattered throughout central Texas, many of which were larger than a thousand acres.

The soil of central Texas is a tight sediment known as “black gumbo”, very similar to modeling clay, only black. When it rains, it takes a long time for the soil to absorb the water. Sometimes in the late summer, the ground stays soft and pliable for several days after the rains have gone.

Once, I was filling a feeder in a remote pasture. For a great distance from the feeder out, the ground was blanketed with the hoof prints of the cattle that came there to feed. These were wide, deep, puncture marks, honey combing the landscape.

In the distance was a stand of Bo d’ark trees with Mesquite and Willow thinning out away from them. On the Texas prairie, this is usually an indication of a creek bed or tank of standing water.



While closing the feeder and fixin' to climb back in my truck, I looked down to see a small green tree frog. He was stuck in the bottom of a hoof print. With a tremendous effort, he struggled to the top of that hoof print, and flopped over into the next. He rested a moment, and began climbing into the next. I watched that frog, and then looked up at the endless span of hoof prints to the small oasis of trees. I couldn't help, but wonder to myself, that if that frog could see all the multitude of hoof prints in front of him, he wouldn't just give up and die in his hole.

Then I realized, at the top of each hoof print, he could see the trees, and the promise of something better, and the only thing standing in his way, was this next hoof print.

It occurred to me, that if we could see all the struggles before us, would we keep climbing that hoof print? Many times in my life, I felt as hopeless as that little frog.

Then I thought, the individual accomplishments of each of those hoof prints is what makes life so enduring.

If we could see all the hoof prints ahead of us, would it be an eternity of struggles, or the opportunity to accomplish innumerable successes?

The Great and Wondrous Tale of Saint Gerome and the Serpent

as told by Kevin, he who is not called Veracity

Sit my children and you will learn of the ferocious battle betwix good and evil that transpired before mine own eyes when I was just a wee lad of 42. It was the time of the great tempest of 97, in the highlands of the land of the Lone Star. I was on a quest of adventure with my child-bride, Mamie, when our little caravan was assailed from the heavens with a mighty flood. We found ourselves in dire straights and almost lost our lives with the rising waters of that far off enchanted land. The rivers rose and the waters in their anger reached out to snatch our very souls. But for the intervention of St. Patrick, St. Bridget, St. Lawrence O'Toole, and all the saints of the Emerald Isle, we would have been flotsam in the devils own cistern.

But that sweet wee ones is another story altogether. I am here to tell of the struggle I was blest to witness when my bride and I fled the southern highlands to seek refuge in the cottage of my cousin, Bridget, who by the way, was named after the blessed St. Bridget of Ireland, in the northern lands. The higher counties where she resides, suffered their own pummelling from the rains and there was much destruction in that small village. But on with the story.

It was on the third day that we were at Bridget's and I was toiling in the ruins of Bridget's wee boat moring, when a great serpent child of Satan himself, reared his horrible head from the putrid waters and struck at me with fangs the size of huge timbers. I was horror struck and but for my quickness of youth would have been devoured whole. I cried out in terror and retreated from the beast. Nearby, the great knight of Holy Mother Church, F. Gerome of the clan Madden, sept Madadahaine, heard my cries, and rode forward on his great battle steed, to my rescue. With nerves of iron and the courage of ten men he placed himself and his mount betwixt myself and the huge serpent. I, of course, was overcome with great awe and humility before the sight of this great warrior who was obviously sent by the saints to my rescue.

A great battle ensued. Time and time again the snake of hades struck at him. Time and time again he thwarted the serpents evil intent with mighty blows from his staff of steel and fire. Then, the evil one delivered unto his great war horse a fatal blow. The sound of that mighty steed's scream of anger and despair still to this day haunts my sleep. The sight of his faithful mount and companion lying broken and dying on that acre of fire and blood enraged the courageous knight to a blinding rage and in one mighty blow, he cleft the monster almost in two.



But the battle was not done. The serpent bellowed in pain, and his eyes took on a glow that reflected the fires of hell itself. He struck out again with such ferocity, that he felled the good knight and he wrapped his bloody body around the warrior in an attempt to crush him before feasting on this noble servant of good. The knight, wrapped in the coils of the demon, fixed one mighty hand about the throat of the beast and they were locked in a macabe dance of death. The universe seemed to pause and wonder at this horrible struggle. Then of a sudden, the knight again raised his weapon, and in a final, swift, and determined strike, destroyed this devil's minion. The blow was so fantastic, that little was left of the giant snake's head. For a time the body of the beast writhed and thrashed, then fell still. Noble Gerome, gave out a victory cry that seemed to thunder even the surrounding mountains. He laid the carcass of the devil on the ground for all to see, and as a message to hell that this fair piece of earth, is not open to his visitations.

This my dear little ones is the true story of Great Uncle Jerry and the snake, for I was there, and you know I would never bend the truth.

The Mower and Little Girls

by Kevin O'Madden

I remember when I was young and we lived on a farm in Ohio. One of the chores my brother Shawn and I had was mowing the front property. We had at the time an old Ford tractor, one with three forward speeds and one reverse. To mow the yard, we had a “bush hog” mower that hooked to the tractor and was powered by a separate drive shaft that connected to the drive line at the rear of the tractor. Now keep in mind Shawn and I were eleven and ten years old respectively, so driving the tractor and mowing was not so much a chore as an opportunity to operate a large, complex machine. Consequently, there was never any real objection on our part to the task. We did, however, put up the expected shuffling of the feet, muttering “aw shoot, do I have to?” every time the duty was “thrust” upon us, but never enough to lose the chance to be the one to do the driving.

Our property in Columbus Ohio was twenty some odd acres, approximately three of which made up the “front lawn.” The eastern most edge was bordered by a steep ravine which dropped about forty feet to a small creek bed.



For the most part Shawn was the more experienced operator, and I hadn't really gotten good at mowing along the edge of the ravine. In any event, my first pass along the edge started out fine, but about half way down, the right side of the bush hog left solid ground and was cutting open air out over the ravine. Well, for some reason, I was not aware of this until more than half of the mower was over the edge and the tractor ceased its forward motion. It was precisely then that I looked back in horror to see the bush hog mowing the face of the cliff and the tractor was slowly going backward toward the precipice even though the wheels were steadily churning forward, something to do with the law of gravity I'm sure.

Amazingly I didn't follow my first instinct which was to abandon ship, but immediately stood on top of the clutch and brake simultaneously, ceasing the backward motion, but doing nothing to correct my predicament.

I also happened to notice two things that were also going on. 1) the steering wheels on the tractor were about six inches off the ground (something about a fulcrum and a lever I would find out about in later studies of physics, 2) I was screaming exactly like a small girl.

My brother Shawn, though being on the other side of the property, mounted on his faithful steed “Chappo”, came galloping over to see what poor little girl was being so horribly tortured. He at once grasped the dire situation his idiot brother was in and 1) dismounted his horse in full gallop, 2) while still airborne, leapt onto the front of the tractor, and clutching the grill work in his fingers, brought the front end back down to the earth.

Calmly he said, “Kevin, put the tractor in first gear (I was in third) and SLOWLY release the clutch.” Knowing that Shawn was older and wiser, I followed his directions to the letter . . . somewhat (remember, I was in full blown panic). I jammed the machine in first and popped the clutch.

Two things happened immediately, 1) the tractor LEAPT forward and jerked the brush hog back onto solid ground, 2) from the front of the tractor I heard what sounded like a small girl screaming.

The Bells of St. Thomas

Kevin O'Madden

Irish is who we are. I was told that all me life...my life. Me...my father was Irish. My mother was Irish. My grandparents were Irish. Irish Catholic.

There's a moniker worth being labeled. My brother Shawn and I were altar boys. We were altar boys when being altar boys was cool. Going to a Catholic school in the early 60's, being Irish, we were shoe-ins. But, being the early 60's it had its "trials of the soul".

When we started altar boy training, the Catholic mass was still said in Latin. Consequently we had to memorize all the prayers in Latin. All the prayers.

Then Vatican II happened. I didn't know there was a Vatican I, much less that you could make more. The consequence of Vatican II was that the Catholic Mass would now be said in the native tongue of the participants.

You guessed it. We now had to relearn all the prayers in ENGLISH. This has nothing to do with the story; I was just fishing for sympathy.

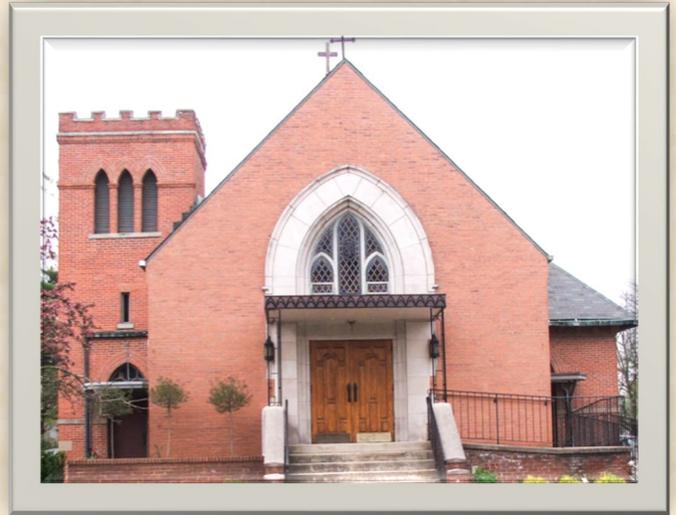
Any way, we were altar boys at a small, I'd like to say run down, but I believe "humble" is more appropriate, parish in urban Columbus Ohio. Shawn and I were great at serving the Latin mass, all you really had to do was begin with Dominae, and end with Deum Nostrum, with a lot of passionate and sincere mumbling in between. As long as you "hit your mark" on stage (the altar), rang the chimes at the appropriate time, let the priest determine how much wine goes in the chalice, don't giggle at the participants sticking their tongue out for the host, you were a "Knight of the Altar".

With the advent of English prayers, depending on the priest, you could squeak by or be the recipient of a glare that you knew meant, "You'll obviously never amount to anything, AND will probably spend the better part of eternity roasting in purgatory". But we were successful, and obviously preferred as supporting cast members in the celebration of "The Passion of The Savior", brought to you every Sunday at 7, 9, 10:30 and noon. I used to believe we were so good at it that we were requested, but in reality, it may have been because Father O'Keefe knew the Maddens always came to 9 o'clock mass and that they always brought a pair of trained altar boys who could be drafted for the masses that may or may not have servants attending. In the hierarchy of altar boys, the older and more experienced were the ones who got to do the large productions like "High Mass", high holy days in the church, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Shawn and I were grunts. Merely foot soldiers in the trenches. We never did the really elaborate pageants of faith.

Except this one time.

I believe the scheduled acolytes were unavailable due to weather or illness, but at the end of mass one Sunday, Fr. O'Keefe asked Dad,(we had no input in the decision), if Shawn and I could do a funeral, scheduled at 2pm that day.

"Of course, my boys would be honored father."



Now a Catholic funeral involves a grand procession down the center aisle led by two altar boys, with hands folded, followed by another altar boy bearing a tall staff affixed with a crucifix, and the priest, followed by two more altar boys (me and Shawn). When we all arrived on stage, those not actually serving the mass, sat, kneeled, stood and bowed on cue, on a bench to the left of the altar. That is where my brother and I were.

Keep in mind this was 2pm, Shawn and I had been at church since 8:30.

A Catholic requiem mass has a great deal of chanting, singing, incense and oration. If you don't have a leading role in the event, and you've missed you're traditional after church pancake breakfast, and lunch, it is understandable that at some time during the solemn chanting and incense burning, you might tend to doze.

While returning to conscience at one point, I realized everyone else was kneeling, and here I was enjoying a little nap time on my little bench right up there in front of God and everybody. I quickly fell to my knees, or that's how it started. I actually had my cassock (the black robe), caught under my left foot, and as I threw myself forward, the front of the robe jerked me down prostrate on the dais. Now, my knees had the robe pinned to the floor, pulling my upper body down toward my belly button, with my forehead solidly in the carpet. Sister Mary Nevergetsomad, whom we all loved, said I looked like the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus when Our Lord called on him.

Sister Beatrice Scaryperson had quite another take on the event. The glare from Fr. O'Keefe threw doubt on my chances of even making Purgatory. From here it just went down hill.

Most of the remainder of the Mass for the Dead swims in my memory as a slow march of doom. Even Shawn, who was more than familiar with my short comings in anything requiring strict adherence to protocol, ceremony, and sanctity, was trying to distance himself from the inevitable fallout of his brother's nincompooery.

The conclusion of the formal service is followed by a similar procession by the troupe back down the center aisle, leading the pallbearers and the casket of the dearly departed out the front doors of the church.

However... Fr. O'Keefe, wanting to avoid the possibility of this solemn event collapsing into something that might warrant the attention of the Bishop, told Shawn and I "you boys tend the bells"

Shawn and I had never "tended the bells". Not even for the simple noon ringing that used to be common back in the day.

There we stood. Both of us staring at the rope.

What do we do? I don't know, just pull it. O.K., how hard? I don't know, I've never done this. Don't look at me, I ain't done it either.

Shawn reached up and pulled down steadily on the rope. A very slight "pong" came from some where above us.

This is harder than I thought. Gimme a hand.

Both of us grabbed it and gave it a mighty shove. BONG-BONG-BONG. The rope went up, we both jumped up and grabbed it pulling it down while we bent our knees, and landed on the floor in a squatting position while still grasping the rope.

BONGBONGBONGBONGBONG.

Ohhhh yeah! We got it now by golly!
Up we went, grinning like gargoyles.

BONGBONGBONGBONGBONGBONGBONG.

The door crashed open. There stood Fr. O'Keefe. His white hair which is always combed and properly slicked to his head, stood out in thick strands looking just like the Great and Powerful Oz. His eyes bulged, I know this because I



had never seen bulging eyes before, but the sight of his eyes confirmed my mental image was dead on. Though there was no possibility of wind in the belfry, his robes and vestments were flowing as if by a mighty tempest.

JAYSOOS MAUREEE EN JOUSEFFFF, WHAT IN DE NAME O GOD ARE YE BOIS DOIN?????

He stepped up grabbed the rope, stopped it in mid swing, the bells went BAbnk.
ONE RING, SAY ONE HAIL MARY, ANOTHER RING, SAY ONE HAIL MARY, A THIRD RING, SAY THREE HAIL MARYS AND START OVER!!! CAN YE DO THAT BOYS?

...yes father.

ARE YE BOTH SURE O THAT?

...yes father

Alright then boys, keep that up till someone comes to tell you to stop. Remember, one Hail Mary between rings, three rings, three Hail Marys and start again. Got it right?

...yes father

To this day I know, I mean I KNOW the proper sequence of bell tolls for a Catholic Requiem Mass. Not that I ever got the chance to do it again.