

Those Torturous English Cuts

Back in the old days just before World War I, along about the time when I was shedding rompers for shirts and pants, my family, like many others in Bluffton, still clung to the horse-and-buggy era.

Our horse was a handsome bay named Mack. He was gentle but spirited, and sleek as a sea lion and always ready to go. A slight tightening of the reins sent him forward in a burst of speed. A sudden "Whoa!" brought him to a dead halt. I tried it one time in the saddle and was catapulted over his head like a clay pigeon sprung from a trap machine.

Our buggy was shiny black with red-spoked wheels and a folding top. The dashboard sported a whip socket and the seat was upholstered with black leather. The floor in front and the luggage compartment in the rear also served as seats — for us children.

One time I sat on the floor back to back with my brother Thomas all the way to Screven's Ferry and back — a distance of 44 miles. That was the time Papa and Mama took Thomas, Luke and me to Savannah to buy our back-to-school clothes. I can never forget that hot August day, because that was the day I bought a pair of those long, narrow, pointed shoes called English Cuts and suffered an unspeakable misery known only to God and me.

Long before daybreak we got up and ate breakfast and started on the 21-mile trip to Screven's Ferry to catch the early boat to Savannah. Usually, we went to Savannah on the steamer Attaquin. But this time Papa wanted to get back the same day, so we had to go by way of the ferry.

The buggy ride took us past the Bluffton Cemetery, over the Rose Dhu bridge, through Pritchardville, over the New River bridge, and then into a winding dirt road through Levy's, Bellinger Hill, and a part of the Savannah River swamp, where we boys half expected, or half hoped, a big black bear would lumber out of the dense bushes, jump into the buggy, and hug us all to death, almost.

Arriving at the ferry landing, we left Mack and the buggy in the care of an old Negro and got aboard the flat-bottomed boat. It was a short but exciting ride across the river, and we boys remained glued to the rails, watching wide-eyed the great ocean vessels moving in and out of the harbor.

As soon as we disembarked upon the Savannah wharf, Papa hailed a hack and we rode to the corner of Bull and Broughton streets, where Papa left us and went on to his business elsewhere in the city.

Up to that moment, we boys were as quiet as three little lambs. But the minute Papa turned his back we became as frisky and unmanageable as a trio of unleashed puppies. Mama was too gentle to cope with us.

For my part, I lost no time setting up a howl for a pair of English Cuts, just like Henry McAlpin's. Henry was one of my best friends in Bluffton. He lived with his uncle and aunt, Dr. and Mrs. F. V. Walker, and they kept him dressed in the latest and finest in boys' apparel. One day Henry came back from Savannah with a pair of those English Cuts on his feet, and for me it was love at first sight. One look at those long, narrow, pointed, shiny masterpieces of elegant grace, and my mind was made up and nothing could change it.

"You won't wear them," Mama warned. "And you know how your papa feels about throwing money away."

"Henry wears his," I argued, "and he likes them."

"They're beautiful on Henry," Mama agreed. "But Henry's feet are smaller than yours."

"I don't care," I said, "I want a pair."

Mama did her best to dissuade me. But I whined and fretted up and down both sides of Broughton street all morning and all over Levy's



and Adler's department stores most of the afternoon, until Mama finally gave in. She took me to the shoe department in Adler's and asked a clerk to fit me in whatever I wanted. She left me there and took Thomas and Luke to another floor.

The black-suited clerk kicked a stool up in front of a red-leather chair and told me to sit. Before I could tell him what kind of shoes I wanted he said, "I know. I know. You want a pair of English Cuts, just like Henry McAlpin's. Put your foot up here."

He sat on the stool and measured my foot. The top of his head looked like a soup bowl upside down. He looked up at me and something in his eyes reminded me of Mr. W. J. Fripp's tomcat the day he ate my brother Mark's pet squirrel. He got up and went to a shelf and jerked a box off of it and came back with the box under his arm. He sat down again and took one of the shoes out of the box, and I saw that it was an oxblood English Cut, exactly like Henry's.

He forced it on my right foot with a shoehorn. It was a size and a half too small, but I didn't say anything. I was afraid he would put it back in the box and tell me that it was the only pair of English Cuts in Savannah. He forced the other shoe on my left foot, and then he smiled that tomcat smile and asked me a leading question no court of justice would have allowed.

"Sonny," he said, "they're real comfortable, aren't they?"

They were squeezing and pinching and burning my feet with all the fury of hell on Judgment Day. But I wasn't taking any chance on another pair being in the city.

"Yessuh!" I shouted, loud enough for everybody on the floor to hear me.

"That's fine," the clerk said. "Now get up and walk. Get up and take a nice long walk. Go outside on the pavement in the nice warm sunshine and walk. It takes a lot of walking on hot pavement to break in a pair of new shoes, just like Henry McAlpin's."

I was glad to get away from that black-suited clerk. But by the time I got to the front door I was envying the serpent in the Garden of Eden when the Lord God commanded him to crawl upon his belly forevermore.

I went out on the sidewalk and stood in the hot August sun. My feet began to swell and my shoes began to shrink. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. I lifted one shoe clear of the pavement, then the other. I leaned backward on my heels. I leaned forward on my toes. I tried every position I could think of, but none relieved the pressure of those English Cuts, I thought of taking them off for a minute's respite, but I knew I would never get them back on without the aid of that cat-eyed monster armed with a shoehorn.

I was still standing on the sidewalk when Papa returned at sundown. As he came up, Mama, with Thomas and Luke still in tow, came up too. Mama said she had finished with the children, but had to get a few things for the house. She would take a hack later and meet us at the ferry boat. Papa said he and the boys would saunter on back to the wharf. It was only eight or ten blocks and we would enjoy the walk. "Let's go," he said.

I gritted my teeth and started walking. I was on the inside, and I could see myself in the display windows. The first time I caught a profile glimpse of one of my squeaking oxbloods I almost fainted. It looked as long and shiny as Grandpa Guilford's walking stick.

A moment later a city smart aleck passed us and made some over-the-shoulder remark about all the gunboats not being in the Navy and I wanted to die right there in my tracks.

"Son," Papa said, "are those new shoes comfortable?"

"Yessuh," I lied.

I tried to walk naturally, so Papa would not question me further. But that profile glimpse and the crack about the gunboats had me too self-conscious to coordinate my steps, and I kept tripping my toes and stumbling forward, as though Thomas or Luke had suddenly thrust one of Mama's hatpins into the seat of my pants.

"Son," Papa asked again, "are you sure those shoes are comfortable?"

"Yessuh," I lied again.

"Well then," Papa said, "why in heavens's name don't you pick up your infernal feet and walk right?"

The eight or ten blocks back to the ferry boat stretched out into what seemed like eight or ten miles. With every step my feet sprouted a new batch of blisters.

Before we reached the other side of the Savannah River night had fallen. But I was still upright when we got back to the buggy. I climbed in and sat on the floor back to back with Thomas, with my feet hanging out. And while Papa and the old Negro were hitching up Mack, I took off my shoes and eased them down to the ground directly in front of the rear wheel.

Papa got in the buggy and picked up the reins. "Getup!" he said, and Mack headed homeward in a fast trot.

I leaned my head against Thomas' shoulder and closed my eyes, and my parents thought I had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. But I guess if the truth were known, I was practically in a coma brought on by the cruel affliction suffered in those twin torture chambers called English Cuts.