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**FEBOLD FEBOLDSON**

Number Five

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I

REAL AMERICAN WEATHER

Somebody ought to do something about the weather. It's downright disgraceful that in most parts of the United States the climate is of foreign origin. Florida and California brazenly boast of Mediterranean sunshine. Winter resorts in the Adirondacks are only imitations of those in Switzerland. Even the famous blizzard of 1888 came from Siberia. In fact, there's only one place where you can get real, genuine, American weather, and that's on the great plains between the Mississippi and the Rockies.

In the early days, I guess, it was even more American than it is now. At least that's what Bergstrom Stromberg says. He's way past ninety and has seen some big weather in his day. Besides, he's heard all about the climate of the early days directly from his uncle, the famous Febold Feboldson. Febold was the first white settler west of the Mississippi, not counting Spaniards and Frenchmen who don't count anyway.

Take 1848 for instance. That was the year the Petrified Snow covered the plains all summer and held up the '48ers in their gold rush to California with the result that they became '49ers. At that time Febold was operating an ox train between San Francisco and Kansas City, because the snow prevented him from doing anything else.

Since Febold was the only plainsman able to make the trip that year, the '48ers appealed to him for help. His secret was to load up with sand from Death Valley, California. The sands of the desert never grow cold, nor did Febold and his oxen. This sand he sold to the gold rushers at fifty dollars a bushel, and they were glad to get it.

Then the '49ers began to swarm over the snow-covered plains in their prairie schooners. But before they reached the Rockies the jolting of the wagons scattered the sand and covered up every bit of the Petrified Snow. And that's the reason, according to Bergstrom Stromberg, that the prairies are so all fired hot in the summer.

Febold cursed himself twenty times a day for twenty years for selling the '48ers that sand. Then he spent the next twenty years trying various schemes to moderate the climate. He finally gave up in disgust and moved to California. Thus he set an example which all good Middlewesterners have followed ever since.

Or take the popcorn ball. There's a genuine American product. Most people think that someone invented the popcorn ball, but it's actually a product of the American weather. It invented itself, so to speak, on Bergstrom Stromsberg's ranch in the early days when Febold owned the place.

It was during that peculiar year known as the Year of the Striped Weather which came between the years of Big Rain and Great Heat. This year the weather was both hot and rainy. There was a mile strip of scorching sunshine and then a mile strip of rain. It so happened that on Febold's farm there were both kinds of weather. The suns hone on his cornfield until the corn began to pop, while the rain washed the syrup out of his sugar cane.

Now the cane field was on a hill and the cornfield was in a valley. The syrup flowed down hill into the popped corn and rolled it into great balls. Bergstrom says some of them were hundreds of feet high and looked like big tennis balls from a distance. You never see any of them now, because the grass hoppers ate them all up in one day, July 12, 1874.

But the Great Fog, I suppose, was the biggest piece of American weather that ever hit the Great Plains. It followed the year of the Great Heat which killed off the Paul Bunyan's Blue Ox. Near the end of that remarkable year, according to Bergstrom Stromberg, it began to rain and kept it up for the proverbial forty days and forty nights!

"But nary a drop of water hit the ground," said Bergstrom.

"Then what became of it?" I asked.

"Why, it turned into steam, of course. That there rain had no more chance of hittin' the ground than you have spittin' into a blast furnace."

This steam, as Bergstrom tells it, cooled enough to turn into fog. The whole country was fogbound. It was so thick that people had to go around in pairs, one to hold the fog apart while the other walked through it. The pioneer ranchers didn't need to water their stock. The cattle would simply drink the fog. It looked funny to see pigs with their noses up in the air rooting for fish and frogs. But the dirt farmers were as mad as the stockmen were happy. The sun couldn't shine through the fog and the seeds didn't know which way was up. So they grew downward.

Things were getting pretty serious. All the farmers had just about decided to go to California when Febold came to their rescue. He hit upon the idea of importing some English fog-cutters from London. But the English were so slow that Febold didn't get his fog-cutters until Thanksgiving, and then the fog had tuned to slush. He finally got to work and cut up the fog and slush into long strips which he laid along the roads so as not to spoil the fields. In course of time the dust covered up the roads and today you can hardly tell where Febold buried the Great Fog.

But many a rural mail carrier has cursed Febold and his English fog-cutters. For every spring, when it rains or thaws, that old Fog comes seeping up and makes rivers of mud out of all the country roads.

II

POST HOLES

If there was one thing which Febold wouldn't have around the place it was a mail order catalogue. And it was all because Eldad Johnson's grandfather tried to beat Febold's record for digging post holes. For Febold did and still does hold the record. But let's begin at the beginning.

When Febold first came west in the early days there was no need of posts or port holes, because there was no cattle or cultivated land. But as the frontier pushed across the Mississippi and onto the plains the pioneers began to feel the need of fences. They were familiar with only the two kinds which they had used back east, the rail fence and the stone fence. Since there were no stones or trees on the plains the early settlers were stumped. And they would be sucking their thumbs yet if it hadn't been for Febold and his post holes.

Just about this time barbed wire was invented and Febold got bust and bought a few thousand miles of it. His problem now was to get posts to put the wire on. This he did by digging post holes in the fall and letting them freeze all winter. Just before the first spring thaw he would dig up the holes and varnish them. Then he would put them partially back in the ground and string the wire. In time the varnish would wear off and leave the bare poles standing. Eldad Johnson says that many of Febold's post holes are still standing on the old home place on the Dismal River.

But Herebold Farvardson, another one of Febold's nephews, takes exception to Eldad's account. Herebold says he has never seen a frozen post hole above ground. It seems that there were some on the old hone place in the early days, but that Febold had to use them all up driving wells during the Year of the Great Heat. That was before the invention of the well-digger. Febold would drive a post hole into the ground and then another directly on top of the first one, and so on until he hit water. A hundred foot post hole makes a very fine well. Herebold says that if anybody doubts his story, just let him come up to the old home place some time and look at the well.

Luckily it really doesn't matter what became of the frozen post holes, because it wasn't long before the pioneers were shipping in real cedar posts so fast that the problem now was how to dig enough real post holes. It couldn't be done by hand and there was no machinery. Finally he recollected that the dismal sauger had a cousin, the happy auger, which had a tail which just suited his purpose.

The happy auger was a peculiar animal. It looked something like a kangaroo, that is, it stood on its hind legs and had a long heavy tail. This tail was the most peculiar part of this peculiar animal. It was shaped like a cork screw, an instrument very common in those pre-cellophane days. Every time the happy auger sat down it spun around on its tail and screwed it into the ground several feet. With this auger Febold used to dig enough post holes to keep hundreds of men busy cutting the posts. After the auger was seated with its tail screwed in the ground Febold would sneak up behind it and fire a six-shooter. The poor creature would jump twenty feet in the air and leave the prettiest post hole you ever saw.

Now Eldad Johnson's grandfather was one of those good-for-nothings who sit around all day looking through last year's mail order catalogue. As long as he was looking at the underwear section in the pink paper he was happy and harmless. But when he got to the firearms section in the green paper he began to get crazy ideas. One of his ideas he actually carried out and it made Febold pretty sore. What did that goofy grandfather of Eldad Johnson's do but order a machine gun from his favorite mail order house. When it came he loaded it up and hid it in the barn. Next morning he got up before Febold and sneaked the happy auger away and went out to beat Febold's record for digging post holes.

And that was the last of the happy auger. When the machine gun began to fire the poor creature jumped at every shot. It jumped in circles, in triangles, squares, parallelograms, and swastikas. At every leap it left a perfect post hole. It finally jumped in a straight line directly for the Gulf of Mexico and hasn't been seen since. Old timers say that Febold caught Eldad Johnson's grandfather and made him fill up all the post holes.

But he didn't quite get all of them filled, because in 1861, he ran away and joined the Confederate Army. So if anyone today finds a post hole with no post it's likely to be one of those which Eldad Johnson's grandfather made with the happy auger and his mail order machine gun.

III

THE COYOTE CURE

Not the least of Febold's exploits and public benefactions was the saving of the old cattle kingdom from the mournful coyotes which once threatened it with extinction. In the early days, according to Eldad Johnson, the ranges were infested with packs of wailing coyotes which were slowly but surely starving the cattle to death. These beasts used to set up such a wail that they would go about for days and days, never touch food or water, and finally die.

At first the ranchers organized hunting parties and went out to slaughter the coyotes, but whenever they came upon a pack the beasts began to bay so mournfully that even Febold, who was an extra tough hombre, didn't have the heart to shoot them. Eldad says he thinks it must have been these same coyotes that created the depression of 1837, they were that depressing.

After the coyote hunts had failed the cattlemen just sat around watching their doggies die. Not so Febold. He was thinking fast and furious on how to rid the country of this scourge. He thought of two thousand and six schemes, but discarded them all untried. However, he did accept his two thousand and seventh scheme. This was to import an animal more dismal than the coyote, so that this new animal could kill off the coyotes in the same way in which the cattle were being killed.

"What this country needs," said Febold, "is an animal more dismal than the coyote. And I know where I can get such a critter. I'll send up to the north countree and have Paul Bunyan send me some of them there dismal saugers. He's the mournfullest animal that be."

So Febold sent to the north woods for some dismal saugers. Now the dismal sauger is one of those animals you read about. He doesn't make a sound himself, but lumbermen have been known to go raving mad after they have met one in a swampy forest. The drip-drip-drip of the dank marsh water from the dismal sauger's cyprus beard does the trick.

In a few days Febold received the following message: "You crazy old Swede, you ought to know that the dismal sauger is a forest animal and can't live on the lone prairie. So I'm sending you a hundred gross of whimpering whingdings which ought to do the job. X. P. Bunyan (his mark)."

And how they did the job. In two days all the wailing coyotes between the Mississippi and the Rockies had crawled off and died of grief. No one except a drunkard ever sees a whingding any more, because they got to whimpering on each others' shoulders and finally cried themselves to death. Eldad says there used to be a popular song about the whingding which was entitled, "I See You in My Dreams."

The whingding was only one of the early American animals of the great plains. There were oodles of them before Febold, who was a great hunter and trapper, captured them all for the sanitarium of Dr. Keeley, the founder of the famous Keeley cure for delirium tremens. Dr. Keeley was able to deal only with the animals which were seen as the results of drinking imported European beverages. These animals, such as the griffin, the chimera, and the gargoyle, were parts of the old world tradition; methods of capturing them had been developed through the centuries.

Everything ran smoothly for Doc until his patients began to imbibe native American liquors, especially home-made corn whiskey which was the chief beverage of the corn growing states of the great plains. Then the doctor began to encounter giddyfish, ding-toed awks, lop-sided saugers, hodages, and such like American creatures. At first he tried the griffin cure on a patient who was bothered by a hodag following him about. But he soon found that European methods would never work under American conditions.

About this time Febold had to take Eldad Johnson's grandfather to the sanitarium and so became acquainted with the doctor's difficulty. "If I could only isolate and capture some of those American creatures," said Keeley, "I could develop serums and methods of cure."

"Leave that to me," said Febold. "Where I come from the woods, I mean plains, is full of 'em."

So when Febold returned he went to work and captured all the hodags, awks, and other such animals in the country and sent them to Dr. Keeley for experimentation. In return for this favor the doctor sent Eldad Johnson's grandfather home cured and never charged a cent for professional services rendered.

IV

THE WEDDING OF THE WINDS

Love or any sort of sentimentality is about the last thing one would associate with Febold, and yet the old codger must have had his moments. Or perhaps it is Eldad Johnson who has contributed his own sentiment to the story. Anyway each spring, according to Eldad, when the first warm winds from the South began to give everyone spring fever, Febold would get a peculiar far-away look in his grizzled old face and begin telling of those two winds which he met in his earlier days. But instead of going on about its business the blizzard lingered in the vicinity. Febold thought this most unusual, until he saw that a spring breeze was coming up from the South. Febold didn't know whether he was witnessing a rendezvous or an ambush. It proved to be the latter.

When the spring breeze saw the Canadian blizzard she suddenly stopped and seemed undecided whether to retreat or not. But the blizzard opened his eyes wider, stuck out his chest, and began to show off. He whirled a skift of snow across the hills and whipped it into fantastic drifts. He followed this with a rattle of hail and some blinding sleet. Febold meantime was nearly buried in snow.

At this display of masculine charm the poor little spring breeze blushed furiously. As the blizzard came closer she gave a weak zephyr-like cry and swooned in his arms. In a short while he brought her back to consciousness with a few blasts of his icy breath. They then talked earnestly for some time. Febold couldn't hear what was said because of the wind. The Canadian blizzard must have proposed marriage and the spring breeze must have accepted him, for they soon whirled off together with their arms about each other. Febold heard afterwards that they had gone off to Kansas to start up in the tornado business.

A few years later Febold had good reason to wish that he had tried to stop this match whole he had a chance. The offspring of this union became so numerous and so rambunctious that Kansas became a menace to the whole country. The pioneers began to write letters to Washington protesting against these young tornadoes. They even threatened to give up their homesteads and move to California unless something drastic was done. The Government finally got itself out of a bad mess by appointing Febold to patrol the Kansas border and chase all stray twisters back into the State.