

Subject: Here's Uncle Jim
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UNCLE JIM THE STORYTELLER

My great uncle, Jim Miskiman had been most places and done more things than any other person I ever knew. And he was a standout in any crowd. Tall and lean, with a drooping black moustache, he caught every eye. High cheek bones, a square jaw, and a swarthy skin gave his face a Slavic appearance, and the fact that he mostly wore black heightened the impression. To a nine year old boy he cut quite a figure.

When I first met Uncle Jim, I was a bit shy, but he seemed to like kids, and acted and talked as if we were old friends, so pretty soon I was chattering away like a magpie. Big and strong as he was, and full of adventures and bravery, he soon became my hero. According to Uncle Jim he had met and handled some pretty scary happenings in his day, coming away unscathed every time. He loved to talk about those times, and I was enthralled with his stories. Uncle Jim had a favourite expression that he used to punctuate his stories, or emphasize a point. "Sufferin' Cats!" he'd say. Sometimes he'd even begin with it. The first story he ever told me was about his growing up in the "Ould Land".

"We used to live beside a peat bog in Ireland," he began, "and sometimes when it was real dark we'd see strange lights out in the bog. Mostly they were almost white, but sometimes they'd turn a pale blue colour. And they took all different shapes and sizes, and kept moving around. Sometimes they seemed to flicker, and other times they'd kind of fade out, and then suddenly they'd get big and bright again. They never came near us though, so we'd often watch them until bedtime. Mother used to tell us they were the spirits of the people who lived there long before she was born. She always called them the Celts, or the Old People, and said they were getting together the way they used to do when they lived there." 'Sufferin' Cats!' Uncle Jim would say, and he'd stroke his long moustache and give a small smile. Then he'd continue. "Sometimes we'd be wakened in the middle of the night with the thunderin' of the horse's hooves in the pasture," he'd say. "They'd run like crazy things for a while before they'd settle down, and I could never go back to sleep 'til they'd quit. When I'd ask my mother about it next morning she'd tell me it was the piskies - - drivin' the horses mad. And she told me about how she'd seen the piskies one time at night. She said they were tiny little devils with sharp little horns and tails, and they had sharp wee forks, and they'd get in the horse's manes and tails and prod them, and the horses'd run like crazy till the piskies would disappear." 'Sufferin'!' he'd say as he slapped his knee and ended his story. Then he'd look at me under his bushy eyebrows to see how I was taking it, and if I was ready for another one.

He loved to tell about the time when he lived on the farm and the blackbirds were so thick. "Sufferin' Cats! those blackbirds were a nuisance," he'd say. "The fence around the barnyard was in a big circle, and the blackbirds would be lined up on it by the hundreds. When I'd feed the chickens those blackbirds would scare them off and eat up all the chicken feed. I used to shoo them away but they'd just fly up on the fence and wait till I'd leave and then they were right back again. Everything they roosted on was messed up. A terrible nuisance they were, and noisy too. Sufferin' - - I didn't know what to do to scare them off they were so bold. I had a rifle and a shotgun, but the rifle would only shoot one bird at a time, and the shotgun might get three if you were lucky. And then it hit me! All I had to do was bend the barrel of the rifle to fit the curve of the fence and I could get a pile of them in one shot! It took me a little while to get the bend in the rifle barrel just right though. I'd bend it a bit and then I'd set up a target way round the fence and shoot at it around the top of the fence. Then I'd bend the barrel a wee bit more till I got it

just right. After a while I could hit that target every time. 'Sufferin!' Then I just fed those chickens and set down and waited. Sure enough the blackbirds soon lined up on the fence. I just took careful aim at the nearest one and when I pulled that trigger that bullet went round the top of that fence and wiped out a hundred of 'em. After a couple of times like that I wasn't bothered any more by them pesky blackbirds ." And then he'd stroke and curl the ends of his moustache while he thought of another story.

Although I never knew it until after I had grown up, it was said that our little town had three liars. Fat MacDonald was one it was said, and Jim Miskiman was the other two. Which may account for some of Uncle Jim's heroic escapades as he related them to me.

"One time," he said, "I was workin' in the lumber camp, and when Saturday night came I wanted to go home so I could go to church, and spend Sunday with the family. It was winter and the lake was frozen and there was lots of snow. The teamsters used to make a road on the lake because it was flat, and never drifted like the dirt roads did. I was walking along the sleigh road on the lake when I saw these tracks like a cow's tracks alongside. Cloven hoofs they were, but they weren't like a cow walked. They went straight ahead like a man walking. Pretty soon I came to a place where they stopped and milled around a bit, and right there was a pile of cinders, like you get from burning coal. At first I couldn't figure it out. Then I got scared! Sufferin' Cat s! - it could only be The Devil, and he'd stopped to relieve himself! I was mighty scared I'll tell you, and I ran all the rest of the way to town hopin' I wouldn't meet him. And the next night when I got back to camp, there were hoof tracks at the back of the bunkhouse and going up the roof." And then Uncle Jim would twirl his moustache a bit, and grin.

All this time I was sitting absolutely rivetted. The Devil! Old Nick! I could see him with his two sharp horns and his long-shafted trident spear, walking along the sleigh road, and sneaking around the bunkhouse while the men slept, malevolence in his every move. I looked at Uncle Jim with my eyes bugging out, wondering what he would have done if he'd met up with Old Nick!

Reaching into his coat pocket Uncle Jim dug out a smelly old briar with a crooked stem - - "chest warmers" older people called them. Taking a jackknife from his pants pocket he opened a blade and loosened the scale inside the pipe bowl, then walked to the door and emptied it outside, tapping it on the doorjamb to loosen the last bits of scale. From the other side of his coat he found a package of coarse tobacco and packed the bowl full. Then from his pants pocket he pulled out a wooden match with a coloured head. Leaning forward slightly to tighten his pants at the back, he lifted his knee and drew the match quickly upward along the back of his right pant leg. The match flared brightly, and after the head had burned off, he held it to the pipe, puffing steadily until there were great clouds of blue smoke in the room. At this point Grandma came over from the sideboard where she was making a pie, and opened the door to let some of the smoke out. "Arrghh!" she muttered loudly as she hurried back to her pies. Uncle Jim had the pipe solidly between his teeth now, and was puffing regular bursts of sweet smelling tobacco smoke from it. I resolved right then that when I was old enough I would smoke a pipe just like it.

Uncle Jim never told any of his stories while Grandpa was around. Grand pa was a pretty religious man, and he said they were lies. And he didn't like lies. I didn't know they were lies though, and I wouldn't have cared anyway.

Uncle Jim's greatest asset was his inherent Irish ability as a horse-trader, and a natural bent as a story-teller. He loved trotting horses, Grandma said, and always had one that was just short of being a winner. Grandma told me how he'd have a nice black, or sometimes a bay, and he would curry and brush it till it's coat shone. Then he'd put a set of fancy harness on it that he had. And with the fairground only across the road from his farm, he'd drive over to the grounds and trot his

horse around the oval race track well before the race so everyone could admire him. And a beautiful sight he was too she said, with his shiny coat, and his fancy harness, but he never seemed to win any races. Uncle Jim didn't care though - he would still brag about him. 'Sufferin!' he'd say, "just wait till the next time. He was a slow starter that last race, but he'll pick up on the next one, you watch!"

Uncle Jim is gone many years now, his grave marked with a tapering, four-sided grey granite monument commemorating him and his three wives. From his three wives, all of whom died before him, he raised 19 children. I still have a picture of him in my memory, in his black serge suit (he always wore the same shiny black suit when he came to visit) with his long black moustache, his leathery face, and his jet black hair. Sometimes he wore a black fedora, making him look even more distinguished.

Uncle Jim lived to the age of 96, and likely enjoyed every day of his life. Grandma said he loved the bottle, but that was before I knew him, so it never affected our friendship. What his religious beliefs were I never asked, but I am flooded with recollections and images when I visit his grave. I can feel his presence, as he strokes his moustache and prepares another story. I particularly remember the cloven hoof story, and I wonder if he and Old Nick ever met up in that far off world where old heroes and story tellers go.