

Camden A-Z

by J. Jackson

Camden A-Z
based on a true story

Billy Sallywite saw the anteater first.

He didn't tell anyone, though. Oh, he tried, but no one knew what he was talking about. When Mrs. Sallywite gave birth to Billy, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck, robbing his brain of precious oxygen. Now a hulking thirty-five year-old man-child in bib overalls, Billy enjoys sounding the alarm for the Camden Volunteer Fire Department. He also sets off the klaxon every New Year's Eve, conscientiously warning the volunteers ahead of time, "Gonna ring the siren tonight. Don't come." Camden has never had a New Year's Eve blaze, thank the Lord.

The anteater incident occurred during that fallow, aimless time of year between Halloween and Thanksgiving.

The Sallywite house abuts the A & M spur on the outskirts of town. On the morning in question, Billy was sitting on the back porch steps, peeling an apple, when the anteater came ambling around the bend. Billy dropped his pocketknife and began to cry.

Six hours later, he was still weeping as he forked mashed-potato-and-peas aggregate into his grizzled maw down at Miller's Cafeteria. Charlie Miller mans the cash register and croons for the blue-haired Polygrip crowd who arrive daily to test their denture cream against Miller's coffee and pie. Charlie was just about to warble "Make the world go away" when he noticed the fat tears splashing down Billy's cheeks.

"Seen a ugly dog" was the only explanation Billy could provide.

"Did it bite ya?" Charlie asked, genuinely concerned.

"Nope. But I seen it, and it seen me."

The official credit for who spotted the anteater first thus went to Red Kite, who was idling his truck at the railroad crossing. He wasn't waiting on a train—just taking a moment to pick his teeth with a folded playing card. The anteater was still walking the tracks. The sight caused Red to do the first double-take of his life.

“Shee-yit!”

Ten minutes later Red was giving a blow-by-blow to the other customers as they stood in line at the Git-N-Split. Knowing Red to be a congenial liar (and congenial lawyer, for that matter), most folks discounted the tale. Del Blankenship, however, knew that Red mainly lied about fishing and fornicating, and as this tale pertained to neither of those things, Del gave it credence.

Del shot out the door so fast that Jenny Lynn didn't have time to hand over the sack of corndogs and burritos he'd just bought.

“Gonna get me an aardvark,” he muttered as his Ford spun out in a cloud of dust. In saying this, Del demonstrated a vocabulary more extensive than any of his cronies had previously suspicioned him of possessing.

Hunting high and low, Del finally bird-dogged the exotic animal on a gravel access road. The disoriented critter had reversed course and was now halfway back down the tracks to Crossett. Del, a former high-school quarterback and five-time rodeo champ, put both of these skills to use, knocking the anteater on its side with a flying tackle, roping its feet together, and hauling it into the bed of his truck, though in accomplishing this final task he threw out his back.

Del fished a warm Bud Light out of his tackle box. He didn't even notice the foam that spewed all over his hand when he popped the top, lost as he was in a P.T. Barnum reverie of fortune and fame.

All these doings transpired on a Wednesday. Hump Day, Del likes to call it, though his wife Raylene always hated that and found it crude, which could have been a mitigating factor behind their split. The two had met on a coon hunt, and it had been lust at first sight. Raylene is a blond-haired, blue-eyed stunner who doesn't mind getting dirty. Del is a handsome devil, though a little buck-toothed and jug-eared. Think Clark Cable meets "Smokey and the Bandit."

Del and Raylene were the closest thing to royalty Camden ever had. In high school, Del had captained both the football and the baseball team. Raylene helmed the cheerleading squad, was class valedictorian, founded the glee club, and edited the yearbook, in which her senior photo had the biggest credits caption. Del's caption just read "photo not available" under a blank rectangle—he'd been toking up in the A-V supply closet on picture day. That year, Del and Raylene were the King and Queen of Senior Prom. When they married, the townspeople were happy for them but also a little put out. It was like the town was somehow losing their favorite son and daughter. Two years later, the couple's divorce was greeted with outward shows of sympathy and inward sighs of relief.

Raylene pulled up stakes and spent eighteen months driving a cab in New York City before coming back to Camden. Upon her return, she decided capitalize on both her outdoorsy tomboy ways and her beauty queen looks. She rented out a Quonset hut, formerly a hardware and feed supply store, and turned the front into a beauty parlor called "Curl Up and Dye." The back half of the building became her taxidermy business, named "The Yellow Cub" in honor of her stint in the Big Apple.

On the Friday night after the anteater capture, Del brought the Williamson twins over to his trailer after their shift at the tool and die. He'd intended to charge five bucks admission apiece, but only could only Matt and Mark to agree to come over after promising them beer and weed.

The three men crowded into the trailer's rank, yellowed bathroom, taking turns peering over the shower's sliding door.

The anteater bucked its head and shuffled in place, the tub too cramped for it to turn around. The beast's toenails scritch and scraped against the porcelain. It sounded like a fork scraping melted cheese off a plate.

"Stinks like a wet sock," Mark opined.

"Like mothballs," Matt seconded. "Did a train mash it? Its head looks stove in."

"Have a little respect," Del scolded. "You're witnessing a miracle of nature."

"What's it eat?" Mark asked.

Del scowled and kicked at the tub with the toe of his boot. "Hell if I know. I phoned Raylene's cousin. He's a biologist over at Arkansas Tech. I asked him what this critter chows on and he got all prissy, sayin' he didn't have time for prank calls. If I ever cross paths with him, I'll wring his chicken neck."

"Could be a vegetarian," Matt ventured.

"No," Del countered. "Just look in its eyes. For sure it's a meat eater. What's the word for that?"

"Agnostic, I do believe," Mark exclaimed.

At this point, Del threw the twins out, muttering something about a box of hammers.

The next day, Del found half a box of Lemonheads on the strip of grass next to his mailbox. He popped one into his mouth but immediately spat it out. The candies were infested with little bugs. He fed the rest to the anteater, which really went for them, so Del brought a cartload of discount Halloween candy home from the Piggly Wiggly.

After that, the tales get kind of murky. Camdenites don't know the whole story, although they can piece a few fragments together, like working on a puzzle without being able to check the picture on the top of the box.

Several people spotted Del buying lumber and chicken wire at Mor-Value. Del isn't known for being handy with a hammer and saw, so his purchase raised a few eyebrows.

Many patrons of The Beer Keg, Camden's sole bar and pool hall, heard Del shooting his drunken mouth off about having "something big in the works" during the first week or two of November.

Half a dozen of the Miller's blue-haired blue-plate crowd tell of seeing Del the week before Thanksgiving slumped fast asleep in one of the barber chairs at Curl Up and Dye. He was covered from head to toe in daubs of pink calamine lotion and looked like he'd seen better days.

That same week, Red Kite brought his Pekingese in for shots at the vet. Del was in lobby pacing nervously but didn't want to talk.

On the day before Thanksgiving, everyone at the tool and die plant watched Del pick a fight with his foreman, Greg Foreman (yes, he's heard all the jokes a million times). Del unwisely tried to clock Greg's jaw, momentarily forgetting that Greg teaches tae kwon do in his spare time. All agree that Del deserved more than just the two broken ribs and bruised ego he received.

And that was pretty much it. Del scrapes by nowadays collecting cans off the side of the road. He ain't sociable like he used to be. If you get close enough, you can hear him muttering about how something "seemed like a good idea."

No one knows what became of the anteater. Some say that Raylene carried it over to the petting zoo in Fordyce. Others say she stuffed it and keeps it around as an end table or a divan. No one's seen it, though.

Everyone agrees that the town of Camden just hasn't been the same, hasn't been quite right, ever since the anteater. And some are of the opinion that it never was quite right to begin with.