Don’t Look for the Roadside Marker
By Mike West

H, THERE WAS A FIGHT, alright! Not the kind that makes the history books or is reflected on a roadside historical marker put up by the county or state. No metal plaque with colored arrows showing the movements of various opposing military units – but a fight, nonetheless.

It doesn’t take the assassination of some archduke or the sudden incursion across a geographic parallel to start a fight. The spark that ignites a battle can be as simple as a hole in a pair of britches.

Frank was not a mean kid. He was simply a fun-loving eight-year-old little brother in a small Depression-era Texas town. I suspect there were many such little fellows.

On that particular day, Frank and several older boys – one being his older brother, were meandering along the concrete porch which ran the full length of the northside of the Celeste, Texas business district.

Frank, as many a young fellow was prone to do, was carrying a sharpened stick likely cut from a persimmon or some other readily available tree. The nature of the wood is not important.

Such a pointed implement could have had a multitude of uses like stirring-up an anthill or engaging in a sword fight with an opposing knight but at that very moment, Frank allowed temptation to get the best of him and it found another use.

Perhaps it was a simple act based on opportunity and spontaneity or maybe there was an element of malice of forethought. I suspect it was the former.

In a flash, Frank took that sharpened stick and jabbed the older boy just ahead of him right in the “south forty”. There may have been second thoughts on Frank’s part, but we will never know.

Seemingly a rather innocent fun-loving prank but as I said earlier, a pair of britches were involved. It was a rare occurrence when such a prized and valuable garment could be had but especially during the Depression of the 1930s – and so they were to be protected from all undue wear and tear.

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and particularly from unnecessary holes.

Well, Frank’s well-placed jab not only elicited the desired scream from the older boy but an unfortunate tear in the fabric of the pants which left a terrible, ill-placed hole. As you can imagine the victim of the assault turned and gave the assailant Frank a pop on the head.

Certainly, this attack on a younger sibling could not go unanswered and immediately Frank’s older brother was involved. Being about 4 years Frank’s senior, the older brother lit into the victim with the torn pants.

In a flash, a fight was underway on the sidewalk in front of Mr. E. D. Bickham’s Grocery and Market. During the fight the two boys rolled down the steps into the street pokings and gouging all the way. I suspect with no small amount of cheering from gathering spectators. Eventually the two pugilists were separated, and no permanent damage was done to human flesh.

Frank and his older brother went one way and Leon went the other. I suspect the britches were patched – but what a place for a patch!

This is not the end of the story. Frank would someday become mayor of Celeste, Texas and his older brother, Dudley, would serve honorably from 1943 to the end of the war.

What of Leon? He would become better known as Audie Leon Murphy. You know the story.

“Battle of the Britches” location. 2018 photo of the store front where Audie Murphy as a youngster got into a fight. The store has since closed but still stands on the north side of U.S. 69 in Celeste, Texas. Photo courtesy of Google Maps.