

The Fulton Stock Sales by Ericca Thornhill

Grand Prize Winner ~ 100 Years Writing Contest ~ Callaway County Public Library

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One cool October Monday in 1912, a huckster drove his rickety wagon in towards Fulton Missouri, unaware that he had a stowaway. This stowaway, ten-year-old Wayne Robert E. Lee Maddox, known as Bobby Wayne to his family, was a tow-headed boy whose Fulton-spun overalls were in need of a good mending. He had climbed into the back of the huckster's wagon this morning while the huckster was bartering with the boy's ma over some fine colored feedsacks. Wayne knew that his mother would go on for hours—or so it seemed to a boy who didn't care nothing for matching patterns—about what designs Mrs. McCredie had bought down the road, and if Ma could perhaps get a few sacks of that particular pattern so that she could trade Mrs. McCredie for some of her extra green floral sacks.

But before Wayne could sneak on board the huckster's wagon, his bossy younger sister, Lacy, pulled him by the strap of his overalls, her pudgy fingers white with flour. “Bobby Wayne, you ain't going to Fulton today! Pa told you to stay right here and get the cellar cleaned up.”

“Let me go, Lacy Lynn, this is my one chance!” Wayne pulled until he heard his overalls rip.

“You made me tear your britches, you. Now I gotta fix ‘em.”

Wayne pulled on his now loose overall strap. “You ain't touching me.” He veered away from her grasping hands and stole towards the huckster's wagon. “Dontcha tell on me, neither, ‘cause if you do, I'll tell Aggie Crowson that you're in love with him.”

Lacy put her hands on her hips in fair imitation of her mother. “Boys.” She sniffed her nose at her brother, but as he worked his way through the overgrown garden, past the itchy old corn leaves and the cracked clay dirt, she didn't hinder his escape. Instead calling softly, “Bobby Wayne, you go by that new library for me, ya hear?” She pulled her library book from her apron pocket. It had flour on it. “Tell Miss Francis that I'm right sorry the book is late.”

“Sure thing, Lacy Lynn.”

Wayne took Lacy's book and ran for the wagon, stuffing the dusty tome into his bib pocket. Lacy was a full shine bookworm, reading all the time—while she did her chores even—and she never kept the books nice. Miss Francis would give him a chewing out for sure. He thought these thoughts as he dropped into the back of the wagon, wedging himself between dusty, but colorful, sacks of feed. The huckster didn't seem to notice Wayne when he finished his business with Ma, and saying farewell, the huckster turned his wagon back to Fulton. Wayne, and all the neighbors, knew that this particular man liked to do a little work on Monday mornings before the stock sales picked up. He would take Wayne right into town, his wagon wheels crunching on the brown oak leaves that scattered through the wheel ruts of their dirt road.

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The huckster sang some songs about the C&A railroad and the Katy Flyer, off key and warbly”

“Katy Flyer take me to Carrington,
I gotta get a job, gonna be a fireman,
gonna be a gandy dancer, make me some pay,
gonna make that whistle blow, going to work the rails,
Chicago and Alton, what a railroad day!”

They lyrics gave Wayne that feeling that all boys get at least once in their life, that feeling that all things are possible, if only one could take flight, and go. The wanderlust moved in his blood, and gave him encouragement that he could succeed in his mission.

And so the huckster took Wayne to Fulton, and as they reached the brick-lined streets near the square, as the wagon rattled ever more clap trappy, like a noisy cover for his movements, Wayne slipped over the side, jumping onto the dusty, uneven bricks.

He watched the huckster drive off through the throngs of people and animals who had come down for this October sale—one of the biggest weekends of the year—and he brushed the dust from the feedsacks and the flour from Lacy Lynn’s grubby mitts from his overalls, feeling pleased that he had made it into town without his Ma knowing. He would take care of his business, and be home before she would even know that he was gone. Nothing was going to make a bigger mess in the cellar than was already there anyhow, and he would be back in time to clean it and do his afternoon chores before Ma could complain.

The county seat of Callaway bustled on Mondays. Schools were let out so that children could help their parents with the stock sales. Men lined the street, chewing and sharing the tales from the county. There was the bellow of cattle and the smell of hogs; it was as if the farm came right into town. He could see at least three auctioneers bellowing out their songs just from where he stood. A man walked by in uniform, and Wayne gaped at him. The army was even here. A group of men walked past, almost bumping into him, and Wayne ducked against a fence.

They were talking about the series.

“There’s no way that Boston can win.”

“What are ya talking about? Tris Speaker is the bee’s knees.”

“And how!”

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The tallest of the men spit into the street. “The Giants have Rube. There ain’t no way those Red Sox are going to hit anything he throws at them.”

Their conversation faded as they meandered through the crowd, and Wayne looked over his shoulder. He would have to watch out for his Pa and uncles, who were supposed to be over with the mules, but they could be anywhere.

Callaway County was famous for its mules. Fulton sold thousands every year. Almost everyone he knew owned at least one good ole’ Missouri mule, and Wayne himself had one. She was a pretty, little dapple grey with a red spot on her rump that he had named Molly, he had raised her from a foal, and she followed him everywhere on the farm, or at least, she used to follow him. He had made a mistake, and he hoped to correct it today. He wasn’t sure how he was going to manage that, especially since he was supposed to be home cleaning the cellar. With Pa and his uncles watching their mules with the sharp eyes of men who were always looking for a bargain, it would be difficult to get his Molly away from them without them seeing him. But he had to try. Molly was his special mule.

“Bobby Wayne! I just talked with your pa. He said you weren’t a comin’ today!”

Wayne glanced at the rambunctious voice, glad to see his friend, Frank Crowson, Aggie’s little brother. They were some kind of distant relation to Dennis Crowson, the man who owned the big livery stable up the way, or so they always said.

“Quiet, Frankie!”

“Whacha hidin’ for, Bobby Wayne?”

“I gotta get me back Molly. Pa put her in with the sale herd.” Wayne leaned down to talk with Frankie, and Lacy’s book fell out of his pocket into the dirty street. Wayne picked up the book and absentmindedly put it back. “You gotta help.”

“Why how’d she get in the sale herd?” Frankie looked puzzled. He too had his special mule, a black one that won all the races the boys set up. He wouldn’t ever sell his Charlie. “Sure thing, Bobby Wayne.” Frankie hunkered down and the two boys peered through the streets. “How we goin’ to do that?”

“I reckon that Molly’ll come when I call her.”

“You fool. Your Pa’ll hear you and then where’ll you be?” Frankie bit his lower lip. “You gotta go in and just take her. Shucks, all you need is a bucket of oats.”

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“And where’d supposed I’d get a bucket of oats?”

Frankie spread his arms. “Look around. There’s bound to be some!”

“Whatcha boys doing?” A musical drawl belonging to twelve-year-old Gladys Sallmons came from above, and they looked up to see her standing there, her feet bare, her overalls rolled up almost to her knees, and two scraggly chickens in her arms. “You look like ninnies, squatting thar.” The chickens flapped, spreading feathery fluff everywhere.

Wayne stood with Frankie, while his friend pulled a white feather off his tongue.

Frankie stepped to her, dropping the feather on the ground. “Be quiet, Gladys. Bobby Wayne’s lost his Molly.”

She leaned towards the boys, swinging the chickens at them. “I know. You can’t miss Molly and that red spot. Bobby Wayne’s crazy to sell her.”

Wayne took a step closer. He had taken a step away. He had almost named his mule Gladys, and this appearance of his affection had his stomach in knots. He never knew what to say to the tall blonde beauty, but the possible lost of his dear Molly made him brave. “Whatcha mean?”

She pointed towards the other side of the square, where the mules were usually sold. “I saw a man talking to your pa. He had Molly.”

Wayne felt his heart stop. He had come as quickly as he could, and he was too late. He took off at a run, pushing through the crowds. “Molly!”

He dodged the clusters of farmers, the noisy auctioneers, avoided the muck on the ground.

“Wait, Wayne!” Frankie was right behind him. “I’m coming.”

A cluster of feathers next to him turned out to be Gladys. She was running and her chickens were making a racket. “Bobby Wayne, what will you do?”

He ignored his friends, his heart in his mouth, his feet pumping on the bricks. It had been a mistake that Molly was with the sales mules. He hadn’t be careful about putting her in the barn last night, he had let her graze in the field with the others. . And when old Albert McGrath came by with his new automobile, Wayne had plum forgot about Molly. His Pa might have let him get Molly back, but there would be no way that he would ever take her back from someone once he sold her.

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His feet took him to the mule area. It was organized chaos. There were two auctioneers, and hundreds of mules. Men milled about, slapping the animals on their sides, checking their feet and teeth, and spitting their tobacco on the ground.

“Wayne! What are you doing here, son?” It was his uncle.

“Uncle Hank, where’s Pa?”

“That way, son.” He pointed to a small cluster of animals. There was Wayne’s pa standing at the edge, his hat torn, his overalls dusty, his boots tied tight and well-oiled. He was folding money and putting it in his pocket. Molly was nowhere to be seen.

Wayne ran over, followed by Frankie and Gladys. “Pa! Where’s my Molly?”

His father pulled his hand out of his pocket and straightened his hat. “I sold her, Son.” He reached back into his overalls and took out some bills. He handed them to Wayne. “I’m mighty proud of you Son, she was at her prime, a good time to put her in the stock sales. I got a fine price for her.” He smiled, the glint of fatherly pride showing in his blue eyes.

Wayne took the money slowly, realizing that his father hadn’t known that Molly wasn’t supposed to be in with the herd. Wayne was a responsible boy, he had never forgotten Molly before. He looked up at his father, not willing to let little boy tears fall, especially not in front of Gladys. “Thank you, Pa.”

His pa straightened up. “What are you doing here Son? I thought that you were going to help your Ma today? Didn’t she need the root cellar cleaned out?”

Frankie spoke up, “But Molly...”

Wayne interrupted. “I gots to bring Lacy Lynn’s book back to that new library. Miss Francis will want it.” He took the book out of his pocket and waved it under his father’s face.

“Oh.” His father leaned over just as Mr. Vandelicht came up and started talking. “Son, I got someone else here to bargain with. I’ll see you at supper.” He showed his mules to the man, talking about the Richland Church choir between hawing about the mules.

Wayne felt like his insides were made of rocks. He hadn’t even gotten a chance to say goodbye to Molly, let alone get her back. She was his friend, and now she was gone.

“You gonna give up just like that?” Frankie crossed his arms.

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“Maybe the man’ll sell you Molly back?” Gladys looked thoughtful. When Wayne didn’t say anything, she backed up and held her chickens by their feet. “I gotta get these back to Ma. Bobby Wayne, Molly was such a purty mule.” She stepped quickly over some mess left by a mule, and disappeared into the throng. “I won’t forget her, Bobby Wayne!”

“Come on, Bobby Wayne,” Frankie chided, pulling them through the crowds. “He just bought her, he can’t have gone far. Let’s look.”

Wayne appreciated his friend’s perseverance and let Frankie lead him around the stock sales. Frankie was a town boy, his father worked at the plant that made overalls, and he was one of the best in math at school. He and his family actually had a telephone, so Wayne considered him to be rich. Years ago, when he first found out, he told that to Frankie. His friend said, “Rich? Naw, Ma just can’t live without talking to her family up in Auxvasse.” Other times, he had played with Frankie during the school pie suppers and springtime fish fries. Frankie was a good friend, but not very good at finding mules. The boys wound their way through the confusion at the square, not really knowing who they were looking for.

Suppertime came and went and they did not find Molly. They ate the cold barbeque pork chops that Wayne’s father had packed, and shared biscuits with his uncles. After that, Frankie said, “The library’ll be opening now. Ma said to get a souvenir booklet from Miss Francis.”

Wayne remembered Lacy Lynn. “I’ll come too.” He patted his bib pocket. The book was gone! “Aw shucks! I lost Lacy Lynn’s book!” The boys looked around. Wayne finally found it, on the ground near his uncle’s mules. The book had been stepped on by a mule, its front cover was half torn off. “Miss Francis’ll tan my hide for sure!” Wayne clutched the book. “Oh that Lacy Lynn!”

Frankie looked downcast. “You are having one heck of a day, Bobby Wayne.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Wayne thought of Molly, and the book didn’t seem so bad. They trudged over to the library.

The library was a brand new beautiful grey building with a red tile roof, a building that Wayne had spent several summer and fall days looking at and exploring, but today, as he carried the torn book to the desk of Miss Francis, the librarian, he couldn’t find any interest in the brand-new Carnegie library. He slowly pulled the book out of his overall pocket, and slid it on the table. “I’d like to return this for my sister, Lacy Lynn.”

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Miss Francis leaned over the table as she noticed the appearance of the book. “Bobby Wayne Maddox! You grew up in a barn or somethin’? This was a brand new book, and look at it! In tatters!” She glared. “Do you know how many people are waiting to borrow this book?”

Frankie spoke up. “Twern’t Bobby Wayne’s fault!”

Miss Francis shushed him with just one look. “You returned the book, Bobby Wayne, it is your responsibility.”

Wayne looked at the torn book, spattered with mud and flour still clinging to its edges. He knew that he could cry and Miss Francis would probably forget it, but his pa always said to step up and get back in the saddle. Miss Francis would probably forget about this book, but she’d never let him borrow another, nor Lacy Lynn for that matter. He put his hands in his pockets, and felt the crumpled up money. “I can pay for the book,” he said, holding out the bills.

“Why Bobby Wayne, where’d you get all that money?”

He gulped. “I sold Molly.”

“Your pretty little mule?”

Wayne nodded.

Miss Francis took the money, counted out what she must have considered would be fair for the price of the book, and she gave the rest to Wayne. As he reached for the change, she pushed the dog eared book to him. “I ought to give you this, Bobby Wayne, after all, you paid for it.”

Wayne took the book. “Thank ya, Miss Francis. Lacy Lynn’ll read this over and over, you know how she is.”

“My yes. That Tarzan is new this year, and I think she has checked it out twice before.” Miss Francis patted Wayne on the shoulder. “I’m real proud of you, Bobby Wayne, selling Molly and all that.”

He ducked his head towards her and followed Frankie into the bookshelves, tired of adults being proud of him for being so stupid as to lose his best mule. Frankie rubbed a grubby finger over the spines of the books as he moved down the aisles.

Wayne said, “Whatcha looking for, Frankie?”

“I dunno. Something with battles.”

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“Bobby Wayne! Bobby Wayne!” It was Gladys again. She ran up to them, panting as if she ran all the way to the library from the square. “I found her, I found her, Bobby Wayne!”

The boys stared at Gladys. She was still barefoot but her pigtailed were in tatters, and she was reduced to just one chicken, that squawked and flapped its wings as she held it by its claws. “You gotta go get her, Bobby Wayne!”

“Gladys McGrath!” Miss Francis had followed her to the bookshelf. “Get that poultry out of the new library!”

“Yes’m.” Gladys ran towards the door. “Come on, Bobby Wayne!”

The boys ducked past Miss Francis and raced for the door, meeting Gladys in the street in front.

She ran towards Fifth Street. “This way! Oh Bobby Wayne, she’s missing you something sorely! Her braying was so loud and pitiful!”

Wayne ran after Gladys, spitting out the chicken feathers that seemed to fill the air. Frankie panted behind as Gladys led them to another section of livestock that was spilling into another part of town that usually didn’t deal with the stock sales. Indeed, it was a very busy day for the auctions. There were more men in army uniforms here and Wayne didn’t know what to think. Pa had been in the army, his pa had fought in the Callaway Guards in the Civil War. Wayne had a deep respect for the military and he felt a strange reluctance to get Molly back from these awesome men.

Gladys pointed out a group of horses and mules. “There, see her?”

Indeed, Wayne noticed that his grey mule was mixed in the throng. Seeing her there, knowing that she would soon be gone, he had to try. He ran up to the man who looked like he was in charge. “Sergeant, sergeant!”

“Yes?” The man smiled at him funny, and Wayne suddenly remembered that there were other ranks besides sergeant. He hoped he had used the right word.

“I need to buy back the mule you bought from my pa. She warn’t supposed to be in the sale.”

The army man put his hands on his hips. “She warn’t, eh?” The man scratched his ear. “I reckon I can find another mule, if you pay me for her.” He quoted a value.

“But that’s more’n you paid for her from my pa.”

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“The army has to eat, son.” The man leaned down. “Look, I’ll let you have her for the same price I bought her for, but don’t tell anyone I did this for you.”

Wayne pulled out his money. “Here it is.”

The army man counted it. “You’re missing fifteen cents.”

“That was for the book.” Wayne pulled out the tattered library book that now belonged to Lacy Lynn. “I can mail you the rest later.”

The army man pulled out a cigarette and lit it. “Sorry son, army can’t take charity. Git yerself another mule.”

Wayne and his friends stood at the edge of the group, while the army man moseyed over to stand with some others.

Frankie whispered, “Let’s just steal her back.”

Gladys looked scandalized. “Frankie!”

Wayne looked over at Gladys. Her chicken was feebly flapping its arms. “Ya think a chicken is worth fifteen cents?”

Gladys put the chicken behind her back. “I’m real sorry, Bobby Wayne, but that Tarzan book was worth about three of this here chicken.”

The three of them sat on the edge of the street, Wayne thinking furiously how he could get his Molly back while at the same time feeling like she should go and help the army, that was the patriotic thing to do. And besides, men didn’t go back on their promises, and so she was gone forever.

“Bobby Wayne? What are you doing here in the dirt?”

Wayne looked up. His father was standing over him. “Son, let’s go home.”

Frankie and Gladys scattered. Wayne stood up. “Yes sir.”

His father put his hand on his shoulder and looked around. He squeezed Wayne’s shoulder and then spoke to the army man.

After a brief conversation between the two men, the army man waved Wayne over. He followed the man to Molly. The sergeant patted Molly’s neck. “I reckon you might want to say goodbye to your friend here.”

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“Oh Molly!” Wayne put his arms around the mule. “You’ve been a good mule! I’m sorry I put you in the field with the rest of the stock.” He patted her on her soft nose, and she flicked her long ears towards him, and said, “Hee haw.”

Wayne heard the army man talking to his pa. “I feel sorry for the poor child. He can have the mule back for the price he’s got.”

Wayne squeezed Molly harder. His father spoke, and Wayne knew what he would say. “No, we made a fair trade. That boy has to learn that his actions have consequences. He forgot his duty towards this mule, and if you keep her, he’ll never forget his duty again. You’ll take good care of her, won’t you?”

The army man replied, “She’ll go to my division, the boys there are kind to their animals.”

Wayne looked up and blinked back tears. “You are going to be an army mule, Molly. You’re going to serve the United States like Grand Pa Pa.” He rubbed her long ears and she leaned into him.

“Time to go, son.”

Wayne patted Molly one last time. “Yes sir.”

Wayne didn’t look back as he followed his pa back to his wagon. They climbed on to the high seat above, Pa chirruped to the mules in the harnesses in front, and they hee hawed, pulling the wagon with their strong shoulders. They rode in silence, Wayne, a courageous Calleweigan to his core, said, “She’ll be happy in the army, won’t she, Pa?”

“Of course, Son. You saw her perk up her ears didnt’cha?”

Wayne nodded. “I can buy a couple little mules for the money she earned us, and raise them, huh Pa?”

His father nodded. “You’d be on your way to a good farm that way, my boy.”

They pulled into their yard, and Ma came running out. “Wayne Robert E. Lee Maddox! I should tan you inside and out! That cellar ain’t cleaned and I been worried sick!” She came up to the wagon and chided Pa. “Did you see that your son up and ran off, shirking his chores today?”

“Ease up, Martha, Bobby Wayne’s been a man today.” He climbed down from the wagon and moved to unhitch the mules. “I’ll tell you about it inside.” He leaned over and his eyes grew stern. “You listen to yer ma, Son. Git in there and clean out the cellar!”

“Yes sir!” Wayne high tailed it to the cellar out back.

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About an hour later, as the sunlight was just beginning to fade and Wayne was busy separating the rubbish from the good roots, Lacy Lynn came in. "What did Miss Francis say?"

Wayne pulled out the book. "She said that you could keep it, but you gotta take better care of the books."

Lacy's eyes lit up and she hugged the Tarzan novel. "Oh thank you, Bobby Wayne!" Her eyes sparkled. "You can be a right ole darn good brother sometimes!"

Wayne smiled at his sister. "I'll do better looking out for you from now on, Lacy Lynn."

She put her hands on her hips. "Boys!" They laughed, and then she got in on the mess, helping her brother sort out and clean the root cellar.

Postscript

Wayne grew up to be a very responsible young man, and, when the country entered WWI, he served his nation proudly. While working in the trenches of Europe, he ran across Molly, who was pulling artillery. They served alongside each other bravely, and when the war was over, Wayne brought Molly back to Fulton, where he bought a small farm, married Gladys, and kept Molly well all the days of her life.