

Uncle Hu Hu

By Don Basnight

Dad said they buried Great Uncle Hubert in a piano case. I have never seen a piano case, and I am not sure one would be big enough. We called him Uncle Hu Hu and he was huge. Even into his sixties his physical strength was used on the farm like a secret weapon no money can buy. He could hold a pissed-off cow for castrating, or pull a barbed wire tight enough to be nailed to a fence post. He would just put his weight into the fence wire and pull. It would stretch and sing like a punished banjo. He could throw bales of hay high onto the second floor barn loft.

Out of school one summer, I pulled up to the barn lot and noticed four or five men struggling with the front end of a tractor. A couple of cousins, a couple of uncles, and granddad were there, along with Uncle Hu Hu. It seemed the tractor had a bad front tire, and they had set about changing it. This was no riding lawnmower, this was a big Ford. Wrenches and the new tire were laid to the ready. Then came the moment I expected someone to set a jack, but instead, Uncle Hu Hu stepped forward and hitched his Pointer overalls. He squatted in front of the axle of that F4000, stabled himself on his size fifteen brogans, and began a two arm curl of the front end of that old work horse. The strain in his shaking arms was frightening. His back was as straight as a bank column; his thighs, parallel to the ground, were as stable as the concrete picnic table at Fowler's Food Store on Franklin Street. His neck turned red well beyond the farmers tan. You could see the pulsing in his carotid as the front axle lifted off the ground. He did not have to spit out a "Hurry up, damn it!" my cousins jumped to the task, awestruck, snatching the old tire off the teetering front end and bolting the new rubber tight. Down it bounced, and I leapt back as Uncle Hu Hu staggered from the release of the weight. Had I not been quick I might have been stepped on or crushed. "Good God, Hubert!" his brother mumbled as he turned away. "Whatcha reckon



that weighs Granddaddy?" I asked. "You boys get him a Pepsi," was the only reply.

He was granddad's younger brother by nine years and lived next door on the farm. Married three times, and widowed twice, I sometimes imagined my aunt's demise, God forbid. I only knew Aunt Ebbie; his second wife. She was a sweet wisp of a woman who was a wonderful cook. When I was grown I learned she died of cancer. Because of his obesity most folks assumed he would go first of a heart attack or stroke, but no, time after time he outlived his wives and lived deep into his seventies.

At the Farmers Exchange, the town's men and farmers mix as they buy and sell supplies, grain, young plants, and work clothes. Some are dodging work, others the heat of the day, but they all look up when Uncle Hubert comes in. He would step on the big flat metal plate of the freight scale to the thrill of the idle men in the store. The arm on the big dial face would spin 'round twice before it would settle near the big number, everyone leaning in to see. The men would howl! Pushing four hundred pounds, none could compare to Hubert's sheer size and some would egg him on to show some feat of strength with bets, cajoles, and dares. Not to disappoint, Uncle Hubert would offer

some contest and let guys strut around the bay area claiming some way they could best him. After a few dollars were put at risk in a friendly wager, Uncle Hu Hu bent and grabbed the belly of a fifty pound burlap bag of feed grain. He tucked it under one big arm pit. He grabbed another fifty pound burlap bag of grain feed and tucked it under the other sweaty arm. He bent down and while a sales clerk was laying yet another bag across his big broad shoulders, he picked up two more burlap bags, one in each hand. With two hundred and fifty pounds in his arms and on his neck he then clenched one more bag of grain in his wide mouth and began to stagger up the stairs to the warehouse loft! The greenbacks were flying!

Later in his life, after Aunt Ebbie had passed, Grandmamma sent my cousin Susan and me over to his house one Thanksgiving afternoon with a platter. Susan went ahead of me holding down the wire fence to cross into Uncle Hubert's yard. Down past the smoke house, and over the "step over" creek, past the bamboo thicket. Goo, our nickname for Susan, opened his sliding glass door and let me go in first. I used two hands to carry the feast across the black and white tile. He was on the porch day-bed, his preference to coming over

and folding in with our house full of folks on holidays. He lay on his side, his great bulk at ease with his bushel basket sized head cradled in his huge hand, held high by a crooked arm. His ear a squeezed grapefruit half; wild hairs sprouting here and there. His tee shirt was pulled up some showing soft side-belly.

"Whatcha got there, Boy?" he said looking at my cargo.

"Where do you want me to put it Uncle Hu Hu?"

"You and Goo bring me some Thanksgiving? Just set it right here." patting the side of his enormous torso. I set the platter on the side of his belly where he ate without sitting up. It did not rock or slide, there was no risk of losing any food. I looked around the sun porch while he began to eat the contents of grand mamma's gift. The porch held battered rattan and a knotty pine wall of framed certificates and accolades. I read a newspaper clipping of where Uncle Hubert won the swimming race at Sparrow's Pool, beating out all the boys including Samuel Lloyd a collegiate athlete. He had won by inches. Susan and I set with him awhile. Years later my cousin Rob found him dead in his home. Uncle Hu Hu did not come to the barn that morning and Rob went looking. He was 79 and could more than fill any piano case I can imagine.

Don Basnight is a real estate sales person in Carrboro who has learned that old people are just young people that have lived a long time. He lives in Chapel Hill with his wife and loves exploring North Carolina.

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Chatham Park continues to move forward in Pittsboro and Chatham County with exciting plans on drawing boards and new retail construction at the entrance to the project located across 15-501 from Northwood High School

Q: What is Penguin Place and what will be located there?

A: Penguin Place is the first retail center to be built in Chatham Park. It is where the Root Cellar Café & Catering will open its second location. Owners and Pittsboro residents Sera Cuni and Susan White first acquired the former Foster's Market in Chapel Hill in 2013 and rebranded it in 2014 as the Root Cellar. Susan grew up in Chatham County and Sera moved to Chatham in 2003. "We love this community and look forward to bringing our scratch-

made food to Chatham Park and to helping our local economy grow." The 3,725 square foot Root Cellar Café & Catering is projected to open in late 2017/early 2018.

Joining the Root Cellar in Penguin Place's 14,000 square foot retail specialty building will be Bottle Revolution, a bottle shop and bar carrying local, Triangle, and NC beers. There's a self-serve wine station too. Beer and wine selections will rotate offering different price points and styles.

This is also the second store for Bottle Revolution owners Lewis Hendricks and Julie Paddison. Opening is slated for 2018.

Penguin Place will feature sculptured works from local artists William Moore and Edwin White.

Q: What is Mosaic and what will be there?

A: Mosaic at Chatham Park (Phase 1) is a 44-acre lifestyle center. When completed, Mosaic will add over \$150 million in tax base to Pittsboro and Chatham County.

Tenants will include a brewery with a restaurant/tasting room, a 120-room hotel, a 125-unit artist colony for residents

55 and older, a 250-seat live performance theater, a first-run movie theater with 8 screens, a community church, class A office space, apartments, a language-immersion day care, a specialty grocer, several farm-to-table restaurants, a coffee shop, fitness center, urgent care office, dental/medical/optical services, local pharmacy, spa + hair salons, and general mercantile.

Mosaic at Chatham Park (Phase 1) will also include: public art, an outdoor, live performance stage, a "works yard" (an open-air and conditioned market space for local merchants), play areas and family gathering places, multi-modal access to scale with bicycle lanes, appropriate access points and parking areas.

Mosaic at Chatham Park (Phase 1) is being developed by the ECO Chatham Group, a partnership between local developers John Fugo of Montgomery Development and Kirk Bradley of Lee-Moore Capital Company.

For more information please visit the site and download the leasing brochure from www.mosaicatchatham.com