

## ***On a Personal Note...***

***Submitted by James "JJ" William Johnson, AAFA # 1189***

This story was told to me the first time by my cousin, Franklin Johnson. It was repeated almost verbatim from a number of family members over the next ten years.

In July of 1998, Holly and I had traveled from our home in Saint Petersburg, Florida to De Queen, Arkansas to investigate a tombstone with the engraving of Chas P. Johnson. A genealogist friend of mine had found it while canvassing the West Line Cemetery in that County. When we arrived, the caretaker of the cemetery met us and identified the stone as that of my grandfather and answered many questions about the my father's family. She told me, "If you want to know about the Johnsons, just drive down this road a piece and you'll find Frank Johnson's place. He knows all about your family."

So, Holly and I drove down the dirt road until we came to the Johnson's farm at a sharp bend in the road. By the time we pulled onto the property, several dogs surrounded our car and were bayed at us strangers; chickens walked about the front yard crabbing about this and that and I'm sure I saw two pigs run off into the nearby woods. On the front porch of the small house sat a shirtless man and near him, leaning against the wall, was a shotgun. To Holly, it was just too rustic and forbidding and she refused get out of the car.

I had seen this sight so many times growing up on Crawley's Ridge, it seemed safe enough to me, so I left the car and strolled up to the house with my biggest smile. I introduced myself and told the half-naked man who my father was and after that, all was well. We even managed to get Holly out of the car.

For the next six days, we visited with Frank and his wife, Mildred. I was beside myself with excitement and had hundreds of questions. Eventually I got around to this one: "How did my grandfather die?" Well, the room got quiet; the kids stopped scampering; the women stopped cooking; the men stopped smoking and even the dogs looked up to see what was going on. Everyone looked at Frank for the story. (Holly later told me that the whole scene scared the bejesus out of her.)

Frank leaned back in his rocker, smiled and told me this story.

***"Your grandfather was a fireman on the De Queen Railroad and all the engineers wanted him on their trains because he could shovel coal all day going out and all night coming back in. He was big and he was strong and he was quicker than a banny rooster on bad shine. He wrestled around the County for a while and no one could pin him and he was so good, he started wrestling professionally as the Arkansas Fireboy. My dad and my grandfather drove up to Wichita once to see him and he won three matches one right after another.***

***"Once, when Uncle Charley was here in West Line, a bunch of his brothers and cousins came over to his house. They was liquored up pretty good, and told Charley that there was a traveling circus or medicine show or something like that over in Broken Bow, Oklahoma and that they had this wrestling bear. They told him that the owner of the bear took bets against all comers and they talked Uncle***

*Charley, after several drinks, to ride over to Broken Bow for a go at the bear.*

*“So, all eight of them got on their horses and rode west out of Arkansas toward Broken Bow. They didn't get there till one o'clock in the morning, cause they got lost twice. A couple of the boys woke up the bear-man, treated him to a few drinks, and talked him into having a special wrestling match that night. When the man saw that the boys were pretty well heeled and headed down the road to a long hangover, he agreed and took them to a rented barn where the bear was kept.*

*“Soon, the bear was muzzled and a rope ring was set up. Lanterns were lit and straw was scattered about the barn's floor. Here were the rules: one, no eye gouging; two, no hitting the old bear in his private parts; and three... well there weren't no three. Three five minute rounds were to be fought with a one minute break between. After that, ten minute rounds until either the bear's arms were pinned to the floor or uncle Charley cried uncle. (Frank broke out into a full laugh at his own joke and everyone in the room laughed with him until his face became serious and dark. The room went quiet again. He leaned toward me in his chair almost whispering his words).*

*“That's when Uncle Charley sobered up. And that's when he seen this was no joke and he was about to go up against an aging but huge bear boar. This was no joke for sure and Uncle Charley was having second thoughts about the whole thing. But the boys had all wagered pretty heavily on Uncle Charley and promised him a sizable chunk of the winnings after the fight. So uncle Charley took several more swigs from the jug, stripped down to his long johns and slipped into the ring.*

*“Now I know you've heard tell that you shouldn't ever wake up a sleeping bear. Well, that's just what them boys done and the bear was less than happy about it. They told me later that they weren't sure if the bear was trained to snarl, scratch the air with its clawless paws and bare its teeth but it sure looked real to them. Now they were having second thoughts. But it was too late. Uncle Charley was feeling the shine and couldn't be talked out of it.*

*“Before they knew it, the bear-man hammered on a bell and bear took out after Uncle Charley quick-like and it caught him for just a mite, bending him backwards some. I don't know how but Uncle Charley managed to roll out of the bear's hug and around the ring they went. The bear chasing and Uncle Charley running and rolling in the straw to beat Dixie. The bear-man kept yelling, "Get out of the ring, if your beat!" Uncle Charley would yell back, "When the rounds over, who's gonna stop the bear?"*

*“In time, it did end and Uncle Charley took his place across from the snarling bear. One of his brothers told him, 'Give it up, brother; you can't pin that bear. Hell, Charley, you can't hardly out-run it!' But my uncle had his dander up and wouldn't hear of it. When the bell rang for the second round, Charley started running and rolling just as he had in the first. It was January and the bear's breath was fogging up the whole barn as it chased Uncle Charley all over the ring. Just when the bear thought it had him, Charley would just roll out of its clutch.*

*“In the eighth round, the bear began to show its age and was running mostly on frustration because it ouldn't catch my uncle. After ten minutes, the round ended and the bear-man came over to talk to Uncle Charley. 'If you want to call it quits, I'll return half of your money and we'll call it a night.' Uncle Charley shook his head. 'How's about we up the ante?'*

*“The bear-man scratch under his hat. 'What else you got to divvy, son?' Uncle Charley grinned. 'Eight*

*fine riding horses and their saddles. That should come to about a thousand dollars.' Well, the boys went crazy. They were yelling and jumping about like frog legs in a greasy skillet. But they was stuck. No one was going to go against Uncle Charley, especially since they was the ones that done talked him into the whole deal. After some thought, the bear-man agreed.*

*"By round fourteen, the bear was really tired. It mostly stayed in the middle of the ring, turning as Uncle Charley ran around the inner part of the ropes. In time, the old bear just watched him with his head until, in the twenty-first round, it hardly looked at Uncle Charley at all. The boys kept yelling, 'Jump on his back, Charley. Ride him down.' But Uncle Charley had other plans.*

*"Well now, the sun was fully up when the fight reached the thirty-second round and Charley was running as strong as ever. Of course by now, half of Broken Bow done heard what was happening and clogged the barn by the dozens. Early drinking and heavy betting greeted the morning.*

*"The end came near the last minutes of the forty-first round. The bear was breathing heavily and was almost asleep. Uncle Charley began to slowly circle, closer and closer to the bear, never taking his eyes off the beast. Then, of all things, Uncle Charley began to sing to the old boar. 'The yeller rose of Texas that I am goin to see...' All the men there were flabberblasted and quieted down to see what would happen next. Soon the tired old bear was nearly on his back, wanting nothing more than to catch up on its lost slumber. Still singing softly, Charley crawled onto the old bear's soft belly, slowly pushed its huge arms into the straw and sung the words, 'One, two, three.'*

*"At that, he slid off the sleeping boar and rejoined his kin. The bear man was genuinely peeved and at first refused to pay up. But many of the folks at Broken Bow had seen the feat, and many of them had lost money betting against the bear, so they threatened him pretty good until the unhappy bear-man forked up the loot.*

*"Now the boys bought some more shine and left for West Line about noon but they didn't make it home till nearly midnight cause they got lost twice.*

*"Word got spread all about; how Uncle Charley had pinned that bear and it was even written up in Ripley's Believe It or Not! He was a hero and professional wrestlers from all over the country challenged him. One challenge came from Europe.*

*"But all was not well. When that bear got Uncle Charley in the first round, it hurt him pretty good. I guess he pulled something because he got real sick, went to a TB hospital in Wichita for a while and after a year or so, he died from a crushed lung.*

*"People came from all over to Uncle Charley's funeral, including almost the whole population of Broken Bow. Charley's dad, my grandfather, loved him so much, he bought him a metal casket from Little Rock to bury him in. It might of been the first one used in Sevier County."*

Now that's the story, as I remember it and it was the most wonderful thing I ever heard. I was so proud to be a Johnson and the grandson of the bear-fighting Arkansas Fireboy.

Just before Holly and I left for Florida, I pulled Frank aside and asked him, "Is that story about my

grandfather really true?"

He looked at me hard for a second, then smiled. "I only told one go-to-hell lie in my whole life."

"What lie," I asked.

"The one you just heard," he grinned. Then he laughed until tears filled his eyes.

As a footnote, Frank died in 2004 and once again, Holly and I traveled to the West Line Cemetery. I was so happy to see that Frank was buried in a metal casket. I guess that just shows how much everybody loved him.

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*(Continued from Page 18, Alford's in Texas Cemeteries)*

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Saint Stanislaus Catholic Cemetery- Anderson Grimes Co.

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58 Harold F. Alford, Sr. b. 1 Jun 1924 d. Jan 1978 computed age: 54  
h/o Virginia Lee Lemay

59 Virginia Alford b. 15 Feb 1928 d. 29 Jun 2003 computed age: 75  
w/o Harold Frank Alford

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### A Sadder Note

[Ed. We received a message from JJ Johnson last fall that we want to acknowledge. We need to thank all those who are continually protecting our freedom.]

"I though you and the rest of the family would like to know my son-in-law, Don Clark, was killed in Mosul, Iraq on November 15, 2008. The OH 58 D Kiowa Scout helicopter that he was piloting went down just outside the city. We buried Don Monday [11/24/08] with full military honors near his home in Dothan, Alabama.

"He is survived by JJ's daughter, his wife, Jamie; four children, Danielle, Brittany, Jon and Bailey and his parents, Don and Linda. He will be greatly missed..."