



Shorty and the Professor

by Robert McKnight, DSPE
(illustration by Nicole Kendrick)

Shorty was not short. He was a very skinny six foot five. He was called that name by the folks in the valley because they didn't know his real name and because they saw humor in irony. For seven years, he had been living in the railroad caboose that sat with a single boxcar on scarcely more than a hundred feet of track in the middle of Mr. Rankin's peach orchard. That piece of track had once been part of a spur that ran from the railway's main line into the center of the orchard. Like so many similar railroad spurs in the valley, it had been used to move the harvested fruit to the packing house. Motor trucks had long since taken over that job. The abandoned caboose and boxcar were oversights on the part of the management of the railroad, the cars having been overlooked until nearly all of the rails on the spur were removed. Since

the cost of retrieving the over-aged, and now isolated, rolling stock would have been greater than its value, the railroad wrote it off, and Mr. Rankin had used the boxcar to store ladders and pruning equipment during the winter and the caboose as a wash-up and lunch room for the picking crews during harvest time.

Shorty had appeared one year as a member of the picking crew. It was soon obvious to Mr. Rankin that Shorty was not the brightest member of the crew, but he was a conscientious worker who out-picked them all. At the end of a day, Shorty would hang around to help load the trucks. Without being asked, he kept the caboose tidy. After the harvest, Mr. Rankin, who had moved out of the valley and could no longer keep a close

eye on things, agreed to let the helpful Shorty stay on in the caboose as a sort of caretaker. In the succeeding months, Shorty had turned the old caboose into a comfortable little home. He had extended the water line from the street a quarter of a mile away. He built a septic system with an extensive drainage field and installed a propane tank to provide for both heat and light. Thinking ahead to the picking seasons, Shorty retrieved discarded windows, doors and kitchen and bathroom parts from the junkyard across the valley and remodeled the boxcar into a facility that the crew could use without having to disturb his privacy in the caboose.

Shorty took his job as caretaker seriously. He saw that the orchard was irrigated and fertilized properly and frequently walked the whole 24 acres inspecting the condition of each tree. It was on one of these inspection tours that Shorty found the Professor asleep under a tree. It was a warm spring day, the orchard's blossoms filling the air with a luscious, sweet perfume. The sound of swarms of pollinating bees had hummed the Professor to sleep within minutes after he had crawled under the tree for a short rest in the shade. Hitch-hiking, he had just been passing through the valley with no particular destination in mind. His last ride had left him off a mile or so up the road, and, by the time he had walked to the orchard, the idea of lying down seemed like a good one.

The Professor wasn't really a professor any more than Shorty was really short. But when Shorty gave "Shorty" as his name that spring day, the Professor thought that the title of "the Professor" would be equally, and as humorously, inappropriate. That's the handle by which the Professor became known throughout the valley; he never told his real name.

When Shorty found the Professor under the tree that spring day, he wasn't sure what to do,

but, believing that Mr. Rankin would probably want him to find out what the stranger was doing there, he stooped down below the bottom branches and asked politely, "Uh, hey there, Mister, are you asleep?"

The Professor jerked awake and replied, "Not any more, young fellow, not any more. Is there something that I can do for you?"

Shorty answered, "Well, Mister, I'm kinda watchin' things here, an' I don't know if Mr. Rankin wants people sleepin' in his orchard."

"Let me assure you again, young fellow, that I am not now sleeping in Mr. Rankin's orchard. I do not know your Mr. Rankin, but I do not see how he could possibly object to someone availing himself of the shade provided by his fine trees on a warm day like this. And being in charge of things here, you are surely to be complimented. This orchard looks superbly tended to. And what, if I may ask, is your name, young fellow?"

This is when the incongruous names of "Shorty" and "the Professor" were exchanged. Except for names, neither of the two ever asked the other anything about himself, but they hit it off so well that Shorty, when he grew hungry, invited the Professor back to the caboose for lunch. The Professor slept that night on the cot in the converted boxcar and had lived there ever since.

Living patterns in Mr. Rankin's orchard fell into a comfortable routine. Shorty would care for the orchard and do odd jobs in a very professional manner on the farms and ranches in the valley, often being paid in foodstuffs produced on the site. The Professor spent most of his time in the boxcar, but, at least twice a week, he would walk the two miles to what passed as the social center for this part of the valley. Called "the corners" by the locals, this was the group of buildings located around the intersection of Fremont

Street and the Highway. There was the gas station on the northeast corner next to the feed store. Diagonally across the street was the combination Post Office and grocery store operated from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM by Mrs. Wilton. Keeping the same hours next door was what was once a produce stand where the Wiltons had sold their farm products to motorists driving along the two-lane highway. It had grown into a hodge-podge of connected structures where everything from peach blossom honey to dubious antiques was for sale. It was run by Marge Grooten, Mrs. Wilton's daughter. In the back of Marge's place was a lean-to serving as the branch library for the valley.

The Professor had wandered into the library several times and had impressed Marge with his obviously wide-ranging knowledge. Marge and the Professor discussed a variety of topics, touching at last on education and the problems many of the valley's youngsters were having with their school subjects.

"You know, Professor," said Marge, "the children could use someone like you to tutor them."

The two talked about it, and it was decided that the Professor would stop by the library every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon at 3:30. Any student having trouble with his or her homework could come into the library instead of walking home. The Professor not only was knowledgeable in any and all of the school subjects but also had a knack for explaining things to the youngsters. There was a noticeable improvement in the grades earned by students living in the valley's west side, and the nearby residents developed a fondness for the Professor.

It so happened that the Professor was also a four-star cook, and Shorty was soon in the habit of taking his meals in the boxcar with him. There, the Professor would prepare the

fresh-picked vegetables and the poultry, pork and farm-raised fish that Shorty brought back as payment for his work on the farms in the valley. The Professor bought seeds at the feed store and had Shorty plant rows of vegetables along the sunny, south side of the boxcar. Occasionally, the two of them would get in Shorty's old pickup and drive to the corners to get fertilizer at the feed store or to load up on staples at Mrs. Wilton's grocery. They were a strikingly humorous pair. The rail-thin Shorty, always dressed in overalls, was a little more than a foot taller than the pudgy Professor in his shabby three-piece suit. Shorty was in his early thirties; the Professor was probably creeping up on eighty.

Once a month, Mrs. Wilton, as postmistress, would hand the Professor a small pension check of some sort that would arrive at the corners as a piece of general delivery mail. He would endorse it, and Mrs. Wilton, as grocery store proprietor, would cash it for him, knowing that the money would all be back in her cash box by the time the next check arrived. Shorty had a weakness for desserts, and, since the Professor was a dedicated pastry chef, no small part of what they bought with that money and hauled back to the orchard was baking supplies.

The picking season after the Professor moved into the boxcar was the first that Mr. Rankin knew of the Professor's presence. Mr. Rankin wondered if he shouldn't object, but he didn't want to make Shorty unhappy for any reason, the orchard being well taken care of with no effort on his part. Furthermore, after the Professor sent him home with a couple of the best peach pies he had ever eaten, he decided to leave everything just as it was. He soon realized just how wise that decision was when the Professor began advising Shorty on the care of the orchard. Each year, the yield of peaches increased and the need for pesticides decreased until the orchard was the most profitable one in the

valley. This made it all the more disturbing to Mr. Rankin when the sheriff served him with a notice from the County Zoning and Building Permits Department referring to his orchard and instructing him that he must “vacate the agriculture-zoned property under his control of all unlawfully housed human inhabitants within 90 days.”

It was never known how word of the orchard residences of Shorty and the Professor got to the county seat forty miles away, but Mr. Rankin knew that he wanted to keep the two on his property. When news of the eviction notice spread throughout the valley’s west side, its inhabitants agreed with Mr. Rankin’s desire to keep Shorty and the Professor right where they were. Shorty was doing journeyman-quality work all over the valley at handyman prices. By this time, the Professor was enabling more than a dozen students, who otherwise would have been expelled, to remain in school and had inspired nearly twice that many youngsters to perform closer to their full potential. Several of the valley’s residents suggested to Mr. Rankin that he consult with Judge Conway, the retired municipal judge now living the life of a country squire on the old Conway family ranch out on Stover Road about three miles from the corners. Mr. Rankin needed no encouragement and drove out there the next day.

After studying the notice to vacate, the Judge asked, “Were permits obtained from the county before Shorty did any remodeling?”

“No, Judge, I’m afraid not.”

“Hmm. Too bad. Did you apply for a minor subdivision to create a residential lot before allowing Shorty and the Professor to live on the property?”

“No, Judge, I’m afraid not.”

“Hmm. Too bad. I’d like to sound hopeful—Shorty has helped me a lot here at the ranch,

and I know the good work that the Professor does down at the corners—but I don’t see how you have a leg to stand on. My advice is to get that odd couple out of your orchard by the deadline and avoid difficulties with the sheriff.”

Reluctantly, Mr. Rankin notified Shorty and the Professor that afternoon. Shorty was devastated. The caboose was the first home he ever had, and he couldn’t imagine himself living anywhere else in the valley. He began to think that he should move on and resume the itinerant life he had led before coming to the valley. The Professor was no longer of an age when living on the road had much appeal. To Marge Grooten’s surprise, he showed up at her place the next morning and spent the day in the library. He read through everything on file in the branch concerning the county’s ordinances and, before going home to his boxcar, gave Marge a long list of other material he wanted her to have brought from the main library at the county seat.

During the next few weeks, the Professor returned to the library, time after time, to go through the latest batch of county government records delivered by the bookmobile, each time leaving Marge with another list of requests. His research proceeded backward in time through the ordinances enacted by the County Board of Supervisors. It wasn’t until he reached the year 1886 that he hit pay dirt. It seems that in order to persuade the railroad to build spur lines throughout the then-developing orchards and truck farms in the valley, the county had passed an ordinance promising the railroad not to interfere with the housing arrangements it might make for its work crews. The ordinance read in part, “No ordinance shall be enacted nor shall any ruling, regulation or requirement be promulgated by this county or any agency thereof affecting the use, location or condition of any carriage, car or other contrivance with flanged wheels while on rails, be they sections

of main line track, sidings, spurs or any portion of the aforementioned.” The recorded minutes of the meeting at which the ordinance was passed—unanimously—included testimony indicating that the railroad would never provide spur lines for their community without protection from the expensive interference that it had suffered at the hands of an overzealous building regulation authority in another county in the state. The supervisors agreed that an ordinance so favorable to the railroad was only reasonable and a small price to pay for the economic boon that the spurs would bring to their largely roadless valley. However, the ordinance had been forgotten after the crews had finished their work and had left the county. Having already studied the records for the years since 1886, the Professor knew the ordinance had never been repealed.

He immediately wrote a letter in his old-fashioned, looping longhand to the County Zoning and Building Permits Department pointing out the ordinance of 1886 and strongly suggesting that they seek competent legal advice before having unlawful notices served on law-abiding citizens. A copy of the letter was addressed to the supervisor representing the west side of the valley. She asked for an opinion from Beaufort, Beaufort and Brigands, the law firm retained by the board to provide its legal counsel. As usual, they accumulated a whole lot of chargeable hours in arriving at their opinion. It was in three parts, the gist of which was:

1. The 1886 ordinance is still in effect and is applicable to the caboose and boxcar in Mr. Rankin’s peach orchard since both pieces of rolling stock rest on a section of rails, however short.
2. The 1886 ordinance should be repealed so that it would not apply to future instances similar to the one in Mr. Rankin’s orchard. Due to the “grandfathering” principle of common law, however, the

repeal of the ordinance would not affect the legal status of Mr. Rankin’s caboose and converted boxcar.

3. An extensive historical study of the county’s ordinances should be undertaken to disclose any instances of other obsolete ordinances remaining in effect. Their own firm of Beaufort, Beaufort and Brigands was mentioned as being especially well qualified to do the study.

At their first meeting after receiving the opinion, the supervisors acted on all three of its points. First, they drafted and dispatched a letter to the Director of the County Zoning and Building Permits Department reprimanding him for his high-handed treatment of the citizenry and instructing him to rescind the notice served on Mr. Rankin and to send letters of apology to Mr. Rankin, Shorty and the Professor. Next, they repealed the 1886 ordinance by a unanimous voice vote. Thirdly, they recognized that the upcoming election was only a few weeks away and that the electorate was in revolt against government waste by tabling a proposal to fund the research effort by Beaufort, Beaufort and Brigands. To preserve appearances, several supervisors tried to justify the decision to table the proposal with remarkably unoriginal observations such as “let sleeping dogs lie” and “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

When Shorty and the Professor were told by Mr. Rankin that they no longer had to leave the orchard, the two settled into their snug little homes hidden between the trees in the center of the peach orchard more deeply than ever. Shorty quit thinking about leaving the valley and planted another row or two of vegetables for the Professor. The Professor prepared a series of lavish banquets that had the two of them feasting far into the night.

~The End~