

# FIRST REPUBLICAN

*"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself . . ."*

*---Franklin D. Roosevelt (A Democrat)*

*By John S. Halbert*

In the early-nineteen-fifties in the town where we lived in Northwest Alabama, everyone was a Democrat. Although the General Election was held in November, everything was settled in the Democratic Primary in May. Republicans? The grown-ups told us youngsters that Republicans were grim, fearsome, hard-bitten people from Up North who were bent on destroying our Southern way of life, and that the Democratic Party stood to defend us against such an unholy onslaught. "The Democrats are the good people," everyone said---so it had to be the truth. And, as our parents were Democrats, we kids just naturally figured we were Democrats, too---which meant that Republicans weren't particularly welcome in our town, where we Democrats all lived together in peace and harmony.

But one day, a *Republican* moved to town and opened a laundromat right across the street from the Post Office. A Republican! In all my eight years I had never actually seen one, which made me curious---and afraid. Was this the start of a Republican invasion? Would more Republicans follow this one and ruin our idyllic way of life? I had heard people at the Baptist Church talk about something called the "Second Coming." Was this *IT*---the Beginning of the End? All sorts of dreadful thoughts welled-up in my mind about this awful Republican who had come from somewhere Up North to start the Yankee takeover that would end life in our little town as we had always known it.

As soon as the news reached High Point, we called an emergency meeting of the Gang at The Hideout. It was such an important matter we even invited my sister and the Church of Christ preacher's daughter to join us. We boys felt that if we had someone with connections to The Church with us---even though she was only a girl---perhaps her presence could somehow give us moral courage and strength to face this terrible threat.

At the appointed hour all of us gathered at the camouflaged entrance. One of the boys pulled aside the concealing branches and in single file everyone crawled down a leafy tunnel into the secluded, wooded sanctuary. This was the first time any female had ever been in our male sanctum and the girls gaped in amazement. "So *this* is where you guys keep sneaking off to!"

Our Exalted Leader waved his hand. In solemn tones he told us what he had heard about the Republican who was now in our midst. Unfortunately, none of us had any idea what he actually looked like. Everyone was concerned that without an adequate description of the man, we might not be able to spot him in time to take evasive action.

Based on how we imagined a Republican probably looked, he undoubtedly had horns, a forked tail, and carried a pitchfork. These were vital clues! Did he also have red, scaly skin, pointed ears, and a pair of knobby pulsating antennas on top of his head? How about a pointed

black goatee and a thin moustache? Did he walk around in a cloud of smoke? Did he have a cruel mouth? These were important questions we couldn't answer. By now, the girls were nearly in tears and concern lined the faces of us boys. Everyone was agitated at the terrible calamity that had befallen our little Southern town---and all of it caused by this---this---*Republican*.

Someone suggested that perhaps some volunteers could sneak around to the laundromat and try to learn more about the horrible man. All the others seized on this idea. "Let's do it!" With one voice we vowed to try to get close enough to the Republican to get a good description of him. If we knew what he actually looked like, we could plan some sort of strategy to counter his inhuman deeds!

By now we had completely forgotten our earlier fears. After all, since this Republican had come from Up North where Yankees plotted to destroy us, it was entirely fitting and proper for us to defend ourselves! The Crusade would start right here in The Hideout---the South's first line of defense. All of us youngsters in our hidden lair were shaking with excitement at the prospect of saving the entire South from utter destruction at the hands of the Republicans!

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The next day, when Dad announced he was going to the Post Office, my sister and I casually convinced him to let us go along for the ride. As soon as he disappeared into the building, the two of us hopped out of the car. Here was our chance! Glancing about to make sure no one was following us, and satisfied that we were not being observed, we scooted across the street. After pausing a few seconds to catch our breaths, and with another furtive look behind us, we tiptoed down the sidewalk toward the laundry. Both of us were beside ourselves with excitement. We were actually close to the store owned by the Republican!

Suppressing shivers, the two of us eased up to the big picture window and peered around the sill. The only sign of activity in the place was an average-looking man in front of a washing machine leaning over a basket of clothes. Was he the infamous Bad One? After a few seconds we decided he looked . . . well . . . normal. Certainly not scary enough to be the Republican. After all, the man was wearing a tie, and, of course, Republicans didn't wear ties. Besides, this man didn't have a tail, or a pitchfork, or any of the other horrible things of Republicans. No, this guy was not the Republican.

*Then he spotted us spying on him through the glass!* Oh, no! He put down the clothes and headed toward the front door in our direction! We were rooted to the sidewalk with fear, unable to move! *Was* he the Republican, after all? If he was, were we going to be killed? Worse yet---would we be *eaten*? In terror we saw the man open the door and step outside!

"May I help you?" he asked, in a pleasant-sounding voice.

"Who, me? Why, I, uh, I---" I was sure I would faint. My sister's mouth was opening and closing, but no sounds came out. This looked like the end for both of us!

"I said, may I help you?" the man repeated in a calm tone. "Are you all right?"

"Y---yes---no---ah---" I blinked. "We were just looking . . . looking---for a Republican, I guess. Yes! That's it! We were looking for a Republican!"

The man smiled, revealing a perfect set of teeth. "I'm a Republican," he modulated, matter-of-factly. "What's the matter? Are you kids scared or something? Are you afraid of me because I'm a Republican? My goodness!"

I swallowed hard and glanced at my sister. Her bulging eyes darted back and forth, as if looking for an avenue of escape. "That is . . . I meant---we just wanted to '*see*' a Republican . . .

we had heard---“

"Well, kids, tell everybody to come see us," the man grinned, with an open gesture, "and we'll do a really good job on their clothes!" He burst out laughing. "You don't have to sneak around! Just tell your friends and your folks to come here, anytime---honest!" He looked at us in amusement, as if trying to hold back another round of laughter.

I couldn't believe it! This man---this *Republican*---was just like one of us! He wasn't dangerous! No pitchfork! No red, scaly skin! No forked tail! No pulsating antennas! (To tell the truth, he looked like a Democrat.) He was being nice to us! And---best of all---we were still alive!

"Now, maybe you two should run along," the man chided. "Your mama and daddy will probably wonder what happened to you."

That was good enough for us. My sister and I scampered back across the street and clambered into the back seat of the car, just as Dad was emerging from the Post Office.

He opened the driver's door and slid behind the steering wheel. "Sorry it took me so long. Hope you weren't too bored!"