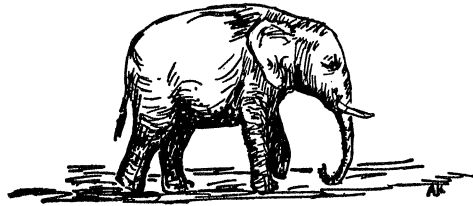


## Chapter VII

# THE CIRCUS and UNCLE BEN



I want to tell you more about Uncle Ben Potter. He never married so he spent most of the money he earned on our family. Fact is, if it had not been for him we would have gone without a lot of things. In those days there was at least one big circus in town every year. Either Ringling Brothers or Barnum and Bailey would come to town. Uncle Ben never failed to take us to the circus every year. It was a big treat for kids that lived in the country and didn't get to go anyplace very often. It took a lot of money and effort plus a lot of patience to take five or six of us twenty miles to a circus and get us all home again.

Besides the main show, there was always a side show or two that we wanted to see. I think it was the first circus I ever went to that we went into the side show to see the largest woman and the smallest man in the world. The man outside was hollering "Step right up, come on in, only 25 cents, one quarter of one dollar to see the woman that weighs 600 pounds and the man that she can hold in her hand." When we went in, there weren't many people in the tent. The fat woman was sitting in a big rocking chair. She pointed to me and said "Come here, little boy." I was bashful and scared so I didn't say anything. Uncle Ben took me by the hand and said, "Come on and talk to the lady." She picked me up and sat me on her lap. She was big all right. Her arm looked bigger than my body and I must have looked like a little baby sitting on her lap. She said, "I would like to have a little curly-haired boy like you." I looked up at her and didn't say anything because I couldn't think of anything to say. Then she kissed me on the cheek and put me down on the ground. After that I kind of felt circus people were just like other people.

Outside again there was circus lemonade and we had to have some. Then we had to have a balloon apiece, plus some popcorn and a lot of things that went with the circus. We always got what we wanted at the circus. Uncle Ben always said "The circus only comes but once a year so we are going to see it all."

One year Uncle Ben took Bill and me to a Fourth of July celebration in Redding. I think I was about 10 years old at the time. There was a lot of excitement in town that day. The events of the day were being held on land along the railroad, part of which is now covered by the old Diamond Match building and the California Parts and Equipment building. One event they

advertised was that a man was going to ride a mean horse without a bridle to hold him. Two men on horseback were going to herd the bucking horse and keep him on the lot where the other events were taking place, so the crowd could see him buck. The man got on the horse all right. Then the man that was holding the horse pulled blindfold and bridle off at the same time. The horse started to buck but at the same time he started to run toward the stable. The stable was located on what is now the Ford sales lot. The horse bucked and ran so fast that the herders never could catch up with him. The rider saw that the horse was going to buck right into the stable where the ceiling was pretty low so he jumped off just as the horse went in the door. In the jump he broke one leg. This took place just before noon. Then about one o'clock there was some excitement that was not on the program. A lot of the stores sold firecrackers and fire works. Bill and I were in a store on the north corner of the 1500 block on California Street buying some firecrackers. I don't remember the name of the store. Somebody in the back of the store yelled "Fire." He came running to the telephone to call the fire department. We ran outside and the smoke was already boiling up in the air. In a few minutes the fire crackers and the fire works in the store began to go off and within a few minutes the whole building was on fire. I don't remember how much of the block burned but I remember it was a big fire and it took most of the afternoon to get it out. The fire put a stop to the rest of the celebration.

Uncle Ben bought each of us boys a twenty-two rifle for our tenth birthday. Mother would never let us have a gun until we were that old. None of us ever became a Davy Crockett when it came to shooting. Maybe if we had had to go to bed without our supper as he did when he missed a shot, we would have become better shots. As it was we all became fair shots though and with the help of old Shep who could put a squirrel up a tree in a hurry, we killed a lot of grey squirrels.

When Earl got old enough to get his gun, we used to go hunting together. When we would get our guns out, old Shep would begin to wag his tail and get a smile on his face as if to say "Now we are going to have some fun." Shep sure could understand English and he could speak it pretty good without ever opening his mouth. One day we had been hunting most of the afternoon. We had killed five squirrels and were on our way home. Shep was trotting along between us and he looked up and said in his way of talking, "Well, boys, we did pretty good today didn't we? I smelled 'em out and run 'em up the trees, then I barked and looked right up at 'em. Then you shot 'em (today you only used 3 or 4 shots on each one) they fell to the ground I ran and picked 'em up and brought 'em to you. That one you crippled though was the most fun. I hope next time we go hunting you will just cripple more of 'em cause I like to bite 'em and kill 'em. Now you will skin 'em when we get home. Your Mother will cook 'em. You will have a good meal and I will get the scraps. Yes, it's been a good day and I hope you

boys like me as much as I like you.”

Then there was the day we wanted to go quail hunting. Shep came out eager to go as he always was. I said, “Shep, you stay home. We are going to hunt quail today and you will scare them so we can’t get a shot at them.” Shep drew his tail between his legs and with that hurt look on his face, he looked up at me and said, “Aw, let me go with you, I won’t scare your old quail. Then we might run into a squirrel and you couldn’t get him without me.” By that time he could see that I was beginning to feel sorry for him and he would begin to smile and show a little hope. Then I would say, “Oh, come on if you feel that way.” Shep would jump up on us and say, “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I knew you would let me go if I begged hard enough.”

We killed quite a few quail with our twenty-twos before we got old enough to own and shoot a shotgun. One of the neighbor boys had a shotgun and when he was climbing through a fence it went off and shot him in the hand. It damaged his hand so badly it had to be cut off at the wrist, so Mother would never let us have a shotgun until we were older.

Uncle Ben worked on the Calkins ranch two miles from our home. He didn’t work Sundays so he always came home to spend the day and to get his clothes which Mother always kept washed and ironed for him. She told me to hitch old Dolly to the buckboard and go get Uncle Ben on Sunday morning. When I got there Mr. Calkins wanted him to take two horses and put them in his upper pasture which was on our way home. He got on one horse bareback and led the other horse. I came along behind in the buckboard. Everything was going fine until we came to a slough of water which was about knee deep to the horses. The horses wanted to drink and some way the horse Uncle Ben was leading got the rope under the other horse’s tail. He started to buck and Uncle Ben, who had had a little too much wine to drink that morning, landed on his head and shoulders in the water. I couldn’t help but laugh because I knew it hadn’t hurt him to fall in the water. When he got the horses to the edge of the water, he found a piece of board and he began to use it along with some of his tall cuss words on the horse that bucked him off. I thought he was going to kill him but the horse pulled away from him about that time and it took both of us about a half hour to catch him again. Before we got home, Uncle Ben was sorry for what he had done. He asked me not to tell Mother that he had been drinking too much. I didn’t tell her, but I don’t think she needed any telling.

Uncle Ben was born September 15, 1867, and died March 12, 1905, making him only 38 when he died. He wasn’t sick very long and when we heard of his death, you can bet there was a pretty sad bunch of kids and we shed a lot of tears. He was more like a father to us than our own father, because Father was away from home so much we hardly knew him.