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A Lost Chapter from MARK PENN GOES TO WAR: The Draft Dodger.

Middleton High football coach Rod Cooper cried when Conrad Miller quit school. At 6-3, 230, Conrad was the next Bronko Nagurski, a bruising fullback on offense and crushing linebacker on defense.

Coach Bernie Bierman of the national champion University of Minnesota Gophers drove down from Minneapolis to watch the Cardinals scrimmage. His quiet nods of approval had the town frenzied with rumors for weeks.

Then Conrad's widowed mother died from a ruptured appendix, and there was no one to keep him in school past his sixteenth birthday. He lived alone in the small family bungalow downstream from the treehouse Mark Penn and Swede Larson had built in a stand of black oaks along the Minnesota River.

After quitting school, Conrad worked at odd jobs: furniture mover, iceman, sawmill helper, and construction laborer. Now, at twenty-one, he was custodian of the city dump, which was a half-mile downstream from his property. Mark and Swede had become friendly with Conrad in June during the national scrap rubber drive when he let them scour the dump for old tires, hot water bottles, girdles-- anything to aid the war effort.

The boys lost track of Conrad until a scorching Wednesday afternoon in late July. They were sitting on their haunches pitching pennies against the shadowed box office wall outside Aces Park after practice. Mark was the batboy, Swede a ball shagger for the local baseball team.

Frank Kunkel skided his reconditioned Rollfast bike to a dusty stop in the loose gravel of the parking lot. "Hey, you guys heard about Conrad Miller?"

The boys dropped to a sitting position. Swede asked, "What about him?"

Frank swung an imaginary rifle back and forth, and made a firing sound with his mouth. "Old Conrad's holed up in his house with a shotgun. He's threatening to shoot the draft board. Lard Ass Morton, too." Frank closed one eye, aimed the rifle again, then biked away with his tires spinning in the gravel.

Swede got to his feet. "This I gotta see. Let's go."

Mark hopped on his shiny Elgin Red-Bird and Swede on his old, fenderless Schwinn, and they pumped toward the Bottom Road. They dumped their bikes in the weedy ditch just beyond their treehouse, and ran long the river bank and into the cedar grove behind the Miller house.

Conrad stood on the screened back porch with a shotgun cradled in the crook of his left arm. He was shirtless under his grimy bib overalls.

Swede stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Conrad's head snapped in that direction, and took the gun in both hands. Swede gave him the thumbs up. Conrad grinned and waved the boys inside. He slapped them on the back and shook hands so hard that Mark's eyes watered. Once again, he marveled at Conrad's brawny arms. Mark had seen Conrad lift the front end of a Model-T off the ground and move it around like a wheelbarrow.

"Good to see you guys," Conrad yelled. "Bad time though. Come on, I'll show you."

The trio navigated an irregular path through the kitchen and its boxed collections of tobacco cans, Watkins bottles, magazines, and Mason jars. There was a wringer-less Maytag washing machine in one corner and a dozen chamber pots stacked along a wall. The oak dining table looked like a messy checker board with uneven rows of hubcaps filled with nails, screws, bottlecaps, marbles, and slugs. The walls were plastered with curling cigarette, cola, and beer posters.

Conrad's collie Shep sniffed at the boys' dirty Keds. Mark stroked his rough coat. Swede's short kick sent Fred the cat tumbling and whining under the table. Two years ago, his dog King had lost an eye, then his life to a cat. Swede had a long memory for such things.

When they reached the enclosed front porch, Conrad eased open the dusty Venetian blinds. "Have a gander at that."

Mark and Swede peeked outside. Beyond the front yard cluttered with abandoned cars, Police Chief Morton was having a nose-to-nose conversation with Andrew Mosley, president of the draft board. Both men's faces were sweaty and red.

"They're trying to arrest me, would have already if it hadn't been for this baby." Conrad patted the barrel of his Winchester Model 12.

Swede frowned. "Why?"

"They want me in the Army."

Mark wrinkled his nose at Swede, who seemed as puzzled as he was.

"What's wrong with going in the Army?" Mark said. "Wish I was old enough."

"What's wrong is I don't want to go."

"How come?" Swede said.

"'Cause I'm what they call a pacifist."

"What's that?" Mark said.

"That's a person who don't believe in war. Here, read this letter." Conrad pulled a crumpled sheet of paper out of his back pocket and gave it to Swede.

Swede passed it to Mark, who knew that his pal didn't want to embarrass himself by showing what a poor reader he was.

Mark read the letter aloud:

Mr. Conrad Miller  
Route 1  
Middleton, Minnesota

Greetings:

Having submitted yourself to a local board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the armed forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you have been selected for training and service in the United States Army. You will report to the Middleton armory at 9 o'clock July 15, 1942, for a physical examination.

Andrew Mosley  
President  
Draft Board #15

Conrad grabbed the letter out of Mark's hands and stuffed it back in his

"I've got another one around here somewhere with stronger language. That's what old man Mosley's doing out there. He came to the door the other day and threatened to send me to Leavenworth Prison for ten years if I didn't take a physical."

"Maybe you should see a lawyer," Swede said.

"Mosley is a lawyer. Anyway, if I'm a pacifist, I don't have to go, no matter what they say. I've been reading about it in books."

Mark caught movement out of the corner of his eye as Dolly Fischer sashayed from the parlor onto the front porch. Swede saw her at the same time, and raised his eyes to the ceiling in disbelief.

Dolly wore skin-tight dungarees and a wrinkled blue work shirt with the tails out. She was twenty with frizzy, washed-out blonde hair and a spotted complexion. Dolly usually spent most of her free time hanging around the Greyhound bus depot checking out the drivers and other unaccompanied males.

Conrad's eyes sparkled as he put his free arm around Dolly's tiny waist. "You guys know Dolly."

Mark and Swede nodded.

Dolly giggled and lay her head against Conrad's broad chest. He stuck his hand under Dolly's shirt and tickled her. They did a little dance around the porch, laughing and teasing each other. Shep snapped out a short bark.

Swede elbowed Mark. "Well, Conrad, we'd better be going."

Conrad kissed Dolly's freckled nose. "Thanks for stopping by. Tomorrow might have been too late." He chuckled. "Need any smokes?" He pulled a half-full pack of Chesterfields out of his shirt pocket and tossed it to Swede.

"Thanks, Conrad," Swede said. "Keep your powder dry."

Mark gave Conrad and Dolly a little wave goodbye, and the boys edged their way through the kitchen maze and out of the house.

Swede stopped at the edge of the grove. "If he's a pacifist, I'm a monkey's uncle. Race you to the ~~house~~<sup>tree house.</sup>" He gave Mark a shove, and spurred into the grove.

"Hey. no fair." Mark sprinted after him.

When the boys streaked out the other side of the grove, they found Chief Morton blocking their way, his arms outspread.

Morton caught Swede by the shoulders. "All right, you two, hold it up."

Swede resisted a powerful urge to kick Morton in the shins. Mark stopped running and returned to Swede's side.

Morton pushed Swede away. "Now just what in the crimminey sakes are you two doing here?"

"Just visiting Conrad," Mark replied.

Morton frowned. "Don't you know that the police department, sheriff's office, draft board, and federal officials have been trying to get inside that house for a week? And youitwo just waltz in there like nothing. Don't you know that Conrad Miller is not quite...all there?" Morton touched hisstemple with his index finger.

Swede laughed.

"What's so funny, Wisenheimer?"

"Nothing. Conrad looked 'all there' to me." He laughed again.

Mark smothered a smile with a frown.

"So you think this is funny, huh? Well, we'll see what you think when I tell your ma." Morton turned to Mark. "And your folks." He grabbed the boys by the back of their necks.

A door slammed behind them. "Let 'em go, Chief."

Conrad was standing on the front steps of the house with his shotgun leveled their way. "You guys, take off, and Chief, don't make a move."

The boys wriggled away, and ran for <sup>the treehouse.</sup> ~~the bikes.~~

"Conrad Miller, this is just another charge against you," Morton said.

"Send me a bill." Conrad went inside.

Mark and Swede hurtled single file along the river path to their treehouse, shinnied up the rope ladder through the trap door, and plopped cross-legged across from each other at the foot locker they used for a table. Swede popped a wooden match with his thumbnail and lit one of Conrad's cigarettes.

"Bet old Morton squeals on us," Mark said.

"We didn't do anything. Conrad was the one with the gun."

"Yeah, but that's not how he'll tell our folks."

"You worry too much." Swede blew a smokering.

The four-o'clock freight left the Middleton depot with a long whistle. It was time for Mark to weed the Penn victory garden. They boys had a quick skinny-dip in the river and headed home. Both were surprised, if wary, when things appeared normal at home.

Later, after dark, Mark was kneeling at the screened west window of his bedroom trying to catch a breeze when he heard the mourning dove coos Swede sometimes made when he was outside.

Mark pushed out the screen. Swede was perched on the thick elm branch.

"You in trouble?" Swede said.

"Naw, I guess Morton forgot."

"He didn't forget, he's just busy. Can you get out?"

"What's up?"

"Lots of people outside the Municipal Building. And they've got the Bottom Road blocked off. I heard they're going in after Conrad."

"We should call him."

"No phoner. Let's go."

Mark thought fast. His bedside Big Ben said eight-forty-five. His folks were at the Majestic for the eight-o'clock movie, THE JUNGLE BOOK, and wouldn't be home till ten. He'd see the movie Sunday if Morton didn't have him in jail, or his folks didn't have him chained to the bed on bread and water. He joined Swede on

on the tree branch and they dropped to the ground.

The boys hightailed it by every shortcut they knew to the grove behind the darkened Miller house. The Bottom Road was clogged with cars, trucks, barricades, and people. Smudgepots distorted the scene with wavy shadows. Several searchlights from police cars were turned on and lit the house.

Andrew Mosley aimed a megaphone at the house. "Conrad Miller, in the name of the government of the United States of America, I order you to surrender. If you don't, we will use whatever methods necessary to arrest you. The house is surrounded. You have two minutes to give yourself up." The words echoed in the night.

Mark whispered, "You really think they'd shoot Conrad? We'd better get down."

The boys flattened themselves in the tangled underbrush and listened. There was a rustle behind them, then a figure, low to the ground, ~~moved~~ <sup>crawled</sup> toward the river.

Swede pushed himself up. "It's Conrad. Let's follow him."

"And get shot?" Mark said. "He might think we're part of the bunch out front."

"We'll hang back a little."

"After you." Mark wasn't about to risk his neck in the dark surrounded by people with itchy trigger fingers.

Conrad headed straight for the river, then seemed to disappear. The boys slowed their pace. They could smell the putrid blue mud of the river bank.

"All right, up with your hands. I've got you covered." Conrad's voice was hoarse.

"Hey, Conrad, it's Swede. Don't shoot."

Conrad edged close enough to see the boys. "What're you doing here? You could get killed."

"We came to warn you," Swede said.

"You're a little late. Anybody got a smoke?"

Swede patted his dungaree and shirt pockets. "I was hoping you had some. There's the rest of your Chesterfields in the treehouse."

"Well, let's go then," Conrad said.

Mark led the way along the river path to the treehouse. He already knew that being with Conrad was not smart. If Conrad was a criminal, then what were Swede and him? Mark had heard the term "aiding and abetting" on the radio program GANG BUSTERS. Were they doing that with Conrad?

Despite his prodigious strength, Conrad had trouble pulling himself up the rope and into the treehouse. Swede lit a thick candle sitting on the foot locker and then cigarettes for Conrad and himself. Conrad broke open the shotgun and lay it across his lap.

Mark crawled through the thickening smoke to the north window of the treehouse in search of fresh air. Lights played wildly through the woods. There was a single rifle shot, then a volley of gunfire and the sound of broken glass. Mark returned to the footlocker.

"What a bunch of chickens," Conrad said. "Glad Ma isn't here to see this."

Mark closed one eye to the smoke. "Could be you. Or us."

Conrad turned toward Mark. "What're you getting at?"

"I'd rather be shooting Nazis than neighbors." Mark anticipated Swede's hard elbow to the arm and grunted in only minor pain.

Conrad's lip curled. "Well, you don't have to go, and I do." He crushed out his cigarette so hard in the Ford hubcap ashtray that the foot locker rocked.

Conrad gestured at Swede. "I really wouldn't mind going in the service. I'm no yellow-belly. You guys know that."

Conrad looked hard from Swede to Mark. The boys nodded.

"It's just that I don't want to leave Dolly." He sighed and closed the gun with a loud clack.

Mark choked a little on the smoke as he repeated Dolly's name. Swede elbowed him again. This time it hurt.

"We're planning to get married. I told old Mosley that."



"Where's she tonight?" Swede asked.

"Home. Too dangerous." There was a tremor in Conrad's voice.

"You can still get married and go in the Army," Mark said. "When my Uncle Joe signed up, he got furlough after his physical and basic training. Now, they've got this V-Mail and free postage. You could write every day. The war won't last forever. Next thing you know, you'll be back just like nothing happened." Mark smiled. He ought to be in recruitment.

Conrad scratched his stubbly jaw. "Ain't no perfume in the V-Mail. But you might be right."

Conrad put his elbows on the foot locker and his chin in his hands. No one spoke. Conrad was thinking.

Conrad's face brightened. "Hell, I never wanted to cause all this trouble. I just wanted to be left alone, the way I've always been. But the war's changed lots of lives, not just mine. Maybe I could turn myself in. Mosley said they wouldn't press charges if I did."

"Tonight's COURIER said that the draft board wanted to settle peacefully with you," Mark said.

"By God, I'll do it!"

"Better leave your gun here," Swede said. "You can get it later."

"Guess I don't need it now. I'll just cut down the road and tell Mosley that I'm ready to serve my country."

He stood up, came to attention, and banged his head on the ceiling. They all laughed.

Conrad insisted that the boys remain behind so they wouldn't get into trouble, but they followed him anyway--at a distance. At the first roadblock, Conrad spoke to someone with a rifle, then raised his hands. There was a flurry of excitement as authorities realized what had happened. Conrad was put into Chief Morton's unmarked black Plymouth and was driven toward town at high speed.

"I hope they keep their word and don't arrest him," Mark said.

Swede spat. "Looks to me like they're taking him to jail."

The police did take Conrad to jail, but only overnight. Swede had the whole story from Conrad in his office at the city dump the next morning. He passed it on to Mark later at the picnic table in the Penn backyard.

"They took Conrad straight from jail to the armory for his physical this morning. He flunked."

"Flunked?"

"He's got flat feet. He's 4-F. All that ruckus for nothing. And Dolly's left him."

"I thought they were getting married."

"Don't ask me. Conrad wouldn't talk about it. He's really bent out of shape."

"I don't blame him," Mark said. "What're flat feet anyway? Conrad can run like a deer."

Swede frowned. "He's just the kind of guy you'd want on your side in battle."

"Yeah, what does the Army know anyway. Maybe they made a mistake. Let's go see him, cheer him up. Maybe <sup>he</sup> ~~his~~ can enlist in the Navy or Marines."

Swede agreed, and the boys headed for Conrad's house. The front porch looked like newsreel footage from the London blitz. All the windows were broken and the front door hung by a single hinge.

Shep greeted them at the back door. Mark knelt to pet the collie. ~~and the boys~~ ~~closed~~ Swede banged on the door several times. When there was no answer, the boys eased inside. Swede went ahead through the kitchen, <sup>and</sup> then entered the parlor, ~~then~~ "Don't come in here!" Swede shouted.

"What?" Mark was already inside.

Swede shoulder-blocked Mark back toward the kitchen, but he hit the door jamb and fell to the parlor floor.

Mark yelled, "What's the matter with you?" Then he saw Conrad lying across the

over-stuffed, wing-style sofa. He knew it was Conrad by his biceps. Blood and flesh were splattered all over the flowered wallpaper. The shot gun was on the floor.

Mark rolled over and scrambled to his feet. He ran out the back door, leaped off the back porch, and started vomiting before his feet hit the ground. Shep trotted over to watch. Mark stopped vomiting only when there was nothing left. He got onto his knees and faced Swede.

"Wipe your mouth."

Mark wiped the hem of his striped T-shirt across his lips and chin. He gagged.

Swede jumped back. "Come on, shape up. You'll never make a Marine that way."

"But..."

"But nothing. Remember Conrad the way he was."

Mark settled on to a porch step and sighed. "What're we going to do?"

"I figure we go to Carlson's, have a Coke, and call the cops in my deep voice."

Swede's alto had dropped to a bass.

Mark was in no condition to argue, but less think. How could Swede be so cool? He'd have nightmares about Conrad for years.

The boys biked silently to the Pure station and bought two Cokes from the red cooler just outside the front door. Swede used the phone booth by the ladies room. Then they sat on the curb by the gas pumps and finished their pop.

In less than five minutes, the sirens started. Chief Morton and Patrolman Dirker drove by in separate cars. Ten minutes later, Earl Weber, the county coroner, passed in his black Studebaker Express-Coupe.

Mark and Swede had another Coke. Thirty minutes later, the parade of officials returned by the same route. Shep was sitting in the front seat of Dirker's car.

Conrad was buried next to his mother in Glenwood Cemetery two days later. The boys biked to the ceremony, but watched from a distance. There were four people

at the grave site: the minister, undertaker, Chief Morton, and a COURIER reporter.

On the way home, the boys saw Dolly Fischer talking to a sailor outside the Greyhound Bus Depot.

THE END