

The Tale of a Dear, Dear Friend

My good friend, Howard Baughman, of Del Rio Texas, was a permanent fixture at the A&M fire school. Every afternoon, after the students had gone, we gathered at Project 13, the ancestral home of the *Black Cats*. There, we would quaff, *ahem, soda pops and iced tea* as we waited in the shade for the miles-long line of cars to clear the only road into town.

Howard was a fine teller of stories. As chief of his department for many decades, he had collected a substantial number of war stories, some factual and some maybe not-so-factual.

After a couple of large glasses of “tea”, he liked to tell of his more ribald and humorous memories. According to Howard, there was a cove out on nearby Lake Amistad that was a popular gathering spot for all the good folks of the area to come and fish off the bank. Blacks, whites, and Hispanics alike all fished there and enjoyed each other’s company in their leisure hours.

One summer day, Lester, one of the black regulars, decided to take a dip in the lake to beat the heat. He went over to a rock outcropping adjacent to the fishing area and dove in, head-first. After the obligatory clapping had subsided, they noticed Lester had not resurfaced. Someone went to town and alerted the police and fire departments.

Howard and another fireman came out with their boat and their drag hooks. They fished for quite some time before they snagged the deeply submerged and well-waterlogged Lester. When they got him up to the boat, they could not bring him on board without risking overturning, so they motored slowly back to the bank towing Lester’s body along behind them. Unbeknownst to the firemen, the current from the boat’s motor had caused Lester’s bathing attire to come untethered and it had floated away.

The crowd gathered around the area where the boat would make landfall. When they got the boat firmly parked in the sand, Howard and friend pulled Lester from the water. Lester emerged, sans his undies, in full view of the crowd. When one of his former fishing companions, a middle-aged black woman, saw all there was of Lester to see, she exclaimed, “**OH, MY!!! Lawdy, lawdy, someone done lost a dear, dear friend!**”

A big part of his punchline was the exaggerated way he imitated the woman’s voice. It was damn sure hilarious!! In all my twenty-one years at the fire school, if Howard was there, he told the tale of Lester. No matter how many times we had heard it, we all always roared with laughter.

Howard also had a real side-splitter of a joke about a lady that had her dog castrated because he loved to bite the mailman, but there is not a way in hell to clean that one up enough to appear in this publication. I think I can honestly say, however, the castrated dog was quite likely the funniest joke any of us have ever heard. Howard’s delivery of that one was priceless.

Howard's gone now and he took his wonderfully unique sense of humor with him. But, without doubt, my good friend, Matthew Uppole, can imitate Howard in grand fashion, and Matt's rendition of Howard's joke repertoire is flawless. If you ever run into Matt, ask him to tell you the joke about the castrated dog.

Trust me. You'll be glad you did.

Howard, rest in peace, my good, good friend. You were one of a kind and will always be remembered by the men of Project 13. And...thank you so much for all the great memories! They are a treasure.