

Most people remember the year 1926 as the year Rudolph Valentino died. He was the Silver Screen's first great idol and his death was an event that shook the whole country (my own cousin slit her wrists when she heard the news). But for folks here in Sarsaparilla Springs, 1926 is best remembered as the year Zane D. Coalpepper moved into our sleepy little Oregon town.

First off, the Coalpeppers' arrival caused a shockwave in the Springs because it was a very unusual event for our town. No one had moved here since as far back as anyone could recollect. Even old Hank Rudders couldn't remember the last time someone had moved into town - and his memory went the farthest back of anyone's in Sarsaparilla Springs: Ninety-seven whole years!

Everyone who lived in Sarsaparilla Springs had been born in Sarsaparilla Springs, raised in Sarsaparilla Springs and most of them got buried in the Sarsaparilla Springs Community Cemetery.

Secondly, the Coalpeppers arrived on the H&T Railroad (nobody knew what the initials stood for, we all called it the Holy Terror Railroad because whenever it roared by Farmer Dally's field it spooked his Holstein cows so bad they wouldn't give milk for a week afterwards). Now their coming on a train might not sound like much, but to us here in Sarsaparilla it was darn near unheard of! Whoever brought five kids, two dogs, a cantankerous old mule, and a canary bird by train, not to mention two buckboard loads worth of belongings had to be John D. Rockefeller's

relatives - or at least that's what everyone in Sarsaparilla Springs swore.

I remember the day they arrived just like it was yesterday: The Holy Terror roared into the Sarsaparilla Springs Railroad Station right on schedule and the whole clan of them climbed out of the passenger car: There were Mr. & Mrs. Coalpepper, their oldest sons; Milton, Eldon & David Jr., their youngest son, Little Tommy, and then Zane D. Coalpepper herself (she came between Eldon and David Jr., I think). She swaggered out onto the platform like she was walking the red carpet at Hollywood. The Coalpeppers might as well have been in Hollywood with all the townspeople who "happened" to be at the station that day. The townspeople were all curious to find out who was moving into the Hasselbeck's old place.

I was there helping Pa send Mama off to Portland where she'd be visiting my cousin Gertrude (the one who slit her wrists when she heard Valentino died), for a few weeks.

The Holy Terror may have arrived on time, but it was way behind schedule when it left - a good half hour. That's how long it took the porters and Mr. Coalpepper to get the Coalpeppers' trunks and furniture off the train. Pa pitched in and helped at the end (it wasn't 'til a few years later that I realized he'd just been in a hurry to ship Mama off so he could start his two weeks of bachelordom).

After their belongings were unloaded from the Holy Terror it took another two hours for the Coalpeppers to get everything to the Hasselbeck's old place. Frank Hull, the owner of the livery stable, loaned them two of his big

buckboards. Pa volunteered to drive one and Mr. Coalpepper drove the other. All the Coalpepper kids piled into the buckboard Pa drove, it being the emptiest. I went along for the ride.

The Hasselbeck's old place was the last house in Sarsaparilla Springs; once you went past that house you were in the country. Pa helped the Coalpeppers unload their stuff and I pitched in, too. It was while I was helping carry furniture inside that Zane asked me, "Who are you?" like she hadn't seen me in the buckboard with them.

"I'm Clarabelle van der Velde. That's my pa," I said, pointing at Pa, who at the time was helping Mr. Coalpepper lug a big, black steam trunk through the front door.

Zane's eyes grew wide. "Your Pa's the sheriff?"

"Yep, he's been the sheriff of Sarsaparilla Springs since I could walk."

"Gee, I bet he'd let you get away with murder."

"I don't think so. He'd probably make me whitewash every fence in Sarsaparilla."

Zane smiled her toothy grin at me and from that moment on we were best friends. All summer long we ran around together. We spent our time either in the Sarsaparilla Springs General Store, drinking our 5¢ Dr. Peppers; watching the chess game between Willard Applewhite, and Elmer Rigsby, or playing at the Coalpeppers' house.

It was in Zane D. Coalpepper's house that I learned you never walk when you can run, and you never talk when you can shout. These two things distressed my mother greatly. Her dear, sweet Clarabelle was being corrupted by the bad morals of *That Girl* (the name Mama had given Zane when she returned from Portland and found me acting "wilder than a March hare").

Mama thanked the Good Lord when the Sarsaparilla Springs Grammar School started up in September. "Now you and *That Girl* will be in school, under close watch, instead of gallivanting around the countryside causing trouble," Mama told me the first morning.

The Sarsaparilla Springs Grammar School was a wooden, one room school house with four windows, a black, potbellied wood stove, a chalkboard on the wall at the head of the room and 14 desks for students, all in plain view from Mr. Phlopbaum's desk. Zane and I trooped into the schoolhouse last when the bell rang. The boys and girls desks were divided by an aisle that ran down the middle of the school house, girls sat on the right and boys on the left. Zane tugged on my arm and we slipped into the bench seat in the back - on the *left* side: I thought she was crazy for making us sit there.

Mr. Phlopbaum marched right back to where Zane and me were sitting, looked down his long beak nose at us and said, "What do you think you're doing on the *left* side?"

I shrunk down in my seat, but Zane didn't move a muscle. "Sittin' here, sir," she said, bold as brass. I

started at her. No one ever talked like that to Mr. Phlopbaum; he was the meanest teacher since Widow Biggs.

He narrowed his beady little eyes at us and said, "Boys sit on the *left*. Girls sit on the *right*. Or are the two of you boys now, as well as miscreants?" I heard a few kids sniggering, and I knew that wouldn't set well with Zane. "Come on, Clarabelle," she elbowed me off the bench.

I scurried into the back row on the girls' side, but Zane came slowly. She didn't like being told what to do. She glared at Mr. Phlopbaum's back as he returned to his perch at the front of the class. "Mr. Flopbottom, you made a big mistake." I wasn't sure if I'd heard Zane right, but I knew *Mr. Flopbottom* (as Zane had dubbed him), would regret the day he made an eternal enemy out of Zane D. Coalpepper.

From that first day of school on Zane acted as if she was in a private war with Mr. Phlopbaum, she lived for the moments when she made his day miserable. There were a dozen incidents that I could name, but the one I remember most was how Zane D. Coalpepper smoked out the Sarsaparilla Springs Grammar School .

The Sarsaparilla Springs Schoolhouse Incident (which was talked about for years afterwards), happened six weeks after school started, in the beginning of October: The time when Jack Frost first arrives; when the sun still shines but the air turns cold. There was a fire roaring brightly in the schoolhouse. Smoke curled lazily from the stovepipe outside, while all of us stayed warm inside. Zane and I still sat in the last row on the right side.

That day I remember Zane had gotten into trouble with Mr. Phlopbaum, because she'd punched his favorite pupil. He made her sit in the corner with the Dunce hat on her head for a whole hour, and nobody humiliated Zane D. Coalpepper and got away with it.

Zane stewed over her humiliation a long time, not saying a single word to me. I knew she was thinking of a way to get even -her brain was always hatching new plans.

Well, we had just finished lunch and were working on our geography lesson when I saw that light bulb pop on over Zane's head. I wanted to know what she had planned, but she didn't say. She raised her hand and Mr. Phlopbaum excused her to use the facilities. (Back in those days indoor plumbing hadn't hit Sarsaparilla Springs yet, and the only "bathrooms" to speak of were wooden outhouses built a good ways from folks' homes.)

Mr. Phlopbaum began pointing out cities on the big map he'd pinned over the chalkboard his back facing the room, which made it easy for me to slip out the door unnoticed. I'd no more than stepped outside than Zane jerked me round the corner of the schoolhouse, near the woodpile that was stacked up to the eaves. She pulled off her drawers, and told me to do the same. "What are you gonna do with my bloomers?"

I watched as she ripped my drawer's in half and handed them back to me. "Put one leg on, and hide the other one," she said.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, slipping my foot into the left drawer.

She wagged her eyebrows, threw her own drawers around her neck like a scarf, climbed the pile of wood and shimmied across the schoolhouse roof to the stovepipe. I raced around the front of the school to watch. Zane wadded her white drawers into a ball and shoved them down the stovepipe's gaping hole, stopping the smoke from rolling out. She tiptoed off the roof, and I handed her the other half of my drawers. She pulled the one leg on, saying, "In case anyone asks to see our drawers we'll only show 'em one leg."

Then we waited.

Pretty soon the school's front door flew open and the Sarsaparilla Springs schoolhouse belched black smoke, along with 12 spluttering students and Mr. Phlopbaum. Zane grabbed my hand and pulled me into the smoke cloud along with her so no one knew who'd done the dirty deed.

Zane D. Coalpepper was a clever one. She'd thought of everything: her bloomers even caught fire in the top of the pipe and burnt up so Mr. Phlopbaum couldn't say whether a boy or a girl was the culprit of this "nasty prank."

The flames in the stovepipe brought my pa - the sheriff - and a bunch of men from town on the run, thinking Sarsaparilla Springs' schoolhouse had caught fire. When they got there only to find a smoked-out schoolhouse, they were upset (most of them were hefty fellas and the only two

reasons they ever ran were for fires and when their supper bells rang).

As the sheriff, it was Pa's job to get to the bottom of the incident. He questioned Mr. Phlopbaum and all us kids. Zane and I were the last one's questioned, and Pa gave us that look parents give their children when they know they're guilty. "Do you know who did this?" he asked

I looked at Zane. Zane looked at me. And we both gave Pa our most innocent smiles.

I never will figure out how Pa knew it was us; maybe it was the one-legged bloomer on Mama's wash line, or maybe he read our minds. Anyway, he never told anybody in town that Zane and I were the ones who smoked out the Sarsaparilla Springs Grammar School, but they all knew: Come spring every fence in Sarsaparilla Springs had a fresh coat of white paint on it.