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The Great Bean-Count Schism

Scott R. Parkin

It happened five years ago at the Hunt family reunion. That's my wife's side. More specifically, my wife's mother's mother's side. Marny and I were newly engaged, and this was to be my grand unveiling before her family.

It was a traditional western reunion. They'd rented a campground at the state park about sixty miles southeast of Panaca, Nevada—that's where most of her family was from. And, like every other event of its kind, the only people who knew anyone were the old folks, the ones who organized it. There were six of them altogether: Aunt Jay, Aunt Edna, Aunt Myrna, Aunt Joyce, Uncle Arch, and Uncle Leroy. (No one knew how to count the proper number of "greats" to go before the name, so Marny instructed me to simply refer to them as "aunt" and "uncle" something-or-other and not to worry too much about it.) They were brothers and sisters, and they'd started the whole reunion thing fifty years ago as a grand birthday party for their mother where all the kids got together and celebrated. She died twenty-odd years ago, but they enjoyed getting together so much, they just kept doing it.

Over the years, though, the little family gathering turned into a major event involving a cast of hundreds and a budget of not inconsiderable proportions. And because no one knew all of the cousins and nephews and granddaughters by sight, a method was devised to keep tabs on who was who and how they were related to the original six.

It was Aunt Myrna's idea. Before you could gain entrance to the event, you had to write your name on one of those "Hello, my name is . . ." badges, along with a pedigree showing your relation to one of the six. I copied Marny's and added "(soon to be husband of)" at the bottom. Aunt Myrna laughed and shook my hand and explained who she was, but I missed most of what she said.
After the greeting and hugging with Aunt Myrna was over, she led us to a table on which sat a mason jar full of red beans. "Guess how many beans are in the jar and write it on the bottom corner of your name tag," she said and tapped the top of the jar with her pencil. "Whoever guesses closest gets a prize at the awards ceremony after dinner."

I questioned Marny about what kind of awards one receives at a family reunion. I couldn't imagine anything like "Best Grandson" or "Most Influential Second Cousin," but I had heard of stranger things. She laughed and told me they were gag gifts and I need not worry, I wasn't nearly old enough to get one. Then she turned her attention to the beans.

Marny is a math teacher, and she approached the jar of beans with great determination and use of the scientific method. She turned the jar this way and that, her lips moving quietly as she considered the best method of accurately guessing the bean count. First she estimated the height, in beans, of the jar. Then she counted width, in beans, of the jar and divided the number by two to get the radius. Then she went to work with her pencil and a paper place mat to determine the volume of the jar in cubic beans. When she was done, she subtracted 2 percent to account for the slight tapering at the top of the jar and wrote down her estimate: 1,823 beans.

I looked at the jar and scratched my head and added fifty to Marny's guess to get my own. How can you beat the scientific method?

It was still early, and people hadn't quite integrated yet. Each family unit had its own little piece of the campground, and each had marked its territory with folding chairs and ice chests. The adults from each group talked to the adults in the group next to them. The children had long since become bored and ended up down the hill at the creek splashing water on each other. The teenagers all sat in folding chairs with sullen looks on their faces at having lost an entire Saturday to a stupid family reunion.

Marny dragged me from family to family, introducing me to anyone who looked familiar to her. I nodded and smiled and tried to be charming, but I don't think I was doing very well; people had a tendency to look at me funny, then whisper to Marny, who shook her head emphatically. I overheard one of them—I don't recall the
name—ask her if I was related to the Emersons. Marny replied that I certainly was not, and he seemed satisfied. I never got a chance to ask her what the question meant. Fifteen minutes later, we had talked to everyone of note, and I still didn’t know who anyone was—except the original six; they were the ones whose name tags sported only one name.

Someone had brought a dog. It was a cute miniature collie with white paws and a tendency to drool. But it was friendly, so I scratched its ears and patted its head and wiped the drool off my shoes every once in a while. And I was a little disappointed when the collie ran off to meet the black mutt someone else had brought.

The collie was back in less than a minute, the mutt close on her heels. She was in heat, and the mutt was interested. The adults pretended not to notice its overly friendly advances, the children tugged at their parents’ shirts and asked why the black dog was chasing the collie like that, and the teenagers hid their heads in shame at the brazen lust of animals.

That’s when Aunt Myrna let loose with the scream.

I turned in time to see Aunt Myrna take the bean jar away from a tall, potbellied man in a checkered shirt and coveralls. She checked the lid on the bean jar and put it down on the wooden camp table with a loud thump, then promptly began to cuss the man out. It was somewhat of a shock to see a sweet old lady like Aunt Myrna going at someone that hard, so I moved in a little closer to try to pick up what she was saying. I caught a glimpse of the tall man’s name tag; his name was Burt, and there was only one name besides his own on the pedigree list at the bottom. I couldn’t see what his bean count guess was.

“You’re not allowed to look inside the jar. You know that!” Aunt Myrna said.

Burt shook his bald head and crossed his arms over his chest. “I most certainly do not know that. Why shouldn’t I look inside?”

Aunt Myrna flushed. “It’s not fair. No one else looked in the jar, so you can’t either.”

Burt shrugged. “So is it my fault no one else was smart enough to look? I just wanted to see if you’d done something to throw off the count, like put a toilet paper tube in there or something.”
Aunt Myrna sputtered and turned red. “I resent that accusation,” she said and tore his name tag off his chest. She took her pencil and scribbled over his bean count guess until it was obliterated under a heavy layer of gray lead, then stuck the tag to his chest again. “You are disqualified. You cheated.”

“I did not cheat!” Burt shouted and reached for a blank name tag from the table. Aunt Myrna smacked his hand and told him to git, and Burt looked at her for a long moment before he turned and stalked away. As he passed me, I heard him mutter, “Just like a Hunt to change the rules when someone smarter’n them comes along.”

I wandered to the area Marny’s parents had staked out and told her what I had seen. She got a cloudy look on her face and said, “Burt’s an Emerson. They’ve had it out for the Hunts since I don’t know when. If Aunt Myrna says he cheated, he cheated. You can’t trust an Emerson for anything.”

I stood there, shocked. I had known Marny for almost two years before we got engaged, and in all that time I had never heard her say something bad about someone—it wasn’t in her nature. But the scowl on her face was unmistakable; she didn’t like Emersons. “What makes Emersons so bad?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Ooh, they’ve been at it for years. It all started when Aunt Joyce married one named Andrew. They got married and moved away and never bothered to come to family events at Christmas or Easter. They didn’t even come back for the family reunion every year. They completely abandoned the Hunt side of the family.

“Until they wanted something.

“They’d been married for five years before they ever showed their faces in Panaca again, and then it was only to beg for money. They came for the family reunion and pumped each of the brothers and sisters for money—they said the copper mining operation upstate was running dry so they were tight for cash.”

Marny sighed. “I don’t know the exact details of it all, but the end result was that no one lent them any money. Times were tough everywhere, and no one had extra.

“Well, they left the reunion in a huff, claiming that it was a conspiracy to keep them down and that the Hunts were just jeal-ous cheapskates who didn’t know the true meaning of family.”
Marny began to pace, and I just stood back and listened. I still hadn’t decided whether to be amused or alarmed at her display. But I had decided that the fact I apparently bore some family resemblance to the Emersons was not good. She continued. “They disappeared after that. No one saw them for another five years. When they finally did come back, they were rich. They had a big car and fancy clothes and lots of cash, and they made sure everyone knew it.”

Marny stopped pacing and looked up at me. “Now that wasn’t bad in and of itself. What got everyone so mad was that they spent the whole reunion bragging about all the stuff they had and how they weren’t cheapskates like some other people they knew, and if anyone needed money, they’d be glad to help out because family came first. It was really rude.

“Well, it turns out no one wanted their help, and that made them mad again. They left the reunion in a huff and didn’t come back again for another five years.”

I smiled. “They seem to have a thing about five-year cycles. Think it’s hereditary?”

Marny glared at me, and I shut up.

She continued. “When they came back again, it was all apologies and excuses. They still had the big car and the fancy clothes, but now they had five children, too. Well, the children ate more than their fair share, and the food ran out. Aunt Jay went to the store and bought hot dogs and buns with her own money, and everyone ended up getting something, at least.

“When Aunt Myrna asked the Emersons to pay for part of the extra food—Aunt Myrna was in charge of the budget, and Aunt Jay wouldn’t have asked for the money if Aunt Myrna hadn’t offered—Andrew got all indignant and huffy again and wanted to know why he suddenly had to pay for food when he’d never had to pay for it before. Aunt Myrna reminded him that it had been five years since he last darkened the doorstep and that things had changed; now people paid for the food. And besides, their kids had eaten as much food as the rest of the family put together, and they ought to be happy at only being asked to pay for part of it.”

Marny started pacing again, and I stifled a grin at the silliness of what some people could hold a grudge over. She stopped at the
far end of her family’s area and looked out across the campground at Burt, then turned back to me. “Well, as you can expect, they got mad again and took off—without paying for the food.” She paced again. “It’s not the money, it’s the attitude. They ignore the family until they want to show off or try to prove a point; then they come back and find something new to get mad at.

“Well, they came back the next year and made a big show about not eating too much food; they even made one of their kids put some fried chicken back in the pan. And they brought a bag full of hot dogs and buns and gave them to Aunt Jay and made a big deal about that. And when they paid for their share of the food, they made a big deal about that, too. It was like they wanted everyone to see how much better they were than the rest of us, when all they were doing was their fair share.”

Marny stopped and clenched her fists. “All the Emersons are like that—it’s in their blood. They’re always trying to show how much better they are than the rest of us. And they taught it to their kids. And to make matters worse, the Emersons started coming every year. It’s like they see it as their sworn duty to come every year and act like their bums are made of gold.”

I shrugged at her. “Isn’t that what family reunions are for? Aren’t you supposed to show off a little?”

Marny stared at me, her mouth agape. “It most certainly is not! Family are the only people you don’t have to show off for. Reunions are to relax and have fun and mingle with the family, not to show off.”

“Oh.”

She looked out across the campground. “Look at them. There’s Burt over there making a big deal out of Aunt Myrna disqualifying him.”

I moved to Marny’s side and looked. Sure enough; Burt stood in the midst of a group of people, waving his hands and pointing at his chest and making a show.

Marny sniffed. “You can always tell an Emerson; they look like a bunch of rednecks.”

I coughed and gagged and did what I could to squelch my laughter. I had grown up in the suburbs of Chicago, and to me all these Westerners looked equally redneck.
Marny patted my back and looked at me with a hint of disapproval in her eye. “Are you okay?”

I coughed a few more times and patted my chest. “Sorry. I swallowed a bug or something. It just flew right in and caught in my throat.”

She looked at me dubiously, then took my hand and led me to a jug full of water. She poured the water into the plastic cup that lay next to it and gave it to me. I dutifully swallowed the water. “Thank you,” I said.

Marny nodded and put the jug and cup back on the ground. Burt and crew broke out laughing, and Marny looked up at them. “They just sit over there and make fun of the rest of us. It isn’t right,” she said.

I nodded. “True. But that still seems like a silly thing to condemn an entire family for.”

Marny shook her head. “You haven’t survived a lifetime of tainted family reunions. They do something every year that ruins it for the rest of us. Sometimes I wish they just wouldn’t come at all.”

Marny was clearly bothered by the situation, and I couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound flippant or accusatory, so I just hugged her and whispered, “I’m sorry. I guess I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

She hugged me back and smiled up at me, and I was happy all over again that she had agreed to marry me. We stood there for a long moment and just enjoyed each other; then she squeezed me again and stepped back. “I better mingle. You want to come?”

I shook my head. “No, I think I’ll just stay here and be anti-social. It’s always a little strange to go to other people’s family reunions. And people keep looking at me funny.”

She smiled impishly. “Well, you do look like an Emerson.”

I hooked my thumbs in my belt loops and spoke in my best hick accent. “Just like a Hunt to be jealous of my staggerin’ beauty.”

She touched my hand. “Cute. Back in a few minutes.”

I sat down in a blue lawn chair and looked out over the campground. Some of the carefully segregated family units had started to lose their separateness as old acquaintances were renewed and warm feelings were slowly rekindled. Many wandered freely from unit to unit, striking up conversations with people who had once
been only relatives but now were also friends. I sat back and smiled. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all. Even some of the sullen teenagers had begun to notice that there were other sullen teenagers and maybe they weren’t as alone as they had thought at first.

I heard a yipping off to my left and looked up to see the miniature collie darting among the trees and coming right for me, a look of abject terror in her eyes, the black mutt close on her heels. The collie reached the clearing where I sat, put on a burst of speed, and leaped through the air and into my lap. It burrowed its tiny head into my armpit and shivered, and I stroked its thin fur with my left hand.

Just moments later, the black mutt bound into the clearing and came straight for me. I leaned forward and put my foot out, and when the mutt recognized the hazard placed in its way, it tried to stop. But the thick layer of last year’s leaves on the ground proved to be slicker than expected, and the mutt slid face first into the bottom of my shoe.

He let out a yelp and scrambled backwards. He eyed me, then the collie, and gingerly stepped forward, but I shouted and waved my arm and he skittered back to the edge of the clearing. No matter what I did I couldn’t get him to go away altogether; he just stood there sniffing at the air. The little collie seemed satisfied with my protection and pulled her nose out of my armpit.

I continued my survey of the reunion and discovered that Marny was right. You could tell an Emerson by sight. Everyone wore the traditional western baseball cap and blue jeans, but the Emersons pushed their caps back just a little further, and their jeans were just a little bluer, like they considered these to be their Sunday-go-to-meeting blue jeans or something. And even though I knew it was impossible, it seemed like all the Emersons I spotted chewed nervously on a toothpick that dangled from their lips like an ersatz cigarette.

Someone rang the dinner bell, and I stood up and put the collie down on the ground. She immediately took off into the woods, and the black mutt chased after. I felt a little sorry for the poor thing.

I headed for the big clearing where forty-odd tables were all lined up. Marny’s family had saved two of them, and Marny stood
waving her arms at me. I went to the table and took her hand. "Hi," she said.

"Hi," I responded. "What's for lunch?"

Marny pointed to three big fire pits over by the outhouses. "Chicken."

I gawked at the spectacle. In each of the three fire pits was an enormous, three-foot-diameter Dutch oven. A gray-haired old man—Uncle Leroy, I think—stood directing traffic while younger men stuck broomsticks through the handles on the giant lids and heaved them up. Great gouts of steam erupted from the Dutch ovens, and the old man poked at the mounds of chicken pieces inside one. After a moment he looked up and kissed his fingertips. "Perfect," he pronounced, and the younger men started piling chicken parts in big broiler pans and bringing them to the four buffet tables.

I was still staring at the sheer size of the Dutch ovens and the amount of chicken in each one. Finally, I touched Marny on the shoulder. "How many people are we feeding here?"

She smiled. "Somewhere around three hundred, I think."

"Oh. Isn't that still a little too much food?"

Marny laughed. "Maybe a little, but not by much. Watch, it'll be mostly gone by four o'clock."

I shrugged and moved with her to the buffet. "If you say so."

It was good, plain food, the traditional family picnic fare: potato salad, tossed greens, baked beans, fried chicken, green jello salad, stale dinner rolls. I took a heaping plateful and headed back to the table, thinking I could go back and load up another plate. Then I remembered Marny's story about the Emersons and decided against it. No reason to tempt the fates—or the Hunts—to have bad feelings about me the first time they met me. My resemblance to the Emersons already put me one step down on that account.

We all got situated—Marny has eight brothers and sisters, so it took most of both tables just to hold us—and waited for Aunt Edna to say grace. She did, and before the "amen" had a chance to die out, we started eating.

I am always surprised at how much fun it can be to just sit around with people and eat. I read in a book once that eating together was a sort of bonding ritual, that the aborigines or someone
ate every meal as communal groups in an effort to build societal unity and strength. I don’t know much about bonding rituals, but I do know that I felt at home and that these multitudes of strangers were no longer quite so strange.

With the possible exception of Burt and the rest of the Emersons.

I don’t know if it was accident or design, but the Emersons taken tables along the outside edge of the picnic area, almost like they were trying to place themselves between us and the exits. After Marny’s stories of the unsavory Emersons and their familial exploits, it made me nervous.

As dinner ended, Burt started talking overly loudly about how Aunt Myrna had cheated him on the bean-count contest. At one point, he shouted, “Hey everybody! The reason Myrna wouldn’t let me look inside the bean jar was because she stashed a toilet paper tube inside the jar. The whole middle of the jar is empty; it’s only half-full.” A few minutes later, he shouted, “Actually, the toilet paper tube is full of . . .” He let the pause hang in the air for a long moment, and I was afraid he would say something gross. “The toilet paper tube is full of even littler beans than the ones on the outside. They’re little, scrawny beans; kinda like Hunts.” And a minute after that, “I lied. The jar is full of normal red beans, just like it seems like from the outside. But then again . . .”

Someone off to my left said, “Put a sock in it, Burt. It’s just like an Emerson to be a sore loser.”

Burt stood up and peered out over the crowd. “Who said that? Who’s the chicken-liver what can’t keep his nose out of other people’s private conversations?”

There was a long pause; then a voice to my right said, “Try acting civilized for once, Burt. Shut up and sit down and let the rest of us eat in peace.”

Burt stood there swiveling his head back and forth trying to figure out who’d said what, and after a minute he sat down heavily and said in a loud voice, “Just like Hunts to hide in a crowd and not own up to what they’ve said.”

I looked at Marny; she just sat there and glowered toward Burt. After a minute, people started talking again, and it looked like the issue had passed.
It hadn’t.

Dinner broke up, and people started mingling again, but there was still a lot of gesturing and loud talking coming from Burt’s side of the campground. People were walking up to him and telling him to lay off, but Burt just blustered and told them to mind their own business and leave him alone.

So people did, and after an hour, Burt finally shut up.

It was an odd thing. Until Marny told me about the Emersons, I wouldn’t have been able to pick one out of a crowd of two. But now I could tell just by looking at them. As I walked around the campground, I would pick people out and try to guess whether they were Hunts or Emersons before I got close enough to see their name tags. I guessed right every time. The redneck factor was that obvious, even to a city boy.

Late afternoon rolled around, and someone rang the dinner bell again. The buffet tables were still set, but the amount of food left on them looked a lot more manageable. I was still hungry from lunch, so I filled a plate, found the two tables Marny’s family had staked out, and sat down.

Aunt Myrna stood in the middle of the picnic area and waited for people to get quiet. She held a sheet of paper in one hand and the jar of beans in the other. Before she could even open her mouth, Burt shouted, “There shouldn’t be a bean-count contest at all if you’re not gonna do it fair and let everyone take part. ’Course you wouldn’t of disqualified a Hunt, would you?”

Aunt Myrna stood there, red-faced. She worked her mouth, but nothing came out, and someone in the Emerson section shouted, “Spit it out, Myrna. Or are you still eating crow for cheating poor Uncle Burt?”

Someone on the Hunt side shouted, “It’s just like an Emerson to make a jerkwater comment like that. Who let you people off the farm, anyway?”

Well, it degenerated quickly after that. People started shouting insults and making slanderous comments about each other’s heritage and whose mothers bore legitimate children. Burt got in a fist fight with Uncle Arch and just about got the tar knocked out of him before he was rescued. Someone went after Aunt Myrna and the bean jar, but rather than let an Emerson get hold of it, she
threw it on the ground, it broke into a thousand pieces, and beans scattered all over the campground. For just a moment, she had a look of triumph on her face; then she realized what she had done and tried to gather up the beans.

In an hour it was over. Everyone packed up their cars as fast as they could and left. A few muttered apologies to Aunt Myrna, but most just peeled rubber and didn’t look back. It turned out the miniature collie belonged to a Hunt, and the black mutt belonged to an Emerson. It figures.

That was five years ago. They haven’t had a big reunion like that since. We’ve received letters from both the Hunts and the Emersons inviting us to separate gatherings but never to a “traditional” reunion like they had had for over fifty years before the great bean-count schism broke the family apart.

I can still see Aunt Myrna on the ground trying to gather up those beans; she did what she could to get the family together again, but she just didn’t have the power—the damage was too great, and the family had scattered too far. Aunt Myrna died last year, and Burt is in the hospital with heart trouble. They never did iron out their differences.

Marny and I don’t talk much about it. I think she’s embarrassed by the whole thing, but she doesn’t need to be. I understand these things. I haven’t been to a Parkin family reunion since the great butter-squeezing fiasco of ‘83. I still think it was one of those shifty-eyed Manns that did it, although I know they’ll never admit it. They’re always doing that kind of thing and then blaming it on good folks.

I never did find out how many beans were in that jar.

Scott R. Parkin is National Training Specialist for On-line Products at Jostens Learning Corporation in Orem, Utah. “The Great Bean-Count Schism” won fourth place in the first BYU Studies Writing Contest, short story/essay division, and will be the first chapter in a novel. His story “Die Mauer,” which appeared in BYU Studies 34, no. 1, won second place in the same contest.