

*The following story was passed down to me by my grandfather, Luther Williams, who was born in Tennessee in 1845, fought in the Civil War, and lived in Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma Territory, Oklahoma, Old Mexico (now New Mexico), and Texas.*

### **Crazy Joe**

Does every small town have some old man who tells tales so fantastic people think he's a liar, a lunatic, or, perhaps, telling the truth? If the small town is in Texas, the answer is a resounding yes.

People weren't always sure what my grandfather's real name was, but his stories attest to the many jobs he had, none of them highly technical but all requiring some skill.

He had rough-necked in the oil fields where he helped bring in some of the greatest gushers in west Texas. He worked down in the Gulf on a fishing boat about three years. Fishing's a leisurely life after the lines are prepared, that is until you strike a run of fish. Then it is pure hard work till you're too tired to lift your pole. He could preach a little fire and brimstone, and he never failed to take up a collection. He was a cowboy, and anyone who knows about the real west knows that requires many skills, including the skill to survive.

As quickly as my Grandpa began his story about seeing a cowboy jump from the top of one mountain to the top of another, he met a solid wall of skepticism. Texans knew about flash floods that swept everything in their path and changed the landscape. They also knew Texas had hills, but no mountains. The way Grandpa described it, there were two mountains, side by side. A mighty storm brought heavy rains creating a rushing stream between the them, washing away the soil at the base of each. The mountains began tilting towards one another. As the base continued to wash away, the mountains moved ever closer to each other.

When the rain stopped, the cowboys gazed in wonder at the two mountain peaks, once far apart, now very close. The sparse soil underneath those two points gave little assurance of support for the two arms jutting out towards each other like long bony fingers.

But “Crazy Joe,” whose name had always bothered him, declared he could jump across the chasm from one mountaintop to the other. If he succeeded, no one would ever call him “Crazy Joe” again. Maybe they’d change it to “Hoppin’ Joe,” or “Jumpin’ Joe,” or some other title. Anything but “Crazy.”

The gap was not enormous; neither was it small. Crazy Joe would have to get a good run to make the distance, but he was known to win footraces. The cowboys began placing bets. Those who bet against Crazy Joe figured the distance between the two points was not impossible, but the ground had been soaked by the rains. The two peaks could collapse at any moment, and all bets were off. The other side argued it was risky, but if Crazy Joe made it, they would double their money. If he missed, they wouldn’t lose much.

It could have gone either way. Crazy Joe had no idea how long the opportunity to change his name would present itself, so he told the cowboys he’d make the jump the following morning at daybreak.

In the early dawn, the men drank strong, boiled coffee around a campfire. Soon after sunrise, they gathered on the side of the gap along with Crazy Joe. His eyes bugged out, and he rolled them like they were two shiny marbles. A path was cleared for him, and he walked it a couple of times to be sure no loose sticks or stones might impede his progress. Giving it his approval, he walked back from the gap about 25 or 30 paces.

He got rid of all the extra weight he could: his pistol and belt, his double D Stetson (revealing hair that had not seen soap or a comb for a while), even his shirt. He kept his hand-tooled boots on because the ground was rocky and uneven. He crouched down like he was in a race—which he was, a race against time and space.

The men shouted, “Crazy Joe. Like a bird! Like a bird! Like a bird!” The chant transfixed him. He felt almost like he could fly—like a bird.

As he began to run and pick up speed, the chanting faded into wide-eyed apprehension. They might never see Crazy Joe alive again. He dashed between the lines of men and flung himself into mid-air. He sailed like a missile, arcing first up, then down, his legs flailing in space. As he landed on the other side, a cheer went up. He made it! He would no longer be Crazy Joe.

He lit flat-footed on the other point and spun around, with one hand raised in the air like he was square dancing to acknowledge the cheers. Grandpa looked down to retrieve the money bag holding the bets when he heard a resounding crack. It wasn’t quite like an earthquake, but clearly, something had broken or moved. The top of the mountain where Crazy Joe landed gave way under his weight. The cowboys watched as Crazy Joe threw up his hands in a helpless gesture and disappeared without a cry into the chasm below.

“He made it,” said my grandfather. “I divided the money to those who bet he would, and we got off the mountain quick.

“About two months later,” my Grandpa went on, “I was up about 20 miles east of McKinney, Texas, near the Red River. It was the fourth Sunday, and the preacher hadn’t shown up. We waited a respectable time then went on with the service. After some gospel singing, I rose to bring a message. It was still March, but close to Easter, so I chose: ‘Though he were dead, yet shall he live.’

“I was just getting warmed up when I spied a man a few rows back whose face looked familiar, but I couldn’t place him. He was scratched up as if he had recently fought a bear. Suddenly, I knew! Dagnabit! It was Crazy Joe! I interrupted my sermon. ‘Crazy Joe! You’re alive?’ I said.

“‘Yep,’ he said, ‘it’s me.’

“I told the folks to sit down and get ready to hear a story like they would probably never heard before. I told them my side of the story to the part where Crazy Joe disappeared. ‘We all saw you go down. What happened?’

“Crazy Joe said, ‘Well, just after I landed on the other side, I heard a loud snap. There was nothin’ I could do. I was goin’ down for sure. All I could do was shout, “God, save me.” The dirt beat me to the bottom by a second or two. It was just mud, deep mud. I was in it, almost to my chest.’

“‘It took me all day to get shed of the mud and dig my boots out. It was ‘most dark when I started walkin’. I was feared I might freeze to death. When I got up on a small rise, I spotted a light a good piece away. I walked till I was all tuckered out. I thought I was gonna die more than once. Then the light I seen went out, but I kept on going. When I got there, it was just a little shack. I hollered loud as I could to raise someone. After a while, a light come on.’

“‘A voice shouted, “I got a loaded shotgun aimed at the door. What do you want? Who are you?’”

“‘That’s the last thing I remember because I went down like a rock. When I come to, they told me they waited a while, then they come out to see about me. They drug me inside, washed me off, and put me to bed. They put salve and liniment on my scrapes and kept watch on me.’

“‘Soon as I felt well enough, I pitched in to split some wood and done some fence-mending, to pay ‘em back a little. Today’s the first chance I got to go to church. I wanted to be in the Lord’s house on the Lord’s day, seeing as how He saved me like He did.’

“I said to the people, ‘This is Crazy Joe’s testimony.’ Folks sat hypnotized till one deacon stood up and said, ‘Praise the Lord!’ They all nodded in agreement.

“I said, ‘Amen. Let’s eat and rejoice.’ People spread out their lunches. Some laid out blankets on a few grassy spots; some picnicked in their wagons; some visited and ate standing up.” I was sure we’d never hear another story to match that one.