

## THE MOVIE HOUSE

Everybody knew Mr. Topsy, he was the most eccentric man in our community. We didn't know the word eccentric then, we just called him "Ole crazy Mr. Topsy". By "we" I mean, nearly all the people in South Haven, the young, the old, everybody, who came in contact with him, one way or another.

## SOUTH HAVEN, ANOTHER PLACE

South Haven wasn't really a town, it was more like a village. Why it was called South Haven, I'll never know. Maybe somebody forgot to add the "e" and it was supposed to be called South Heaven, but, that could not have been the case, in that it was more hell than heaven. All I know is that I ended up living there in 1950, and it was there, that I began an odyssey, which would shape my life forever.... and where I met Mr. Topsy.

We moved, (my family and me), from Tulsa the big city twelve miles north of South Haven the summer of '49. When we got to our new "home," I was in for the shock of my young life.

We went from having indoor toilets and running water, paved streets, street lights and all, to a way of life that I could not believe. We moved to a house, much too small for the family of eight, that we had grown to be by then. It was at the very edge of the woods and near the end of civilization. It sat on top of a knoll, like someone had a few bricks left over and just used them to see how much house they could build. It was just the latest thing that happened to me in this, my first year into my teens. You see, I was just turning thirteen, and was in the midst of a whirlwind of things happening in my personal life. I describe these as the "Zero Years." So, the move to this place was just the capper of things to come. More on that later.... back to Mr. Topsy.

He was old, when we moved to South Haven, and stayed old, as long as I was there. As far as anyone could remember, he had always been an old man, an odd, old man. There were odd balls in most towns and he was "King of the hill" in South Haven.

## MR. TOPSY, WALKING

The first time I saw him, I met him, as I was walking from the bus stop, one day. Well, in reality I caught up with him. I was just getting off the bus and he was walking up ahead of me, so when our strides matched, I spoke. Mama taught me to be respectful to grown folks and I was just making conversation, when I said “hello.” He mumbled something, that I didn’t understand, and then he slowed down to keep from talking to me. I was into my rhythm by then, and I kept on walking, and didn’t take it personally. I thought he might be a bit touched, I left him alone, and he did the same to me.

Then I began to hear odd things about Mr. Topsy, from the boys I played with in the neighborhood, about how he lived and all. If he spoke to you, it was usually something out of the blue that had nothing to do with what was happening at the time. It was like he saw the world in another place and spoke to you, like you were from wherever that was. He never made eye contact with you, if he spoke at all. He was strange, very strange and he always kept to himself. That was Mr. Topsy.

## HE WALKED EVERYWHERE HE WENT

He never rode the bus, like the rest of us who didn’t have cars. He walked everywhere he went and you might see him walking anywhere along the highway. It didn’t matter if it was in our part of town, or in the white part of town. He just walked. We’d pass him as we rode the bus, he’d be trudging along with his croaker-sack on his shoulder. He always carried that burlap sack on his back. He reminded you of that cat who dropped apple seeds everywhere he went, except Mr. Topsy put stuff in his sack. He always had something in his hands, or, in that filthy old sack... that was part of his wardrobe. The sack, the dirty clothes, turned over shoes, old hat, and just plain dirt, made up the sum total of who Mr. Topsy was... everyday.

He’d pick up anything he saw, most of it stuff that other folks had thrown away and left along the highway. His front yard was full of this stuff and I guess he had some use for these things, because he never stopped bringing stuff home. He had piles of odds and ends out front, and a barking, mangy dog to keep it company. The dog of no identifiable pedigree.

Mr. Topsy was his own best company and no one can remember having a conversation with him that lasted more than a few seconds. Maybe Mrs. Hawkins did. She lived a little ways down the street in the nice house. Most people thought he had a crush on her. She was tall, and pretty with long curly hair. Or maybe, it was because she cooked him food every now and then. She'd just knock on his door, set the plates outside his door and walk away. The dog didn't bark at her when she came there and people began to speculate about that. Nobody can remember him thanking her. But, she kept right on cooking food for the unsociable Mr. Topsy. He never had any other visitors either, as far as anyone could tell. Old folks didn't talk to him, and young kids chunked rocks at him from a distance, being malicious as kids tended to be in those days. I was one of the young kids, but I didn't chunk rocks, at least not at Mr. Topsy, Mama woulda killed me.