

## **The Dixon Brothers**

**by Stephen Russell Payne**

“Willie, put your teeth in. We got to go.”

Willie looked up at Wendell, rubbing his ear into his hunched over shoulder. “I ain’t goin’.”

“What do you mean, you ain’t going?”

Willie shook his head as he pushed himself out of his chair, stained gauze pads scattering to the floor. He steadied himself with his cane then limped out of the parlor into the kitchen, favoring his left leg, the one with the deep ulcers on the shin.

Wendell stepped into the doorway. “Now don’t be getting that way. We’re just doing what I promised.”

“I never promised,” Willie said, tapping the metal ash pan beneath the wood stove with his cane.

“Willie, we been over it a hundred times: you was too young. I promised for you.”

“Ma shoulda’ talked to me.”

“You was only eight when Ma died. And a little hellion. There wan’t no talking to you.”

“Was that after I hurt my head?”

“Yes, you fell outta’ the barn the year before, when you were seven.” Wendell shook his head. “Shoulda’ taken care of this years ago. We’re too old now; minds ain’t sharp. This is just what Ma worried about.”

“I don’t like it, Wendell. This thing scares me.”

Wendell stepped over to his little brother. “Mr. Martin’s a nice man. He’ll make it easy for us.”

Willie’s face tightened with concern.

“What is it?” Wendell asked.

“I ain’t scared of going to see Mr. Martin.” He stared at the deeply worn floor boards. “I just don’t want to be left alone.”

Wendell slid an arm around Willie’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, one way or the other we’ll always be together.”

“How do you know?”

“Well— Ma told me. And Reverend Cummings said so too, right from his Sunday pulpit.” He looked into Willie’s droopy eyes. “Ma’s still here. You know – some nights we talk to her at the supper table, just like she was eating with us. It’ll be the same for you and me. Don’t matter who goes first.”

“I guess. But it’s different with you. You’re my brother.”

“I know,” Wendell said, sympathetically. “Now let’s get your teeth in. We don’t want Mr. Martin waiting on us.”

Willie’s neck muscles tightened. “I’ll go on one account.”

“What’s that?”

“You read me Huck Finn tonight.”

Wendell nodded. “Course I will. Just like always.”

Willie hobbled over to the linoleum counter and leaned against the scratched porcelain sink. A single red geranium stood in a clay pot on the chipped white paint of the

window sill. Afternoon sunlight lit the patchy stubble of Willie's face as his arthritic fingers wedged yellowed dentures into his mouth. He chomped down a couple times then wiped a gob of adhesive on his pants. Then he leaned on his cane and headed for the front door. Wendell followed him outside where several scrawny chickens scattered across the farmyard as they walked to their rusted Dodge Power Wagon.

Standing by the truck, Willie raised his cane toward the tractor shed, its roof split in two from heavy winter snows. "If we don't get after that it's goinna' crush the hood of the Deere." For a few moments they stared at the faded green tractor they'd driven over their farm's rocky Vermont fields for better than half a century.

"Yup," Wendell said, opening Willie's door. "Someday we'll get after that roof." He boosted Willie up onto his seat. The door creaked as Wendell forced it shut with his shoulder. Then he walked around to the driver's side, slid an old cushion over a protruding spring and climbed in. He pulled out the choke, pumped the gas pedal, and fired it up. Blue smoke drifted by the cab as the engine settled then Wendell took hold of the stick shift with both hands. Having been frozen in four-wheel-drive for years, the transmission moaned like a downed cow as he ground it into first gear. He gave it some gas and they lurched forward out of the yard onto the road.

Given its questionable brakes, Wendell kept the Dodge in low as they descended the winding dirt road which was lined with grand old maples and broken runs of barbed wire fence. Halfway down the hill, they passed Ray Nelson's sugar woods.

Willie sat up straighter. “Just look at them blue lines running through the woods.” He shook his head. “Lazy is all. Buckets the only way to catch sap. Plastic pipe ruins the flavor, ties the trees all up in knots. Trees is s’posed to be free, ain’t they, Wendell?”

Wendell nodded. “Yes, but hardly anyone gathers by hand anymore.”

Below Nelson’s, Willie pointed to a collection of tin sap buckets hanging at odd angles on a stand of large maples. “Ivan’s still got buckets up,” he said. “Snow’s gone, trees all budded out. He ought to have them down and washed by now.”

“I guess I forgot to tell you that one night a few weeks back, Ivan’s old lady brought dinner up to the sugar house and found him slumped dead against the woodpile, syrup all burned to hell. Too bad, that was a sweet run of sap.”

“Well, his buckets ought to be down anyway.”

“Willie—the poor guy’s dead.”

“No excuse.”

Wendell shook his head, forced the truck into second gear and headed into town.

“Wendell,” Willie said as they passed Lester’s Texaco.

“What is it?”

“Can I ask you a question – I mean later?”

“Course. Ask it now if you want.”

“C’ain’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s private.”

Wendell looked around the cab. “This ain’t private enough?”

“Nope. We’s in town.”

“Suit yourself.”

Willie crossed his arms and stared out the window as they drove down Main Street. He tensed as Wendell steered into the parking lot of Martin’s Funeral Home.

“Ready?”

“I ain’t goin’ in.”

“Yes you are.”

Willie pulled his pant leg up over his knee and scratched around the blistered edges of his ulcers. “What if they’s, you know, a dead one in there?”

“We ain’t here to see no dead people. Besides, we’ll just be in the showroom, or whatever they call it.”

Wendell opened Willie’s door, pulled his pant leg back down then helped him out of the truck. He held the door as Willie hobbled over the threshold into a foyer paneled with dark wood. Navy blue carpet covered the floor. The door closed behind them, shutting out all sounds from the street.

Willie sniffed the air. “Smells weird in here.”

“Kind of musty,” Wendell said, looking around. “Wonder where Mr. Martin is.”

“They’s a light on down there,” Willie said, pointing to the end of the foyer.

They walked past a tall brass vase full of gladiolas to a room with dark maroon drapes hanging in the doorway.

“This place is creepy,” Willie said. “I’m gettin’ outta’ here.”

“Not till we’re done our business, you ain’t. Now come on.” Wendell led Willie through the curtained doorway into a room filled with rows of chairs, in front of which sat an open casket.

Willie started. “Shit worth a damn!” he exclaimed, grabbing hold of Wendell’s arm. “You said we wouldn’t see no dead people.”

“We ain’t in the right place,” Wendell said, turning away. “Let’s go back outside. Must be another door where the live customers come in.”

Willie didn’t budge. He just stared at the corpse.

“Come on, now.”

“Ain’t that Horace?” Willie said, limping down the aisle toward the casket.

“Willie, get away from there.”

Willie raised his cane to the head of the corpse. “Yes ‘sir, Horace Bagley in the flesh. What’s he doing here?”

Wendell walked down the aisle and peered over Willie’s shoulder. “For cryin’ out loud, Willie, he’s dead.”

“Looks kinda’ peaceful, don’t he?”

Wendell looked at Horace’s face. “They musta’ done something to him. He’s clean shaven for God sakes.”

“Mr. Dixon?”

An elderly man in a dark suit walked down the aisle from the back of the room.

“Mr. Martin—”

“Nice to see you again,” Mr. Martin said, shaking Wendell’s hand. He turned.  
“And you must be Willie.”

Willie shook hands without looking at him.

“Did you folks know Horace? He was a fine horseshoe player.”

Wendell nodded. “We used to play Saturdays behind the Grange Hall. He had a darn good arm.”

Mr. Martin smiled. “Now, if you gentlemen will follow me, I’ll take you downstairs to go over things.”

Willie turned back to Horace. “Can you make anyone look this good?”

“Usually,” Mr. Martin said. “My granddaughter does a nice job with the cosmetic work.”

Willie pointed at Horace’s face. “What’s that red stuff? Don’t look like a man ought to.”

“Rouge. Puts a little color in their cheeks.”

“His cheeks were never that color.”

“Well they are now,” Wendell said. “Now come on, follow Mr. Martin.”

Frowning, Willie followed them out of the room, down a narrow staircase into a showroom displaying several different styles of coffins. Hanging over a heavy oak desk was a large black and white photograph of a crowd of people at a railroad station. A banner laid out on the lawn in front of them read: “The People of St. Johnsbury 1928.”

“Please sit down,” Mr. Martin said.

Wendell looked up at the photograph. “Will you look at that,” he said. “Mr. Jenks took that when we were kids.”

“Do you remember that day?” Mr. Martin asked.

Wendell raised his wire-rimmed glasses up onto his forehead. “Yes, sir. We was there with Ma and Grandpa Amos. Watched the Calvin Coolidge steam in from Morrisville on the St. J. & LC, newest locomotive in Vermont.” He pointed. “It’s right there, with two American flags flying off the boiler.”

Willie straightened as much as his arthritis would allow.

“Can you see?” Wendell asked.

“Not really.”

“Here,” Mr. Martin said. “Let’s we take it down for you.”

He lifted the photograph off its hook and laid it on the desk. Willie hunched over the dusty glass.

“Do you remember being in this picture?” Mr. Martin asked.

“Nope.”

“They took a lot of pictures that day,” Wendell said. “I remember them telling us to stand still, hold our breath as long as we could so as not to blur the negative. It was hard for Mom and Grandpa ‘cause they were so sick.” Wendell pointed to a woman holding a young boy; another, older boy stood at her side. Behind her was an elderly man with a white beard whose hand rested on her shoulder.

Wendell pointed. “See that blurry kid? That’s you, right there in Ma’s arms. You never stayed still for a second.”



Willie slid his crooked fingertips across the glass. A deep reverence settled into his voice. “That’s Ma and me?”

“Sure is. I’m beside her and Grandpa Amos behind. Ma took him out of the home to go down for the town picture.”

“Outta’ what home?”

“The County Home – for the sick. Grampa had consumption. You know that.”

“They take this picture before I fell outta’ the barn?”

Wendell glanced uncomfortably at Mr. Martin. “You’re about three in this picture. You was seven when you had the accident.”

Willie squinted at his image under the glass. “So I was normal then?”

“Yes. You was a rascal, but normal.”

“I’ll be darned,” Willie said, raising his hand to his chin.

Mr. Martin slid the picture to the side of his desk. “Well, we’d better get started.” He opened a file then looked over his bifocals at Wendell. “Before your mother died she set aside enough money so that you and Willie wouldn’t have to worry about your final arrangements. She talked to me about—”

“You talked to Ma?” Willie interjected.

“Yes, several times. She told me what she wanted for you boys.” Mr. Martin shook his head. “Terrible to die so young but back in those days they didn’t have good treatments for sugar diabetes. Poor thing was almost blind when her kidneys finally gave out.”

“Was she pretty?” Willie asked.

“Your mother was very pretty,” Mr. Martin continued. “And she didn’t want the same thing to happen to you that happened to your grandfather Amos.”

“What happened to him?”

Wendell slid forward on his chair. “I’m sorry, Mr. Martin, Willie’s memory’s bad. I’ve told him a hundred—”

“It’s all right,” Mr. Martin said. He folded his hands on the desk. “Willie, your grandfather was a hard working farmer. He put enough food on the table, but wasn’t able to save any money. So when he took sick your mother was left alone working the farm, raising you boys. Not well herself, the best she could do was put Amos in the County Home. When he died she couldn’t afford a funeral so they buried him out back in the pauper’s cemetery, no stone of his own. She wanted you boys to have better.”

“So what we need to do today is pick out a casket for each of you and a memorial you can share.”

“Do we get a funeral?” Willie asked.

“You could have a small service if you wish.”

“I’d like that,” Wendell said.

“Do you have some friends or relatives still living?”

Wendell thought for a moment. “Well, we’ve got a cousin up in East Burke, and a couple fellows from the Grange might come.”

“That would be fine,” Mr. Martin said, pushing his chair back. “Now let’s look at a few caskets and see what you like.”

They followed Mr. Martin toward the back of the room. Willie stopped beside a heavily lacquered mahogany model and slid his hand along its polished brass rail. He peered inside, pushed on the thick cushioned silk with the hook of his cane. "Here's a nice one."

Wendell stepped closer.

Willie rapped his knuckles on the curved top. "Solid." He looked up and down the length of it. "It's long enough. We'd fit."

Wendell reached in, felt the white silk ruffle then shook his head. "This ain't right for us." He looked over at Mr. Martin. "Got anything less fancy?"

"Certainly, come this way." He motioned to a simple, square-topped casket sitting against the back wall.

Wendell and Willie walked over and ran their hands over the smooth wood planks forming the box. Wendell examined the corner of the lid. "Good tight tongue and groove."

"A lot of farmers choose this one," Mr. Martin said.

"Nice wide pine," Willie said. "And it don't have that frilly stuff." He stretched his arms out, hooking his crooked fingers around the ends of the box. "You don't suppose we'd both fit in one?"

"Kind of a two-fer," Wendell said, smiling.

"I don't think that would be possible," Mr. Martin placed his hand on top of the box. "So you'd each like one of these?"

Wendell nodded.

Willie bent forward and rubbed his calf. “I got to set down, Wendell. My leg’s hurtin’ awful.”

Mr. Martin motioned back toward his desk. “Let’s sit down. You can select a stone and you’ll be done.”

Wendell helped Willie back to a chair. His ankle was swollen and yellow fluid streaked down his shin into his shoe.

“I ain’t got enough energy to pick me out a stone,” Willie said.

Mr. Martin opened a photo album. “Perhaps you could look through these sample pictures while you rest.” He slid the photo album in front of them and turned through a few pages.

“Looky that one,” Willie said, pointing to a shiny gray stone with a tractor engraved on it. “How’d they do that?”

“They’ve got a laser at the monument company in Barre that’ll engrave most any design.”

“That’s it,” Willie said, his eyes brightening. “We’ll have the John Deere on ours.”

Wendell’s face lit up. “Good idea.”

Mr. Martin didn’t look so enthusiastic. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think your Mother’s account would cover that large a marker, or the engraving. Custom memorials are quite expensive.”

Willie hung his head.

“Then any stone’ll do,” Wendell said.

“Well, let’s say we get you boys a nice piece of Vermont granite and put both your names on it.”

“I got to go home,” Willie said, scratching at his leg.

Mr. Martin frowned. “That looks terribly sore. Can I get you a bandage?”

“Nope. Needs air.”

“We’ll dress it when we get back to the farm,” Wendell said.

“No more dressings,” Willie suddenly stood. “Come on, Wendell. Goinna’ get chilly tonight. We got to load the stove.”

Wendell stood up.

Mr. Martin stepped around the side of his desk. “There is one other thing I should mention to you. There’s always the option of cremation. Then you don’t need to worry about a casket and all. People often have their ashes scattered over a special place.”

Willie’s eyes opened wide. “You mean burn us all to hell in one of them ovens? No goddamn way!” He got his cane under him and limped toward an exit door.

“Mr. Dixon, that’s not the way out.”

Before Mr. Martin could stop him, Willie pushed through the panic bar and fled. Wendell followed him outside into the back where old wooden shipping pallets and broken headstones protruded at odd angles from the grass. At the side of a dirt driveway a 1950s Cadillac hearse sat in a sea of overgrown raspberry bushes.

Wendell took after Willie, catching him at the end of the driveway.

“Willie—” Wendell said, taking his arm. “Stop. We got to rest a minute.”

“Truck’s this way,” Willie said. He leaned forward on his cane and shuffled up a slight incline to the parking lot, favoring his bad leg almost to the point of dragging it. When they reached their pickup, they both leaned against the tailgate, exhausted.

“Let’s get out of here,” Willie said after catching his breath.

Wendell helped Willie into the truck then climbed in himself and started it up.

As they drove out of town, dark storm clouds were pushing into the Connecticut River valley from the North. Back on their hill, Willie turned to Wendell. “Can we keep going, up to the old pasture?”

Wendell tapped the fuel gauge causing the needle to bounce. “I ‘spose we’ve got enough gas.” He looked at Willie. “But I’m worried about your leg. And besides, aren’t you tired?”

“Yeah, but I like the view up there. It’s peaceful.”

“Okay.”

They continued to the top of the hill where the road turned into nothing more than a set of old skidder ruts.

“Hang on,” Wendell said, the transmission whining as he downshifted into first. Willie braced himself against the dash as they lurched through the ruts, blackberry bushes scratching along the doors of the Power Wagon. They finally broke out into a meadow of spring grass then drove past a line of scraggly old apple trees to the far end of the field. Wendell pulled to a stop at the edge of a cliff where a wide green valley opened below them like a great theater. In the distance, the mountain tops were illuminated with a warm yellow-purple glow from the setting sun.

Wendell rolled down his window, letting in cool Canadian air which was arriving ahead of the storm. “Just look at all them shades of green.”

Willie nodded. “I want to be buried right here.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The sky darkened as clouds gathered against the mountains.

Wendell turned to his brother. “Back in town you wanted to ask me a question.

This private enough?”

Willie stared out the windshield. “You ever had relations with a woman?”

Wendell adjusted his hands on the steering wheel. “Once.”

“Who?”

“Rachael. Captain Smith’s daughter.”

“Why didn’t you marry her?”

“Didn’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“I was busy, had to tend to the farm.”

Willie paused for a few moments. “Did you love her?”

“I had a fancy for her.”

Willie looked Wendell in the eye. “You let her go on account of me?”

“Sort of, I guess.”

The first raindrops splattered on the hood of the cab.

Willie reached over and laid his hand on Wendell’s forearm. “Let’s go home.”

Wendell patted Willie's hand, turned the truck around and crossed back over the meadow. As they headed down the hill, rain fell harder on the roof of the Dodge.

As they arrived at the house, a car pulled into the yard behind them. Wendell squinted at the approaching headlights. "Who could that be?"

Wearing a slicker, Mr. Martin got out of his Buick and walked over to Wendell. "I want you and your brother to have this." He said, handing Wendell a cardboard tube. "Good night, now." He touched the brim of his hat, walked back to his car and drove off.

With the tube under his arm, Wendell helped Willie out of the truck and into the kitchen where he collapsed in his chair by the wood stove. His breathing was labored and his forehead was beaded with sweat.

"I'll make some hot tea," Wendell said, struggling to get Willie out of his damp coat.

"I'll tend the fire," Willie said in a whisper. Wendell tucked a gray Army blanket around Willie's shoulders then started a fire in the stove. He left the firebox door open to warm the kitchen.

Wendell stepped to the sink and for a few moments enjoyed the familiar patter of rain on the kitchen windowpanes. He filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove. Then he sat down at the table and opened the cardboard tube. He unrolled some papers and held them at arm's length. Across the top of a sketch of a 1941 John Deere was a hand written note: To Wendell and Willie – hope this looks enough like yours. I've taken care of having it engraved for you. Sincerely, John Martin."



Wendell smiled and held up the sketch. “Look what Mr. Martin done for us. He’s going to put the Deere on our stone.”

Willie didn’t respond.

Wendell set the sketch on the table, walked to the Hoosier and brought down the tackle box filled with Willie’s dressings. He gently slid Willie’s pant leg up over his knee and was alarmed at what he saw. Willie’s lower leg had become a mottled purple color, with bright red streaks running from the festered ulcers up onto his thigh. There was an odor Wendell hadn’t smelled before. “Dear God, we’ve got to get this cleaned up.”

In his sleepiness, Willie tried to push him away. “Let it go,” he mumbled, his dentures dislodging as he spoke.

“It’s okay little Brother. Go back to sleep.”

Wendell bent forward, slid Willie’s dentures from his mouth and set them in a saucer on the table. He tested the temperature of the water in the kettle then poured it over a clean towel into a mixing bowl. He stirred in a tablespoon of Epsom salts and set it on the floor next to Willie’s chair. Wendell knelt down, wrung out the towel and carefully washed around the edges of the ulcers.

When Wendell was finished, he wrapped Willie’s leg with clean muslin then sat down and rested for a few minutes. Then he picked up their tattered addition of Huckleberry Finn, opened it to the strand of rawhide marking Willie’s favorite passage, and began to read.

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