



John Croyle's Speck of Heaven

Condensed from
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ROY EXUM

ONE COLD AND RAINY October morning in Gadsden, Ala., workers opened the door of an empty boxcar they were preparing to load. There, shivering in the beam of their flashlight, was a small boy.

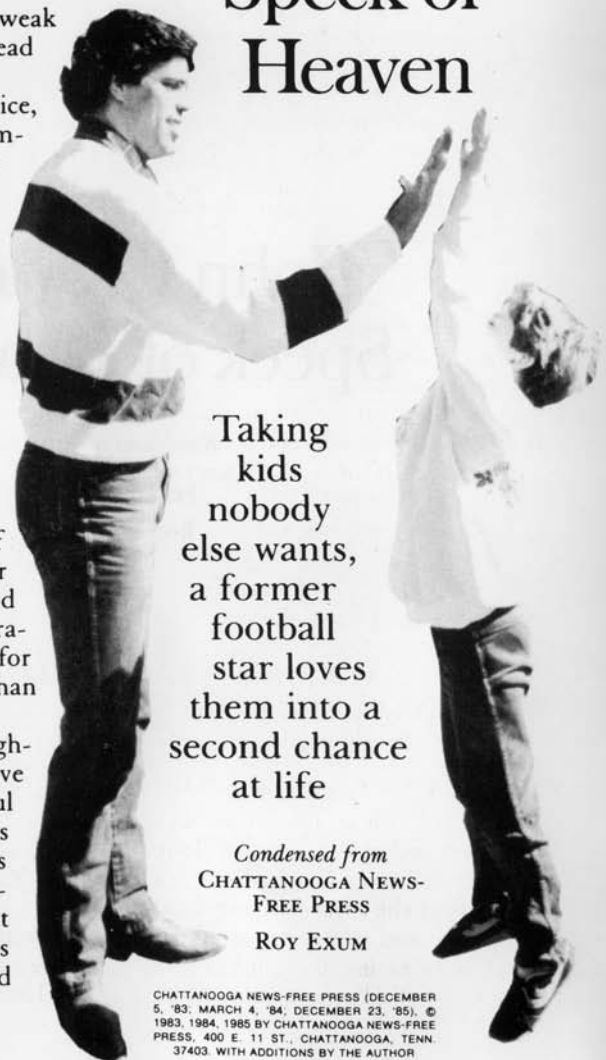
He had a can of beans and some cereal in a box. In a weak voice, he cried, "Go ahead and shoot me."

The men called police, who immediately summoned John Croyle in nearby Glencoe. Croyle took the little hobo to his ranch, fed and clothed him and cared for him as he would a son.

That story is one of hundreds that filter from a speck of heaven: John Croyle's Big Oak Ranch in northeastern Alabama. There, a standout University of Alabama football player has forsaken what would surely have been a lucrative business career for blessings far greater than most men ever know.

Croyle, 36, once a tougher-than-leather defensive end under coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, takes kids nobody else wants and gives them the support they need to turn out fine. He has pulled boys out of junked cars and

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Taking kids nobody else wants, a former football star loves them into a second chance at life

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PHOTO: FRANK JOHNSTON

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lifted them from beds filled with their own grime. Asked how many have been abused or neglected, John answers, "All of 'em. I've had people actually drive up, open the car door and sling out a boy and a sack of clothes and never say a word. Just like that!"

One boy, picked up along the highway, told the patrolman that his mother was dead and that his sister, 18 and pregnant, had told him he had to leave because she didn't have any more food. So the little kid walked down that lonesome road until the trooper came along. Fighting back tears, the officer put the boy on his front seat, flicked on the blue lights and nosed his cruiser toward Glencoe.

John asks for some of his kids. "I go to whoever has custody and talk 'em into giving me the child. I do it because I figure these youngsters ought to have a better life."

Etowah County district judge Robert E. Lewis, who has placed many juveniles at Big Oak Ranch, says, "If everybody had as much interest in their *own* children as John Croyle does in *any* kid, we wouldn't have delinquency in this country. It's that simple."

\$70,000 From "The Man." John Croyle was raised as an only child from age five, when a falling tombstone killed his four-year-old sister during a funeral. Somehow the tragedy triggered in the Croyles a profound concern for others. John's father, Frank, a division manager of the local Sears store, began

coaching kids in summer sports. Soon John, a natural athlete, was offering his teammates tips on holding a bat and shooting a basketball.

By his senior year in high school, John was inundated with athletic scholarship offers. In Alabama, however, it would have been a sacrilege to play anywhere but in Tuscaloosa. He played on three University of Alabama teams from 1971 through 1973, and all three were Southeastern Conference champions. But there was something more to John Croyle's heartbeat.

In the summers, John worked at a boys' camp in Lumberton, Miss. And in those teen years he came to feel that his Christian mission was to take care of kids who had nothing, absolutely no chance.

Toward the end of his final football season, he went to see "The Man," as Coach Bryant was called by his players. "I told him I wanted to use the money I would earn playing pro football to start a ranch for kids," says Croyle.

Coach Bryant told him to forget about pro football, that he knew John's heart wasn't in it. But the Bear promised to serve on Croyle's board of directors and do what he could to help him raise the funds he needed for his dream.

In 1974 Croyle faced the toughest moment of his young life. He had found a beautiful 120 acres on which to build the ranch. But the owner wanted a \$50,000 down payment within 48 hours.

John's savings totaled \$5000. Wil-

liam Buck, a Birmingham oral surgeon, pledged \$15,000, but John was still \$30,000 shy. Then, just when his chances of raising the rest of the money seemed bleakest, an old teammate came to the rescue.

John Hannah believed so profoundly in Croyle and what he hoped to do that the All-American promised John any bonus he might get to sign a pro-football contract. Hannah signed with the New England Patriots before John's deadline and offered his friend the \$30,000 bonus. Croyle named his first house for abused boys The John Hannah Home.

Over the years, Coach Bryant became one of the biggest believers in Big Oak Ranch. The afternoon before the 1982 Liberty Bowl, when Bryant would coach his last game, one fan thrust a commemorative T-shirt through the crowd and shouted, "If you sign this I'll give a thousand dollars to any charity you name!" Bryant reached for his pen and said in his gruff voice, "Send the money to Big Oak Ranch."

"When Coach Bryant died," says Croyle, "we got to checking. Over the years he had given the boys of Big Oak \$70,000."

"I Love You." The ranch, which opened with an old farmhouse in January 1975, now includes two fishing lakes, a big swimming pool and seven two-story homes with a set of houseparents in each. There are 14 dogs, 12 horses, 60 pigs, 40 cows and 176 chickens. But, best of all, there are 56 boys getting another chance at life.

It is a bustling place, especially after the older boys come home from school. John's "RATs" (Ranch Action Teams) band together to gather hay, wash cars, work in the huge garden or tend livestock. "Everybody has chores to do," says Croyle. "That's part of being a family." Each boy gets \$2 an hour. "But they get docked a dollar for every minute they're late to work," says Croyle, "so if there's one thing my guys know, it's how to be prompt!"

John and his wife, Tee, get 10 to 15 calls a week concerning placement. After deciding which children to accept, John tells each new arrival four things:

"One: I love you. I ain't gay or weird, but I want you to know I love you, and one day you'll understand that.

"Two: I won't ever lie to you. I may not always tell you everything you want to know, but I will never ever lie.

"Three: I'll stick with you until you're grown. If you'll try to be the best person you can be, then you've got me for life.

"Four: If you ever do me wrong, I'll get you." He says this "so a boy will always wonder—especially during that instant right before he might do something he knows he shouldn't!"

Each house is patterned after a normal family. "We vary the ages so there's an older 'brother' to look up to and a younger one to take under your wing," says

Croyle. Houseparents do most of the disciplining, but tough problems are referred to Croyle. He rarely paddles, he says. "What good does that do to a boy whose mother has dipped his legs into a vat of hot grease?"

Three Chances. Croyle also says experience has taught him to listen carefully before he doles out a punishment. One night a furious Croyle was driving a runaway back to the ranch. "Why did you do it?" John demanded.

"I wanted to see my mother," said the boy.

"We would have *let* you. All you needed to do was ask."

"I *did*. I asked my mother if I could come see her and she said no, she never wanted to see me again. But I wanted to see her," said the boy, his voice small, "so I went."

There wasn't a whole lot more said during the rest of the drive.

"I don't care how bad you are, what you do. Everybody gets three chances with me," says Croyle, whose car has been stolen so many times he leaves the keys in it to save repairing hot-wiring jobs. "I may bend a little on the chances, but once you use the third, you are gone."

It is after "strike two" that Croyle puts his arm over a boy's shoulder and walks out the long drive to the road. Then they turn and look at the sprawling ranch, at the houses and cattle, and at all the other boys racing their bikes and throwing balls. "I point to our sign,

'A Christian Home for Children Needing a Chance,' and tell that boy, 'I am the best friend you ever had, but now you're down to just one last chance.'"

He recalls one of the boys he had to send away. "I saw him picking up cans along the road a year later. He waved, but I didn't slow down. You see, I have 56 boys here who deserve what that boy didn't want. But, oh, that kills you. . . ."

"Coach Bryant once told me that he never thought about the players who had done well; he remembered the failures. I guess I'm the same way."

But most of Big Oak's 500 "alumni" have turned out well. Several have attended college, and one who today owns his own business sent everybody on the ranch to an amusement park in Georgia for a day. One is a government employee, and dozens work in construction, using skills learned on the ranch.

By such a measure, Croyle's efforts are quite a success. "Let me tell you about success," he says. "I figure it is three things: doing what God calls you to do, doing what you do best, and doing what makes you happy. To tell the truth, if I had just one more year to live, I wouldn't change a heartbeat!"

"Is That You, Dad?" John gets a new boy about every month and tries to build a house about every nine. A gymnasium was recently built with a basketball court and a weight room. John is also on the verge of

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opening a similar ranch for girls.

One of the biggest backers of Big Oak Ranch is Ray Perkins, who followed Bryant as Alabama's head coach and who is now coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. One day Perkins was admiring the houses and asked Croyle what each cost. John told him that the going price was \$67,000. As the two men talked, Perkins spied an old, sway-backed horse a farmer had given the boys.

"I'd like to have a horse like that," Perkins told Croyle. And John, so thankful for all the coach had done, quickly said, "He's yours—we'll give him to you."

But Perkins shook his head and wrote out a \$67,000 check for that old swaybacked horse. And today eight boys live in the Ray Perkins House.

Thanks to such support, the ranch is now debt-free. But annual operating costs are \$480,000. And there is still the responsibility of feeding 56 boys, the fact that a van needs repair and the reality that boys require medical and dental care.

How does Croyle, who works

365 days a year, handle such pressure? Partly by following a lesson from Bear Bryant: "Coach Bryant was a master at getting you to ignore the aching ribs, the cracked hand. He taught us that when our opponent 'knew' he had us whipped, there was still some fight left, and all we had to do was call on it."

Then John adds a story: "Once, we arranged for a boy's father to come get him for the weekend. His daddy wasn't supposed to arrive until just before dark, but by mid-afternoon that kid had laid out his clothes and was sitting by the window, waiting.

"He fell asleep sitting there. When I realized his father wasn't coming, I finally gathered up the boy in my arms. As I carried him to bed, he said, 'Is that you, Dad?'

"Whenever I feel tired, I think, *There's another child out there somewhere who's been waiting for you all his life.* And then it gets easy again."

John Croyle's address is Big Oak Ranch, P.O. Box 507, Springville, AL 35146.

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