

My First Wild Turkey

By H. Clay Needham



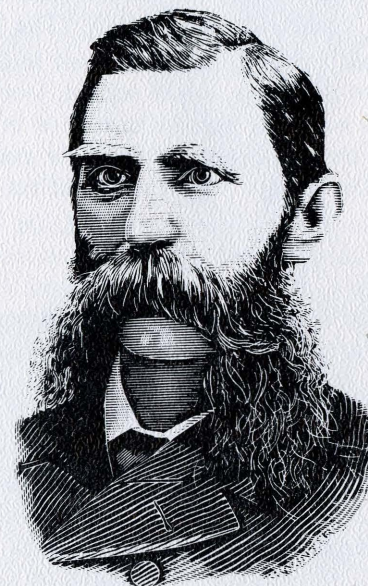
H. Clay Needham

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By *H. Clay Needham*
(Written About 1900)



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HENRY CLAY NEEDHAM

Henry Clay Needham, author of **“My First Wild Turkey,”** was born on June 8, 1851, at Percival Mills (Hardin County), Kentucky, the fourth son of Parkman Smith and Rebecca South Needham. When he was still a small child the family moved back to **“The Old Brick,”** the home of Parkman’s parents, Timothy and Ruth Smith Needham, to run the mill there and to help care for the parents. The house was located on Linder’s Creek in Hardin County and is the scene of this story. From his reference to the **“Companion”** Henry Clay probably intended to submit his story to the leading children’s magazine of that day, **“The Youth’s Companion.”**

Henry Clay studied at home until he moved to Elizabethtown in 1871 to attend college there. He then taught school, worked in Missouri, and finally went to Kansas where he became interested in coal mining. He also worked actively with the Prohibition Party. He and Governor St. John authored the Kansas Dry Law, which is still in effect in 1977.

It was also in Kansas that he married Lillie Florence Taylor, the daughter of Samuel Dawson and Elizabeth Raymer Taylor. They were married at the Taylor home in Arcadia on April 17, 1879. In 1888 the family moved to California, settling in Newhall where Henry Clay was superintendent of St. John’s Subdivision, a prohibition colony.

In his years in Los Angeles County, Henry Clay Needham became well known as a leading Prohibitionist, serving as state party chairman a number of times. The California delegation to the national convention carried him as their candidate for president in 1920. He was a rancher, a real estate developer, an oil operator. For some time he owned the Newhall Water Company.

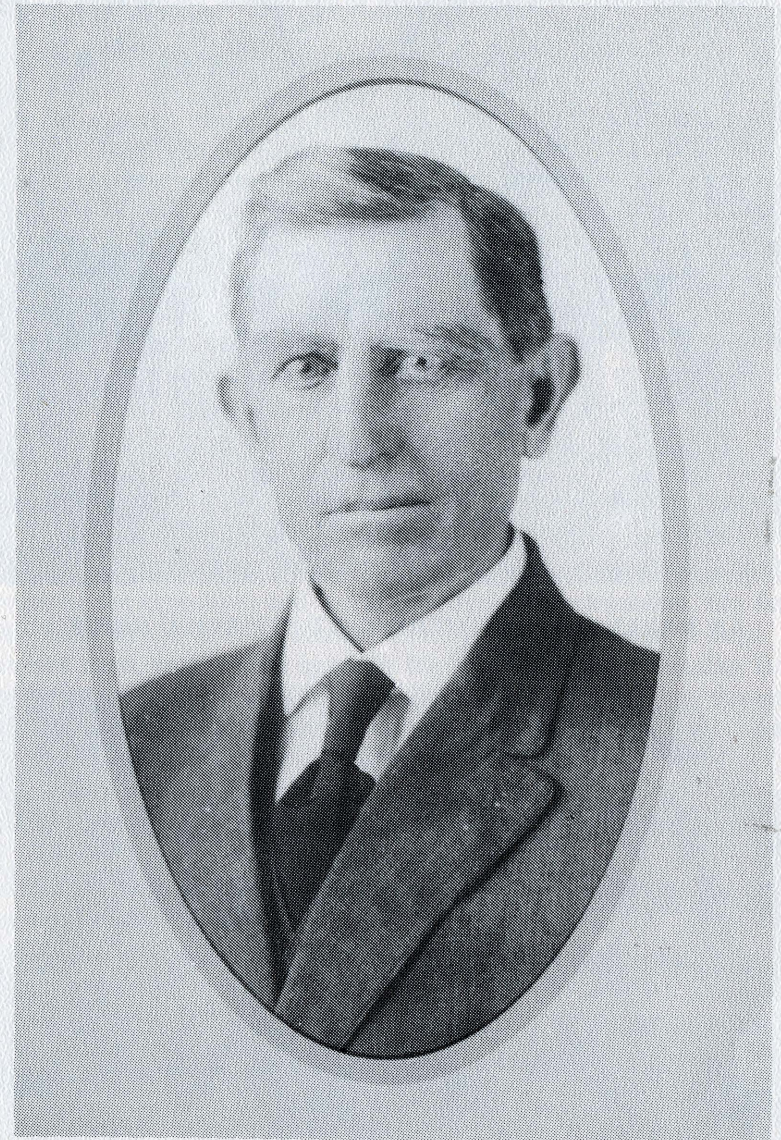
He died February 21, 1936 in Newhall, leaving his widow and five children: Nellie Needham Miller, Pearl Needham Segerstrom, Russell, Neil and Henry Parke Needham. The only surviving son in 1977 is Parke, Commodore, U. S. Navy (Retired).

The Albert Needham mentioned in **“My First Wild Turkey,”** was the youngest brother of Parkman, born in Kentucky on August 31, 1823, and died February 8, 1889. Marion, Albert’s eldest son, was born in 1845 and died in 1912.

Henry Clay’s sisters were Louise Melvina, **“Mellie,”** born in 1847; Martha, **“Mattie,”** born in 1849; Letitia, **“Tish or Tishie,”** born in 1854; and Margaret, **“Maggie,”** born in 1857.

Marjorie Segerstrom Coffill

Sonora — Fall, 1977



H. CLAY NEEDHAM
1851 - 1936



AN EARLY DAY GATHERING AT "THE OLD BRICK"



THE OLD BARN AS SEEN TODAY

My First Wild Turkey

It seems long ago, when I, a boy of 12 summers, killed my first wild turkey. Since that day while I have seen something of the world as I have crossed the continent from that childhood home in Kentucky to the sunny slopes and shores of California, have hunted deer and turkey in the mountains of Missouri, killed prairie chickens on the plains of Kansas where the flocks were numbered by the thousands; and have searched for larger game in the fastnesses and solitudes of the mountains of California; have likewise seen something of social life along its lines of intellectual and political achievements; many of these associations and experiences have been joyful and pleasant; yet withal, I do not think I ever spent an hour so fully swallowed up with keen transitory bliss as the one in which that spring morning 37 year ago when I, a white-headed boy, triumphantly brought in my first "gobbler."

Some of the reminiscences of the days leading up to that hour would perhaps be of interest from the contrast to these days of rush, strains and electricity. To begin, myself and four cousins had had a frolic and fun "treading out wheat." Your farmers' boys of these days would be ignorant of the expression and it will necessitate an explanation. My father on his farm in the hills of Hardin County, Kentucky, had a large, old fashioned barn, with a wide space in the center used as a treading floor. Here the wheat sheaves were laid in a large circle and we boys, mounting our horse, and leading another by our side would ride round and round, while the action of the horses' hooves would separate the grain from the husks in which it had grown. This would be continued for hours, while my father and my Uncle Albert would stand opposite to each other with fork in hand to keep the scattering straw tossed back in the ring, and occasionally loosening up and turning the entire mass so that it might all be exposed to the trampling hooves.

Through the vicissitudes of all these years I can still see those two grey bearded men; men who carried their hearts in the open, so full of tender kindness that they could find time to, with twinkling eyes, take part in the fun of the youth about them. What glorious days! We played circus actors on our circling horses, wrestled in the straw, or practiced acrobatic feats on the treading floor during the resting hour.

It was after days of such fun and frolic as this when the ever increasing heap of grain and chaff in the center had grown to be, in my childish eyes, almost a mountain that I well knew what was coming; after these days of hilarity always came the doleful ones when for hour after hour with blistered hands and aching back I would hang on to the revolving handle of the old fashioned wheat fan, turning it round and round to produce the vibration and wind necessary to separate the kernels from the chaff. In such seasons I must admit that my repugnance to such drudgery

has more than once brought the "blinding tears" to my eyes. But now as I look back through the years to the graves of those two men beneath the wild cherry tree in the family cemetery; and with scattered paths of the cousins as they reach from ocean to ocean, I would tug at the handle of that fan for a year just to have again one day of that long ago experience.

But it cannot be. You who are boys today think of this, and while I would have you enjoy to the utmost each youthful hour, I would also say be thoughtful and kind to the aged ones with their grey hairs for there comes a day when through tears you will see the little mound in the cemetery where rests these tired frames.

It was after a season of such enjoyment when I with a heavy heart had been long turning that hateful crank while Marion, a cousin, who was in the first flush of young manhood, which always brings that estimation of individual importance which borders close upon the domineering, was with steady stroke of scoop piling the chaff and grain in the hopper, and occasionally giving my lagging arms the necessary encouragement by shouting out the command, through the rattle and dust from the machine, "Turn up, Henry!" Was there ever a more hateful phrase? It seemed to me that I already had the internal gear of that old machine whirling and vibrating up to the safety limit, and verily thought he issued *his order* just to show his authority.

It was a cloudy morning of the early spring, dripping with a mist of rain. I stood by that machine, struggling with the handle, standing on an upturned box to bring me up to the regulation height; and while thus sorrowfully circumstanced, my eyes wandered out through the wide opening in the barn, away across the orchard and field to where the pasture land joined timber in the distance. What was that I could see through the mist and haze? Dark spots moved here and there where the sheep were grazing; some appearing large and round while others were but small huches (sic) gliding here and there. A breeze lifted the haze a little, and then I saw the spreading tails of the strutting gobblers and knew that about half a hundred wild turkeys were getting their morning meal in that pasture field.

How the blood thrilled to my fingers' ends. I had killed quail, rabbits and squirrels, but never a turkey. Without a word I dropped that handle and sped away, through the opening and into and down the lane for the dwelling; chuckling to myself as I passed the open barn gate which I knew Marion would have to stop to close, and this would give me time in the spare. There was but one gun in the house and he was something of a nimrod. I heard the shout of "What's the matter?" as I rounded the corner of the barn, and in a moment afterward I heard the clatter of the closing gate and then the regular beat of his feet as he pounded the mud behind me. To me it meant almost a race for life. I fairly flew over the fence at the back yard, into the long, back porch, through it into the

sitting room where the gun stood in the corner with the long, old fashioned shot pouch hanging on the muzzle. I snatched the pouch and gun and as I bounded out of the door, I heard the rattle of my cousin's feet on the porch boards after me; by the time he gained the door I was well out in the open yard and turned on him defiantly, and warned him that if he came near me I would fire off the gun and scream and "holler" and frighten away the entire flock. He stopped; tried commanding and threatening to no avail. Then he began to beg, plead and reason that I could not kill a turkey and to let him have the gun; but my blood was up and I was "sot" and so informed him in plain terms while my sisters, who had been attracted to the doors by the rumpus, stood by giggling. He finally gave it up in disgust and said as he turned away, "let the dad'broomed fool go," and I went; keeping well around to the side out of sight of the flock I gained the timber back of the pastures.

Pushing the gun through a crack between the rails of the fence I clambered over and made a wide detour, scrambling over fallen logs and through brush, vines, and briars and at last came up to the fence opposite to the point where I supposed the flock of turkeys to be.

Here a strip of woods had been enclosed within the pasture field for the shade it would afford the animals, and I crawled up behind the fence at a point where a wood road had been cut through this timber, as I knew this road would afford me a clear opening to the field beyond. How slowly I seemed to move as I scrambled along, flat on the ground, pushing along the gun before me. As I neared the fence my fluttering heart pounded so furiously against my ribs that I felt the noise would certainly frighten the wary birds. At last I was within reach of the fence. I cautiously put the muzzle of the gun through the crack above the second rail, and with muscle and mind strung to utmost tension I slowly raised my head, from which I had removed my hat, until I could see over the rails to the fields beyond.

Would they be there yet? What a question; more important then to me than since when thousands of dollars were at stake. I had the breech of the gun to my shoulder and eye training down the sights, and as I slowly raised the gun I could see the flock beyond the strip of timber about one hundred yards away. A large gobbler was strutting in front of the opening; just as I raised my head I presume he caught a glimpse of something unusual for he instantly lowered his tail and stood erect, looking intently in my direction.

I was just on the point of touching the hair trigger, having him well in range, when a mammoth sheep slipped fair between me and the turkey, completely cutting him off from my view. Was ever circumstance so exasperating? Should I shoot the hateful sheep? While I debated these questions through what seemed an age, but what I presume in reality was only a moment, the sheep walked on and, oh, joy! there stood the turkey still and erect.

I "drew a bead" on his black and glistening side and touched the trigger. As the smoke burst from the muzzle of the gun I sprang to my feet and began to clamber up the fence, leaving my hat on the ground; while on top of the fence I paused long enough amid the confusion of the running sheep, the flapping wings of the rising flock of turkeys, to see my bird stumbling around on the ground. I sprang off at a bound, seized the muzzle of the gun and poked it through the fence and scurried down the road for the field. Just as I was gaining the opening, the turkey managed to get wing and away he went across the corner of the pasture field, with each stroke of his mighty wings getting higher and higher and higher in the sky.

Have you ever been placed where after a supreme effort the result of the struggle seemed slipping away? Then you can imagine the feeling of pain and despair and disappointment which filled my boyish breast as through tear-dimmed eyes I watched that bird steadily rising, and with each stroke getting further and further away. He had passed the borders of the field, was high in the air, when his stroke failed him; he fluttered a moment and then began to irregularly descend.

Hope again filled my soul. Down, down, down he came until the sound of his thrashing wings, beating among the branches of the great oak trees, reached me across the field; and then he was out of sight.

I immediately started across the field with all the power that was in me. The gun was heavy, I dropped it. The flapping of the great shot pouch as it dangled about my legs impeded my progress. I slipped the strap above my head as I ran and left it lying. My coat and vest seemed to bind my swelling lungs. I slipped them from my arms and sped on. As I reached the other fence I thought possibly if I should find the turkey it might mean a long chase, and bethought me of my dog. I began to shout with all the lung power I had left, "Here, Watch," "Here, Watch," but it was a long distance to the house and my wind power was not over strong. I scaled the fence, ran through the woods to where the trees stood amid whose branches I had seen the turkey disappear. No dead turkey, just my anxious gaze. I ran wildly about among the bushes to no avail. then I ran back, climbed the fence and with renewed energy shouted for my dog; gave it up, took another header in the timber; no turkey. I climbed the fence again and called for the dog, again descended and searched the underbrush and again mounted the fence and sang out, "Here, Watch," "Here, Watch," until it seemed my windpipe was fractured and my throat hanging in "slivers."

What joy as I saw the dark shadow of the huge mastiff as he cleared the back yard fence near a mile away. How eagerly that faithful dog put forth every power to reach me, but what a snail's pace it seemed to me. I shouted to encourage him. He pounded the sodden ground of the pasture land with aching feet as he propelled his huge body along,

and at last stood at the fence beneath me with panting sides and lolling tongue, as he looked up as if to say, "What on earth is wanted?"

I leaped from the fence; he tried to jump it but was too tired to succeed. I was too short, and the dog was too heavy to lift him to the top. What was to be done, for time with me then was precious? I ran down the fence a few paces to where two crooked rails formed an unusually large crack, showed this to the intelligent creature; and although it was narrow he made the plunge and after much effort and twisting, many whines and cries, he at last slipped through and stood beside me, and away we went to the spot where the turkey had fallen.

I pointed my finger to the ground. He understood what was wanted, put his nose to the wet leaves and began to describe a circle about the spot. Suddenly he stopped, sniffed a little and then lumbered away through the brush and I followed as rapidly as possible. He was some distance in advance of me; stopped short near some fallen limbs, turned around and looked at me as I came running in a way that said plainly, "I do not know just what to do." I looked just ahead of him and beneath the limbs crouched my turkey; his long neck stretched out and prone upon the ground and his eye glistening; he evidently thought himself secretly hid. I dropped on my knees, made a dive beneath the limbs, clutched him about the neck, just back of his head, and dragged him out. As I got upon my feet I swung him over my shoulder and started for the field while his kicking legs and flapping wings pounded a tattoo on my back. I held that neck with a grip of iron and as I clambered over logs, ducked under brush, and ran through openings, the struggles and pounding gradually grew less and by the time I had reached the fence he hung limp and dead from suffocation.

I climbed on the fence and stood on the topmost rail and paused long enough to give one long, loud hurrah; clambered down, and swinging my turkey over my shoulder started on the run across the fields for the house as fast as my tired legs could carry me, never forgetting to give forth exulting shouts with each step and breath produced with all the lung power that was left within me.

At the house, with my sisters, I was a hero, and my cousin even in his disappointment was compelled to admit that he was a "whopping gobbler."

My father and mother had been away for a visit overnight and would not return until noon, so I gave my older sisters commands and instructions as to how to scald and dress the bird with all the importance of a major-general, and then started back to gather up the scattered fragments along the way of my victorious march. Beginning with the hat I followed the "trail" and collected gun, shot pouch and clothes.

During this time my plans for the day had matured. When I arrived home I issued orders accordingly. I brought in a tremendous lot of stove

wood and left my sisters to their baking, and I mounted my pony and scoured the neighborhood, inviting all the uncles, aunts and cousins to eat a turkey dinner with me.

When my father and mother came home they found a houseful of jolly people awaiting them, and what a meal and afternoon we all had together. Everyone gratified my vanity by declaring, some that it was the largest, others that it was the fattest turkey ever killed in that county; and all agreeing that I was worthy of the nimrod blood that had come down to me through the succeeding generations.

That night I pressed a happy pillow, for truly the day for me had been full of honor and glory. Years have sped along and now all the older ones who sat at that board have passed away. Their bodies rest beneath the grass and daisies, and their spirits now await us in the beyond. But still, while growing old, I remember that day with a thrill of joy and pleasure; but there are some other things memory holds as well; and while I would not take one joy from youthful pleasure, allow me to drop a word to the young from what is growing now, to be for me, the evening and shady side of life. You will not always be young; father, mother, brothers, sisters and friends will not always be with you. As you grow old these joys of youth grow less important and you begin to remember with pain the acts of disobedience and unkindness, or with joy, the places where you smoothed the paths for aged and tired feet, or by some sacrifice of your own cast a ray of joy and made a happy day in the clouded life of someone who was less fortunate.

When you begin to grow old, and the sun is low on the horizon of life it is the memory of the kindness done our own, and the favors shown to those beneath us, rather than the smiles and plaudits of those above us in life that add a peaceful halo of love to closing days.

Wishing every boy and girl of the Companion a happy youth and a contented old age, purchased by acts of love and charity, I am yours,

H. Clay Needham



