

## ***THE DELTA LOVERS***

**By Jerry Lemonds**

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By working faithfully eight hours a day you may eventually get to be a boss and work 12 hours a day. Robert Frost

Shirtless, with one fist raised on high and the other hand massaging his aching lower back, Johnny Andrews roared at the Delta sky: “By gawd, I can’t take this anymore, Joe! How can such a beautiful plant produce perfect finger-sized-cotton-boll-missiles, multi-colored blooms and soft cotton used world-wide to make beautiful, comfortable clothing, suddenly become a monster with 5 sharp thorns protecting the soft cotton locks and grown on knee-crawling, short plants in rock-like clay soils?”

Joe’s mouth dropped open at this long speech berating his beloved cotton.

A moment later, groaning pathetically, Johnny was softly rubbing a couple of his mutilated kneecaps that had been chewed raw by the sharp-edged clods of Mississippi mud – also known as “gumbo” – that surrounded the two of them in this sun-baked cotton field. “My back’s in pieces,” moaned the long-suffering Johnny, “and my fingers and knees are torn and bleeding from crawling on the gumbo and picking this dad-blamed cotton. And that ain’t all, buddy!” He glared across the muggy, brightly lit space between himself and his very best pal. “My toes hurt, too – from too many days of wearin’ these outgrown Sears clodhoppers. Why, I’m so crippled, I can’t even get up and down the rows!”

1

Johnny glared hard at his fellow-picker for a moment, and then suddenly burst into laughter. The complainer was a tall, blond-haired kid with a snappy crew cut and a brilliant smile. But how could you see his body, with that nine-foot-long cotton sack looped around his head and shoulder? Hidden behind the frayed bag of cotton bolls, his fierce blue eyes blazed with indignation.

The kid's broad, deeply tanned shoulders were slick with sweat, giving his 180-pound, muscled torso a shimmering, god-like appearance. For a moment, you'd have thought Apollo, himself, had just dropped down out of the sky to savor the human joys of picking cotton in the Mississippi Delta.

But Johnny Andrews was human, all too human – and right now, he was madder than a sack of drenched horns.

Joe's jaw dropped as he watched his companion's angry outburst. For a few seconds, he didn't say anything. Then he sent his friend a long, slow chuckle. "Hey, you better slow down, Johnny, before you blow a gasket!" He laughed again, and the two of them promptly sat down on their half-filled sacks and faced each other.

"We're due for a break, anyway," said Joe.

"Hey, you sure are riled, buddy. I ain't seen you this hot since we lost to Carthage Central in that double-overtime – after you kicked the ball out of bounds and cost us the victory, that is. What's the problem, wild man – don't you *like* pickin' this fluffy stuff ten hours at a stretch under that good ole southeast-Missouri sun?"

Now the two youngsters fell silent again, while resting on their gear. They'd known each other for more than 15 years, and each could tell what the other one was

thinking. The mid-afternoon sun hung above them like a giant ball of molten copper, and the humid air of the Missouri Delta lay motionless against their sweating faces.

But Johnny could never remain still for long, and within ten seconds, he was barking again. “Joe, do you remember that Charles Darwin, that biologist we studied in Mr. Appleton’s biology class? Invented the idea of evolution? I bet you didn’t know he wrote a book called ‘The Survival of the Fittest Cotton-Picker!’”

Joe shook his head and groaned. “Not funny. If you’re thinking about a career as a comedian, you better give up on it right now.” The two of them guffawed loudly.

*After several hours of picking three rows of cotton while sharing the middle one, they needed every laugh they could find. Let’s face it: These were stressful difficult times for the entire world – but especially for young men facing a future that swirled with danger, now that Uncle Sam had just declared war against both Germany and Japan.*

Johnny frowned deeply, as he contemplated their unhappy situation. There was no way around it: They were prisoners of the cotton boll! But then his eyes lightened, and he suddenly laughed out loud. “Joe, I’ve got it. Let’s get the heck out of the Delta – let’s join the gol-darned Navy and see the world. I’ve been reading everything I can about the armed forces, and the Navy sure looks like the way to go.