Uncle Fred has the relaxed personality of a country sheep farmer. He does have energy, though; now in his eighties, he and Aunt Emmaline travel all over the US as volunteers with the Red Cross. Evidently mild mannered Uncle Fred had one childhood scrape after another. My dad was the ninth child and Uncle Fred the tenth, so they naturally spent a lot of time together.

My dad told us these stories about Uncle Fred. I once asked Uncle Fred how accurate these stories are, and he replied that in general outline, they are true though they have benefitted from years of retelling.

The Fox

One morning after a light snow, my dad and Uncle Fred noticed fresh fox tracks and decided to go on a fox hunt. They followed the tracks, but the fox had escaped down a groundhog hole. Being about ten to twelve years old, my dad and Uncle Fred had the brilliant idea to blast that fox out of the hole. They walked down the ridge to the tractor barn, filled a pint jar half full of gasoline, walked back up the ridge and poured the gasoline down the groundhog hole. They lay flat on the ground, my dad behind Uncle Fred who pushed a burning scrap of burlap bag tied to the end of a ten foot stick slowly closer towards the groundhog hole.

Suddenly my dad felt a huge wave of dirt surging along under him. The fireball singed Uncle Fred’s hair and eyebrows. And did they get their fox? Looking back years later, my dad believes the fox ran out the back hole of the groundhog, and he is sure the fox was laughing at the two dirty scorched would-be fox hunters.

Addendum: Uncle Fred said his brothers used various explosive devices pretty often. He also mentioned that they usually killed groundhogs with a big wrench; if they noticed a groundhog while driving the tractor in the field, they would grab the wrench out of the tractor toolbox, drive after the groundhog, and club the groundhog with the wrench.

The Skunk

Every country boy knows that a skunk turns it back up and lifts its tail just before it sprays. And all country boys have heard that if you pick up a skunk by its tail fast enough, it cannot lift its tail to spray. About five or six year old, Uncle Fred had boundless energy and curiosity. One day he saw a skunk; he ran up and quickly picked the skunk up by its tail before it could spray him.

When young Uncle Fred arrived back at the farm, patient Grandma tried to wash away the horrible smell. Water and soap did nothing, milk baths failed, the reputed power of tomato juice to remove skunk scent proved false. In the end, Uncle Fred had to sleep in the barn for a few days until the odor faded.

 Addendum:  Both my dad and Uncle Fred said that their family skinned lots of skunk since the pelts were fairly valuable.  So Uncle Fred said skunk odor was not a big deal.