

OATMEAL

I was 10 years old, and I hated oatmeal.

My sisters and I grew up in Battle Creek, Michigan, the self-proclaimed “Cereal Capital of the World” and home to both Kellogg’s and Post cereal companies. And we preferred the dry kind—Rice Krispies, Post Toasties, Sugar Frosted Flakes. Despite that, from time to time our dad would insist on cooking up some oatmeal for family breakfasts. He said it would stick to our ribs. We kids thought that that was not necessarily a good thing.

It wasn’t so much the taste as the texture. I think you know what I mean. Unlike with dry cereal, which forms lots of little crannies for milk to flow into, the milk I poured onto a glop of oatmeal just puddled on top, so that I had to stir the gluey mess to have any hope of getting the milk blended in. My mother would offer to sprinkle brown sugar on mine, thinking it would help. It did not. I didn’t like brown sugar either, which I considered simply the regular stuff that looked dirty and tasted funny.

But in 1955 I found myself eating oatmeal without complaint. Sergeant Preston of the Yukon was a new TV series that featured the adventures of a Canadian mountie stationed in the Yukon Territory during the Klondike gold rush days. Sergeant Preston was just as hokey as all the other 1950s kids shows, but I loved it anyway. The show was sponsored by Quaker Oats, you know, the company with the round boxes that featured a picture on the front of some guy that looked like Benjamin Franklin.

This was at a time when virtually all the kids’ food companies were offering promotions of one kind or another to encourage sales. In some cases it was a trinket that was included in each box of cereal—always to be found at the very bottom of the box. In others, the item was more substantial, requiring you to mail in some sort of proof of purchase, such as the paper seals from jars of Ovaltine to get a Captain Midnight secret decoder ring.

However, for the Sergeant Preston show, Quaker Oats was featuring something totally different. Rather than some sort of cheap toy that was invariably inferior to what the promotion promised and that we usually discarded, lost, or broke within the first few hours, Quaker Oats was

offering land! That's right. For a couple of Quaker Oatmeal boxtops, I could become the actual owner of land in the Yukon Territory. One square inch of land, to be exact.

So I dutifully started choking down oatmeal for breakfast. I encouraged my sisters to eat it as well. They turned me down flat. I was on my own to consume two whole boxes of the stuff. Finally came the day when I finished the oatmeal, had the boxtops, and mailed them in to Quaker Oats.

And a few weeks later my deed to one square inch of Yukon Territory arrived in the mail. It consisted of an official looking document that included a good deal of legalese filling both front and back. The deed assured me, as "Grantee" (once I wrote my name in a blank provided on the document), that I and my "heirs and assigns forever" owned the land "in fee simple," whatever all that meant. The document included a unique serial number in red ink, so of course it had to be authentic.

Once I got the deed I spent a substantial amount of time fantasizing about my new status as a landowner. I figured that the deed gave me ownership rights not just to the surface but to everything beneath in a pyramidal wedge extending all the way down to a point at the center of the earth. Perhaps I could travel to the Yukon and track down the exact location of my square inch. Perhaps I could stake it out—with toothpicks. Perhaps it contained a nugget of gold just below the surface.

In the end I proved no different from other 10-year-olds, and the thrill of land ownership faded. Frankly, I wasn't going to be traveling to the Yukon any time soon. So I put the deed aside with some of my other important possessions—maps that I had collected from gas stations during our family road trips, a rabbit's foot that had acquired a noticeable odor, and that Captain Midnight secret decoder ring—all of which I kept in the drawer of a nightstand that sat next to my bed.

To my disappointment, I learned that shortly after I had force-fed myself the two boxes of oatmeal to get my deed, Quaker Oats decided to start putting the deeds directly into their boxes of cereal—and, sigh, not just the boxes of oatmeal. In any event, by the late 1950s both Sergeant Preston and the land promotion were history. And ultimately the Canadian government

foreclosed on the Yukon property that had included the 21 million square inches of land that the company had deeded to kids like me. Quaker Oats, it seems, had failed to pay real estate taxes totaling \$37.20.

Several years later, after our family had moved to a new house, something jogged my memory, and I asked my mother if she knew where my deed was. She gave me her best deadpan look and asked, "Deed? What deed?"