

# Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

## In Case of Rapture

A short story by Bill Dockery

## Stuckey's

One of the South's greatest roadside attractions

## Pontiac

Remembering the family car

## Play it by Ear

An old dirt road store

## In a Pickle

Those old country stores

## Back to Brushy Creek

A memoir by Charlton Hillis

## The Real 'Real McCoy'

A glimpse into the origins of a major sport

*David Skinner*

# Good Old (and New) Country Stores

By David Ray Skinner

**T**hanks, y'all, for all the feedback and compliments (and complements) on the last issue of *SouthernReader*—nearly 6000 of you southern readers went online to check it out.

Hopefully, this issue will prove to be just as popular. We're especially proud to be able to showcase Stuckey's—a true southern legend. Back before the days of the interstate (and even after the interstates were completed), no summer trip to Florida was complete without a stop (or two or three) at a Stuckey's, especially in south Georgia.

My family has always been a little partial to special places like Stuckey's. Growing up in Nashville with grandparents in Clarksville and Dover, many weekends were spent on the Highway 41A, and more often than not, we'd make a stop at "The Blanket Store," always lured by their "*Burma-Shave-type*" sequential roadside rhyming signage. But if the stores like Stuckey's and The Blanket Stores were in the professional league, the old country stores that we loved were more in the minor leagues.

My article, "In a Pickle" details that passion for those old stores, and Niles Reddick writes about "Reddick's Store and Post Office," a staple of by-gone Benevolence, Georgia.

And though we would never accuse any of these ol' stores of selling unlicensed alcohol, Ron Burch weighs in on this *under-the-radar* industry and how it helped launch a current popular American sport. Plus, Bill Dockery's fictional piece, "In Case of Rapture" adds a little "flavoring" (my grandfather's word) to the same subject.

This issue is rounded out with Charlton Walters Hillis's deep dive into her hard-scrapple ancestors and Marshall Lancaster's fond memories of a special car.

Hope you enjoy this issue; keep those cards and letters (and mostly emails) coming!

*David Skinner*



David Skinner



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Stuckey's:

## The Oasis on the Highway

by David Ray Skinner

T

here are still those of us that can remember a time in America before the advent of interstate highways. I was born and raised in Nashville, which had the great fortune of being one of the many cities and towns located on the famous Highway 41, one of the major "pre-interstate" north-south federal highways, first laid out in 1926.

It runs south from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, all the way down to Miami, and is more than 2000 miles long. Along the way, it threads Milwaukee, Chicago, Evansville, Terre Haute, Nashville, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Macon, Tampa and Miami. Once President Eisenhower's interstate dream made it off the drawing boards and into asphalt, it would take a number of different interstates to replace (and align themselves with) old U.S. 41. She was a tough ol' girl to replace, and old 41 is still vibrant and a viable alternative to a north-south route to this day.

However, back in the '50s and early '60s, through much of the south, Highway 41 was the only game in town if you wanted to vacation in sunny Florida. I remember well packing our red-and-white '56 Chevy the night before and heading down 41 out of Nashville in the pre-dawn hours. By the time my

*The only roadside attractions that were sanctioned as stops by my parents were the Stuckey's stores with their teal blue roofs.*





*Stuckey's—Eastman, Georgia, circa 1940's*



sister, Jann and I were awake, we were just rolling into Georgia, and our excitement turned to boredom as we realized we were barely out of Tennessee and still hours away from the beach. Our mother encouraged us to look for billboards advertising the various snake and alligator farms, homemade petting zoos and other roadside attractions. However, the only ones that were sanctioned as stops by my parents were the Stuckey's stores with their teal-blue roofs. Not only were they our favorite, they were a welcome rest stop for the weary Florida-bound travelers—a place for Dad to refuel the Chevy (which had a hide-away gas tank in the taillight) and for us to grab a bite to eat and (if we were lucky) get a souvenir. I always looked forward to add-

Howard Johnson's had their orange roofs; McDonalds had their golden arches; but the roofs we looked for were those famous teal-blue roofs.

ing yet another rubber snake to my collection and Jann was always looking for one of those draw-string, leather-and-cloth purses. Howard Johnson's had their orange roofs; McDonalds had their golden arches; but the roofs we looked for were those famous teal-blue roofs—the ultimate highway oasis. The steep roofs painted teal made the buildings highly visible from a distance and proved to be an important marketing tool.

Stuckey's was an institution built on pecans—the first “Stuckey's” was more of a roadside pecan stand along Highway 23 (a close cousin to Highway 41) in Eastman, Georgia. It was established by W.S. “Sylvester” Stuckey, Sr. in 1937. W.S. was a ninth-generation Stuckey. He had grown up on a farm in Middle Georgia and knew the value of hard work. He had dropped out of UGA Law in his third year in 1931. Cotton hit rock bottom, so he moved home to help on his father's farm.

Things got so bad that there wasn't enough feed for the mules. The mules would get so weak they'd lie down, and W.S. would have to hoist them to their feet. It was the Great Depression and jobs were scarce. However, it was a bumper crop that year, and pecans were plentiful. The highway tourist stand W.S. set up was really a lean-to “shack”—a board structure with a sloped back roof. He sold pecans, cane juice, syrup, homemade quilts, and cherry cider (“all you can drink for 5 cents”).



And then, came the brainstorm. One morning, W.S. interrupted his wife, Ethel's bridge game, and asked her to whip up a batch of pralines. The fact that Ethel had never made candy in her life didn't matter nor figure into his dream, because the brainstorm paid off, and the pralines were a big hit. Ethel soon learned to make divinity, fudge, and what was to become the brand's signature treat, the pecan log roll, a heavenly mix of nougat, caramel, and pecans. Ethel recruited her sisters, Hazel and Pearl, to the candy-making venture, and their Southern confections proved to be a hit with the tourists heading down the road to Florida. They would make candy four times a day in their home kitchen and walk the two-to-three miles to the pecan shack. W.S. added "Fresh Homemade Candy—Made Today" to his "Pecans for Sale" sign.

The highway stand did well enough for W.S. to open his first store in Eastman. That store grossed between \$25,000—\$30,000, enough to open a second store in 1939 in Unadilla, Georgia on that famous Highway 41. All the candy for the stores was made on site, and the store included an apartment for the manager, which began the Stuckey's tradition of having live-in units attached to the stores and managers residing in back. It was around this time that Ethel experimented with an old family recipe of



white molasses, powdered sugar, and roasted pecans, and the Stuckey's famous Pecan Log Roll was born.

Throughout the next two decades, W.S. and his family turned the little stand into a roadside empire, eventually boasting 360 stores in over 40 states, all offering clean restrooms, Texaco gas, unique souvenirs and their famous candies and pecan logs. Stuckey's also owned an Eastman candy plant, a trucking company and a sign company to produce the 4,000 Stuckey's billboards that lined the highways. The billboards would begin about fifty miles from the stores, then right up to 1,000 feet. He'd place bill-

*Throughout the next two decades, W.S. and his family turned the little stand into a roadside empire, eventually with 360 stores in over 40 states.*

boards from five miles to a few feet apart. The billboards would say, "Five miles to Stuckey's"; "Four miles to Stuckey's"; "Three

miles to Stuckey's"; until the traveler finally reached the ultimate teal-roofed destination.

But the marketing didn't stop with just the billboards; almost every Stuckey's store at one point featured either a parrot or a mynah bird. The birds would greet customers with a "Hello, I'm not for sale" as they walked into the stores. They also took out ads in national publications such as *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, and *Saturday Evening Post*.

The locations of the Stuckey's stores were carefully considered. W.S. would do his own surveys of traffic volume, breaking it down to local and out-of-state, northbound or southbound. Then, came the true test; after drinking several cups of coffee, he would drive until he needed to make a rest stop. That was where he'd build a store.

Stuckey's was also ahead of its time in race relations. Black travelers who were barred from eating with white people in the pre-Civil Rights era found that they were always welcome in every Stuckey's store. Later on,



Great pecan candy, delightful and dandy, the perfect family treat.  
Fudge and confections, highway directions, tasty snacks to eat!  
Every trip's a pleasure trip when you stop at *Stuckey's*

They also took out ads in national publications such as *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Saturday Evening Post*.

W.S. and Billy were thanked by a number of black travelers from those days, and told them that they would literally plan their trips in those days around where they could use the restroom and safety stop. One told Billy, "In those pre-integration days, public restrooms were off-limits to blacks, but Stuckey's was different." Unlike most establishments of that time, Stuckey's never had segregated restrooms.

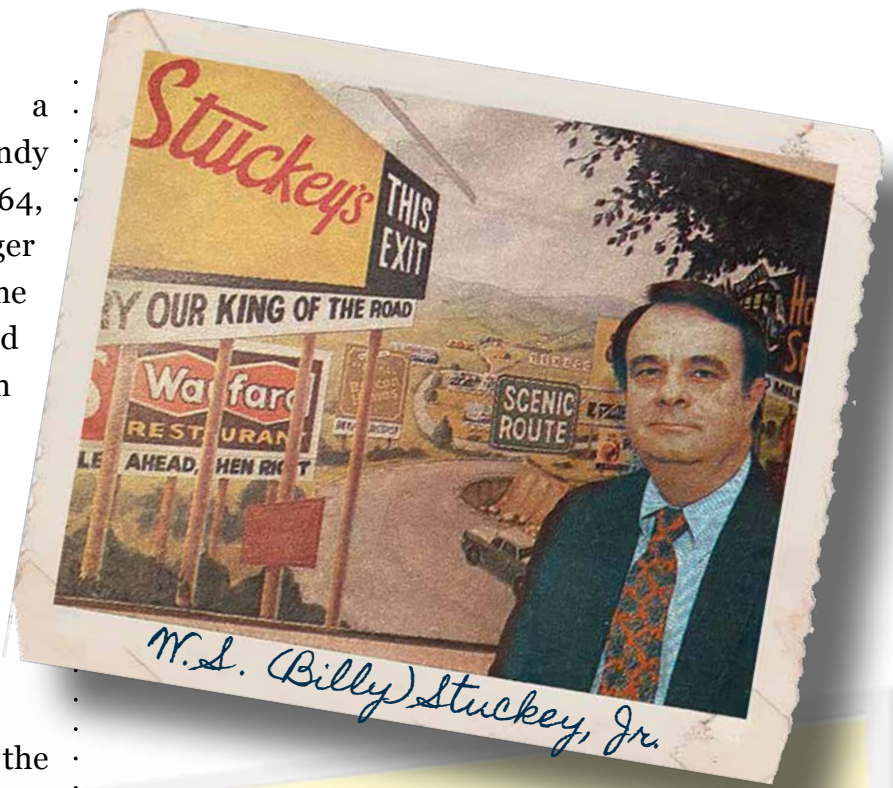
W.S. was serious about his motto: "Every highway traveler is a friend." There was no exception or asterisk in his motto.

By 1960, Stuckey's totaled 115 stores, 10 of them owned by the family, with 1,000 employees and candy sales of \$5 million. Business was booming and expanding, but W.S. found that he lacked the infrastructure and human capital to continue managing the growth. He began nego-

tiations with Pet, Inc., a St. Louis-based dairy products company best known for its evaporated milk. Stuckey's management was thin, and Pet had the capital to open new stores. For its part, Pet

saw Stuckey's candy operation as a natural tie-in to its Whitman's Candy division. So, on December 14, 1964, Stuckey's merged with Pet. The merger included the Stuckey candy factory, the right to expand new Stuckey's stores, and the Texaco gasoline proceeds. But then came the Arab Oil Embargo in the 1970's and the subsequent decrease in travel and vacationing. Even though Stuckey's actually adapted and pivoted when the new interstate highways were built (relocating and building new stores on interstate exits), by the late '70s, all but a few stores had faded into the Americana past. In 1966, the founder's son, W.S. (Billy) Stuckey, Jr. was elected to Congress and Stuckey's Stores, Inc. was sold to Pet. Then, in 1969, Ted Gamble, the President of Pet—who had been close to Billy—died suddenly, and the management of Stuckey's began to change for the worse. In 1970, W.S. took early retirement and left his position. Stuckey's didn't fare well after its founder's departure. The company became more corporate-focused and much less personal. The solidly-built, people-oriented Stuckey's began to tear apart at the seams.

External events hurt the business as well. Inflation and the afore-mentioned the Arab Oil Embargo sharply curtailed gasoline sales and long-distance travel, and that, in turn, greatly



affected the roadside tourism business. Vacations were usually limited to a 300-mile radius, which meant that travelers would reach their destination in a few hours and were unwilling to take long rest stops along the way.

*Stuckey's didn't fare well after its founder's departure. The company became more corporate-focused and much less personal.*

W.S. Stuckey, who loved to work, was not happy with retirement, although he enjoyed traveling the world with Ethel and spending time with his seven grandchildren. His health was failing, though, and he passed away on January 6, 1977 of a brain aneurism. That same year, a Chicago corporation bought Pet (in a hostile

takeover), and began closing Stuckey's stores across the country.

The number of stores plummeted to 75, and many of the former locations became



sad and fading reminders of the company's glory days. Fortunately, on May 1, 1985, Billy Stuckey (who had served five terms in Congress before starting Interstate Dairy Queen, which he had been running successfully since 1977) and four partners bought back the remaining assets of Stuckey's.

This included the trademark, the franchise system, and the few remaining company-owned stores.

Under Billy's guidance, the Stuckey's Express concept—or "a store within a store"—was launched, and the company expanded to over 165 franchises in 17 states. This ended a 17-year period during which the company was not run by family members. The candy division was acquired by Nashville-based

Standard Candy, makers of Goo Goo Clusters and King Leo candy sticks, and an arrangement was made for Standard to produce the pecan log roll and other Stuckey's candy products. Stuckey's Express created a turn-key operation for c-store locations, acting as a direct vendor for the Stuckey's signature candy but also hundreds of gifts, souvenirs, and novelties. Then, in 1988, Stuckey's modernized its look by repainting the teal colored roofs with vibrant royal blue and a bold new logo and stand-alone stores were redesigned with a restaurant / convenience store model.

In November of 2019, Billy's daughter, Stephanie Stuckey, bought the company from Billy and his partners and took over as CEO and the company got yet another shot in the arm. Stephanie wasn't just "the next generation of Stuckey leadership," she had

*Billy Stuckey's daughter, Stephanie, bought the company and took over as CEO, and the company got yet another shot in the arm.*

already made her mark in Georgia and her credentials are impressive. A graduate of the University of Georgia School of Law, she worked as a trial lawyer, served seven terms in the Georgia Legislature, ran an environmental nonprofit and served as head of sustainability for the City of Atlanta prior to making a life pivot and taking on her family's famous roadside business at the age of 53.

In August of 2020, R.G. Lamar, a pecan farmer from Hawkinsville, Georgia, joined Stuckey's Corporation as President and co-owner. Together, Stephanie and RG have



*Stephanie Stuckey and R. G. Lamar*

purchased a pecan shelling and candy manufacturing facility in Wrens, GA, revamped their distribution operations (still based in Eastman, Georgia), acquired a healthy pecan snack company, undergone a rebranding, added four new franchised stores, expanded its B2B retail customer base, and increased online sales 550%.

It has now been eighty-plus years since W.S. and Ethel started their roadside operations as a humble pecan stand and to say that Stephanie is excited about the future of Stuckey's in an understatement. Stuckey's is still on the nation's highways, continuing to deliver on their founder's promise to make every traveler a friend.

Now, they have a unique connection with

special places along the interstate highway system and they are able to highlight fun places to visit near each store. Plus, in this day of fast-food, and smartphones, pulling over for gas may be the only way some travelers connect with small towns in the South. It gives them a glimpse of the roadside stands and stores which were a staple of travel in the quickly-disappearing America of the past—all from a modern, present-day and convenient perspective. Pecan logs, gourd stands, boiled peanuts, pralines, coonskin caps, and rubber snakes and alligators... what's not to love?



*For more information about Stuckey's or to find a Stuckey's near you, visit [Stuckeys.com](http://Stuckeys.com).*

# In Case of Rapture

By William Love Dockery

**N**

o headlights showed in the rearview mirror, only dust roiling red in the taillights and vanishing into the black. The Chevy's slanted back window was thick with dust, making the view even more cloudy and vague.

The road went up a steep hill and Pettigrew nudged the gas. Gravel pinged on the undercarriage like shot against a tin roof. A low spot in the road sent the load in the trunk banging against the springs with a thud that shook the whole car.

At the top of the hill, Pettigrew had a long view down the valley before him. Half way down, the windows of a small church shone yellow, but nothing else broke the blackness. Then as he watched, there was a flash at the bottom of the valley, where the road ran along the Holston. Headlights rounded a bend and began bobbing up the long slope. Nance's ferry was cut off.

Without thinking, he killed his own lights, gripped the wheel with both hands, and let up on the gas. The car slowed abruptly as he fought to steer by the whiteness of the gravel between the black fencerows. He checked the mirror again: Nothing.

The church sat in a saddle between two hills, where the road forked. The other car was coming up the left fork; to the right, Blue Hole Road dropped down a steep hollow to dead-end along the river.

The dust cloud caught up and passed him as he approached the church. He considered pulling into the yard amid the cars and farm pickups but it was too obvious. He hated dead-end roads, but he steered right, clutch in, foot on the brake, rolling quietly past the frame building at little more than a walk. The windows were thrown wide and above the sound of his idling engine Pettigrew heard preaching, an ecstatic agony of shouts

*Without thinking, he killed his own lights, gripped the wheel with both hands, and let up on the gas.*



and hollers and rhythmic grunts. He shook his head.

“Lloyd, Lloyd.”

When the car dropped below the crest of the hill, he popped it back into gear and sped up. At the bottom of the hill the road came abruptly to the river and skirted a large circular pit in the bank. Lights still off, Pettigrew passed the spring and headed for the Deacon’s tarpaper shack fifty yards beyond. He swung off the gravel into the hard-packed yard and drove past the cabin toward a small barn that leaned into the hill-

side. He parked the car in the weeds on the side away from the road and climbed out on the uphill side, holding the door to keep it from slamming shut. He leaned against the rough-sawn boards.

The first patrol car came down the hill too quickly and slid in the gravel when it came to the spring. Without looking around the corner, Pettigrew watched the headlights splash whitely against the hillside as the car sped toward the end of the road a mile upriver. Minutes later the second car came down the grade, made the same skid at the spring, and careened after the first.

Pettigrew considered trying to break back to the main road and away before the patrol cars could turn around, but it didn’t feel right. There might be other patrols about. If he had to abandon the car, he could still climb up the wooded hill and go home through the fields.

If they didn’t catch him with his load, they couldn’t prove he was driving.

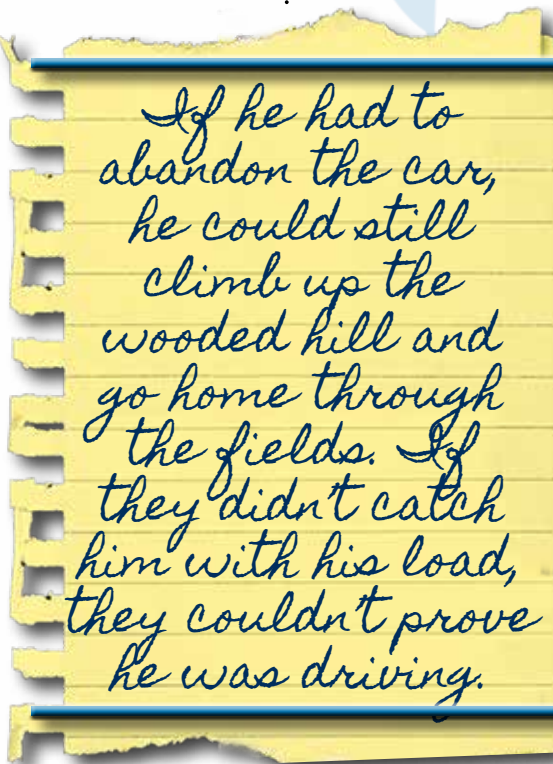
In minutes the cars came back, slow and deliberate, their spotlights playing around the fishing cabins and outbuildings and garden plots along the road. The sweeping beams threw giant shadows on the hillside pastures. Pettigrew hunkered in the weeds and began to pick a route through the briars and brush to the woods.

Both cars pulled even with the Deacon’s cabin and the lights swept the yard. They focused first on the shack, throwing

up sparkles in the imitation-brick tarpaper. Both spots turned in quick succession to the outhouse and the smoke house and finally over the parched garden to the barn.

Sharp blades of light flashed between the barn boards and raked the swept-back Chevy. Pettigrew stiffened into a crouch and got ready to run to the hill. Without warning, a two-way radio squawked. Pettigrew jumped. He could hear the deputies talking back and forth out the car windows. Abruptly, the spots went out and gravel flew as the cars lurched back toward the spring and up the hollow. They wallowed roughly up the grade and went out of hearing over the gap. He slumped back on his heels, hawked a copper-tasting ball of phlegm into the weeds, and groped his shirt for a cigarette.

Pulling on the cigarette, he rose awkwardly. With the cruisers gone, the singing and clap-



*If he had to abandon the car, he could still climb up the wooded hill and go home through the fields. If they didn't catch him with his load, they couldn't prove he was driving.*



ping and shouts carried down the hill in waves. He rubbed his nose and the raw smell of green liquor reached him. He ground the smoke into the grass and stepped to the back of the car.

The trunk was full of boxes. He struck a match and then another, looking for the source of the smell. Low on one of the bottom cases there was a dark spot on the cardboard. He propped a box on the side of the car and extracted a jar from the case underneath. A seep of liquid glinted on the side. He licked it, set the jar atop the car, and repacked the trunk. He moved to a hacked tree trunk beside the woodpile and set down the jar.

A chip in the glass lip showed under the sealing ring. He took a mouthful, set the jar on the log, and lit another cigarette.

The uproar at the church soon died to a faint babble, punctuated by occasional bursts of laughter and revving car engines. Even that faded and a bob-white started to call from a fencerow. Pettigrew was lighting another cigarette from the previous one when he heard the gravel rattling on the road. He crushed the butt, pinched out the fresh one, and hunkered down on the log.

"...anyone who can read the Scriptures has got to know the signs are right..." It was Lloyd, talking earnestly. "The atom bomb, the Iron Curtain...women making up and wearing ear bobs and smoking, whorish-like...God just can't stand for much more of that."

The second voice was older, still firm but with an occasional quaver.

"Don't get tangled up with the end times, Son. You got a sweet message. People believe when you preach. Turn them to Jesus and to each other. God will handle the end times."

The rattle of the gravel ceased as the pair stepped into the yard. Pettigrew cupped his hand to relight the cigarette and tossed the match in a glowing arc toward the pair. Startled, they turned toward him.

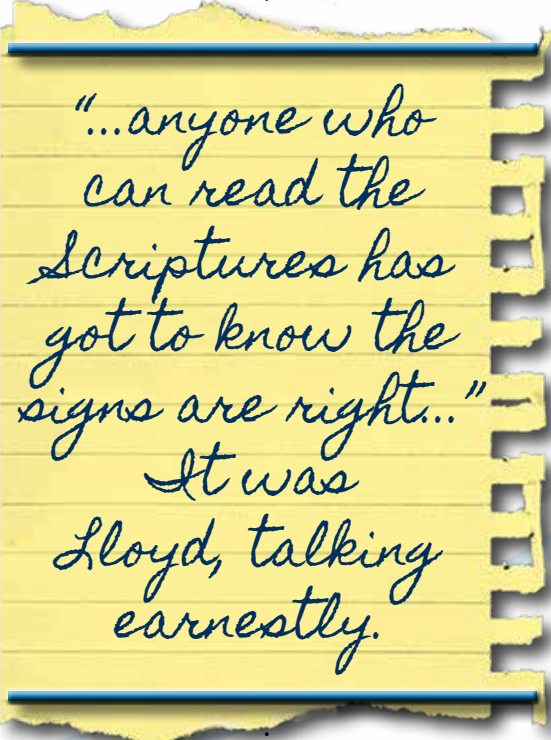
"Here, Son, watch that fire. It's too dry." The old man stepped on the match. Pettigrew ignored the Deacon and turned to Lloyd.

"Save any souls tonight, Cousin?"

Lloyd grimaced. "What are you doing here?" He wouldn't meet Pettigrew's eyes. Sweat had plastered his white shirt to his back, and his dark, skinny tie was blacker toward the collar. He stripped the tie from around his neck and put it and a limber leather Bible inside the door of the shack. He turned and picked up a cane pole that was leaning against the wall.

"Here, Cuz." Pettigrew extended the jar to Lloyd. "Yeah, the night got a little too warm for me, too. I thought I might come down and wet a line with you boys till it cools off a little bit."

Lloyd turned away from the outstretched arm. Pettigrew tilted the bottle and swallowed. "Why didn't you bring a couple of Holy Roller gals with you? Can't you preach them



"...anyone who can read the Scriptures has got to know the signs are right..."  
It was Lloyd, talking earnestly.

into the ticking?”

Lloyd mopped his forehead with a kerchief and turned to the Deacon. “Let’s go. I need to fish.”

Pettigrew laughed. “If we can’t hook a soul or roll one of them sweet little holies, maybe we can snag a bass.”

The Deacon put a hand on his shoulder. “Son, if you want to fish, let’s fish. If you want to talk like that, go back to your honkytonks. Leave him be.”

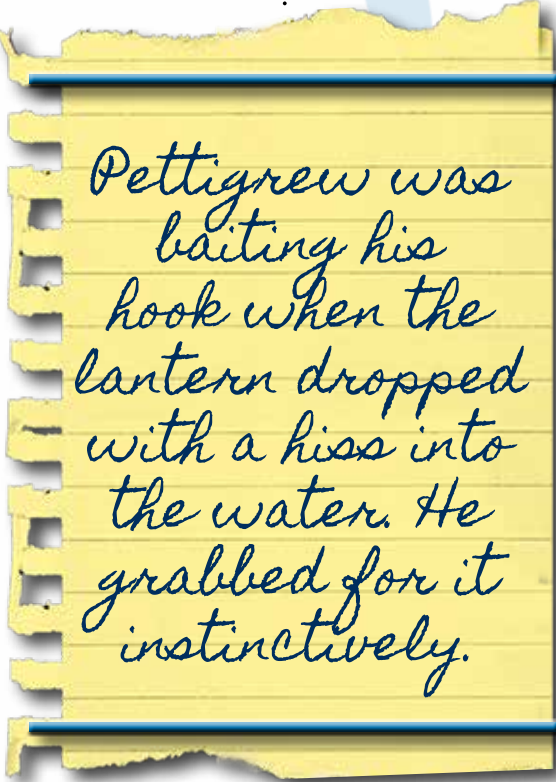
Pettigrew shrugged. He stood up and stretched, then stooped and retrieved a pole and tackle box from under the cabin. He followed the others across the road to the spring and down the bank to where the johnboats were tied.

The Deacon got in one with Pettigrew, and Lloyd took the other. They rowed easily downriver about a hundred yards to a high limestone bluff, where the bare, broken limbs of a sunken tree poked bonelike from the dark water. They tied up to the tree and the old man lit a kerosene lantern. He propped an oar at an angle and hung the lantern from it. Pettigrew fished from the end of one boat, casting into the faster currents of the river. On the other end, the Deacon cast toward the bank in still water under the bluff. Upstream a few yards, close enough to take advantage of the lantern but out far enough not to tangle lines, Lloyd cast from the other boat.

For the first hour, no one got a bite. They sat without talking, the only sounds the river

purling underneath the boats and the occasional sizz of a cast line. Pettigrew relaxed,

taking a gulp of the liquor now and then and watching insects lured to the lantern fall onto the water. He liked fishing, the forced monotony that let the pressures ease off. His mind wandered to the fish deep in the water, streamlined, muscular shapes moving unseen among rocks and old logs, feeding, swimming, probing the currents, wary yet at home. He wondered idly what the fish thought when it bit a



*Pettigrew was baiting his hook when the lantern dropped with a hiss into the water. He grabbed for it instinctively.*

barbed scrap and was suddenly yanked into a strange world.

Balancing against the sway of the boat, the Deacon stood up stiffly to cast. The lantern jiggled and the circle of light swung drunkenly around the boats. Pettigrew saw the red plastic bobber disappeared from the circle of light. It plopped close under the bluff.

The old man reeled in the line and cast again. Pettigrew grew glum. The man who had taught him and Lloyd to fish, and half the boys within five miles of the Blue Hole, was growing frail. No one had anything bad to say about the old man, except maybe these days they wondered why he kept fishing with Pettigrew.

Pettigrew was baiting his hook when the lantern dropped with a hiss into the water. He grabbed for it instinctively. An abrupt darkness erased bluff and river, and the boat began to rock wildly. In the flurry of move-

ment and darkness, he lost his bearings and slumped back, lightheaded and limp, toward the end of the boat. He felt buoyant and warm, like lying on a rock under a white sun, a blood-orange glow shining through closed eyelids. The night and the river dissolved into the radiance, and he sprawled unaware.

Cold water sloshing down his back brought him to the boat again. He tried to dampen the swaying and see through the blackness.

“Deacon?” He reached toward the other end of the boat. He could hear Lloyd’s oars upriver a short way, quick, panicked splashes growing more and more distant.

Pettigrew’s eyes began to see different shades of dark—the black, looming bluff, the charcoal sky, faintly reflective ripples on the water—but he could not spot the old man. He shook his head.

“Deacon!” Eyes wide, he stared over the water, looking and listening for a thrashing figure or waves from a splash. Nothing. “Deacon-n-n-n.” The call bounced back from the bluff.

Groping in the bottom of the boat, he found and shipped the oars and sculled around the snag, looking for any sign of the old man. “Deacon-n-n. Lloyd. Lloyd, help me.” Without a light, the search was hopeless. He began to row upstream with frantic but steady pulls, aiming for the takeout next to the Blue Hole.

The boat bumped the shore and, as Pettigrew scrambled out to tie it off, his foot

slipped backward and he fell heavily into a tangle of brush. He crawled out awkwardly, stinging from scratches on his arms and face.

As he pulled himself up the bank he saw the outline of a dark sedan beyond the spring. A Ford, he thought vaguely, ’53 or ’54. When he staggered onto the gravel road, a spotlight blinded him. A light atop the car began spinning, a red beam strobing on the overhanging trees.

“Stop right there. We need to talk to you.”

The probation officer looked up from his computer monitor and cocked an eyebrow at the old man sitting in a folding chair. “Rufus Pettigrew. Come in. Have a seat.”

Pettigrew stepped into the office and sat in a battered chair in front of the desk.

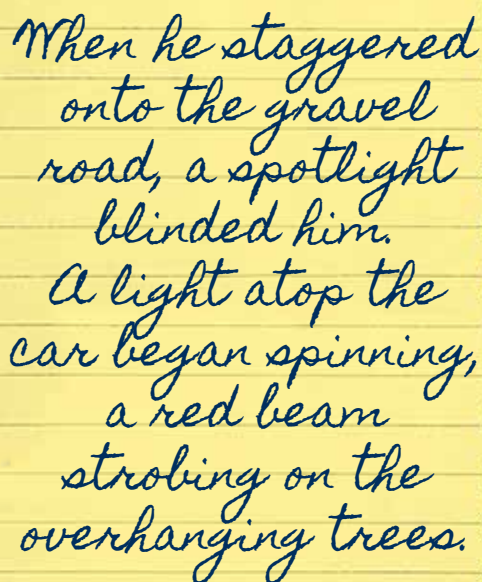
“You’ve been gone a long time.” The official’s finger traced details in the folder on his lap.

“Yes, sir.”

“Forty, almost forty-one years is a long time to be away from a place. You’re going to have a lot to adjust to.” He peered over the stacks of folders on his desk. “Some guys with long sentences find that the Walls seem more like home than the outside world.”

“Yes, sir.” Pettigrew returned the man’s gaze and waited.

“I’ve talked with your relatives and they are OK with this trailer on the river, but I still



When he staggered onto the gravel road, a spotlight blinded him. A light atop the car began spinning, a red beam strobing on the overhanging trees.

think you might be better off in a halfway house in Knoxville. I can arrange it.” The man swiveled his chair toward the phone on the table beside him.

“No, sir. No.” Pettigrew leaned forward, almost put out a hand to stop him. “This cabin—I should be OK there. I’ll be out of the way.”

“Suit yourself. I guess there isn’t much trouble you can get into that far back in the country. Remember, no liquor, no firearms. I’ll check in on you next week.” He tossed the folder onto a stack on the floor and stood up. “Come on. I’ve got you a ride.”

Outside Pettigrew looked around. Downtown Dandridge looked the same—the old courthouse where he had been tried, the jail next door where he had been held, the drugstore across the street he could see from his cell. All summer while they searched for the Deacon’s body, Pettigrew had watched the store, the customers coming and going, the shopkeepers gathering for coffee in the mornings, laughing and joking. Every morning the youngest counter girl in a frilled white apron and bobby socks would come out to sweep the sidewalk in front of the display windows.

“Over here.” The probation officer motioned him to a dirty white van with a fading Department of Corrections logo on the side and opened the door. Pettigrew shoved his suitcase in and slid over against the window behind the driver.

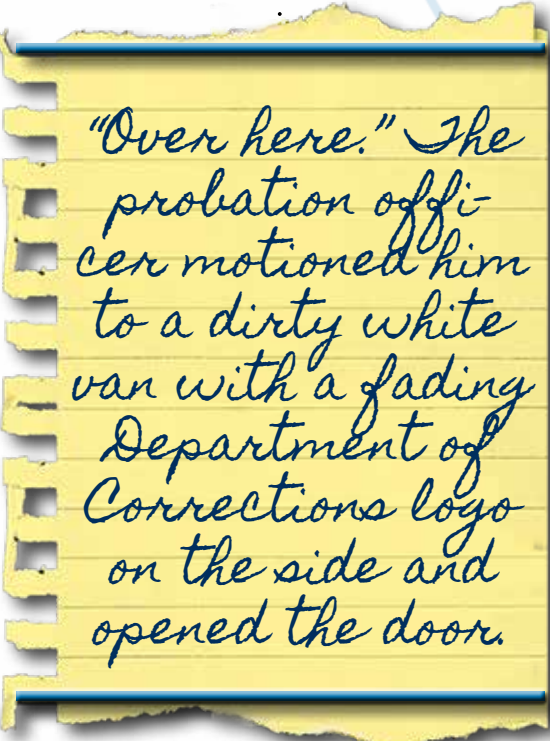
“I’ll see you next week. Uh—fasten your seatbelt.” The official slapped the top of the van and the driver cranked the engine. Pettigrew swayed a little as it lurched into gear.

Little on the drive from Dandridge to New Market was familiar. Twisty State Route 92 that wrapped itself around the knobby hills and fields crossing Dumplin Valley had been replaced with a wide, evenly-graded highway that shouldered its way through the landscape. There was a brick high school campus that was new to him and a golf course where he remembered a dairy farm. Only

the profile of Bays Mountain was familiar, but it was pincushioned with towers and water tanks.

Pettigrew was in New Market before he realized it. The van turned off the four-lane and went through a narrow, arched railroad underpass. The Holston highlands looked the same, with cattle grazing acres of rolling pastureland and the occasional cornfield or tobacco patch. Some of the two-story frame farmhouses looked familiar, but the columned brick mansions now set in the middle of green fields looked garish and out of place.

The van topped a rise and began a long downward grade. Far down in a line of trees, Pettigrew glimpsed the Holston. The church still sat in the saddle where the road forked; the front had been veneered in red brick, and a handicapped ramp angled down the side of



*“Over here.” The probation officer motioned him to a dirty white van with a fading Department of Corrections logo on the side and opened the door.*

the building. Like the road, the parking lot had been asphalted.

As he turned down the right fork, the driver spoke for the first time.

"I guess what they say is true, hunh?" The driver looked at Pettigrew through the rear-view mirror.

"How's that."

"About returning to the scene of the crime."

Pettigrew looked hard at the mirror. The driver's eyes were crinkled, as if he were smiling. Pettigrew grunted and looked out the window again. The van began the steep descent toward the river. It skirted the spring at the bottom of the hill and passed a thicket of sumac saplings that almost hid a decaying tarpaper shack.

Down the road, the driver pulled up next to a humpbacked trailer a few hundred yards farther along the river. It was surrounded by a tin-roofed screened porch with a sprung door and dead leaves gathered in the corners.

"I reckon this is your cousin's place." The driver put the van in park.

Without looking at the man, Pettigrew climbed out and retrieved his suitcase.

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The turbines at Cherokee Dam several miles upriver had been shut down, and the Holston had dropped. Small rafts of bleach bottles were beached in debris along the banks and tatters from plastic grocery bags

fluttered from underbrush along the water's edge. Long rows of strata were exposed like broken dams angled across the river, and half a dozen gulls were feeding noisily on the exposed shoals.

Pettigrew was standing on one of the tilted, tablelike slabs, fishing a broad pool in its lee. He'd caught three bluegill and was pulling in a fourth when he heard a yell from the bank. A tall figure in tan was standing beside the white state van and hailing him.

"Pettigroo-o-o." The call echoed off the hill above the river. "Hey, Pettigroo-o-o-o."

He yanked the fish up on the rock, removed the hook, and added it to the stringer before turning

to look back at the shore.

"Pettigrew!"

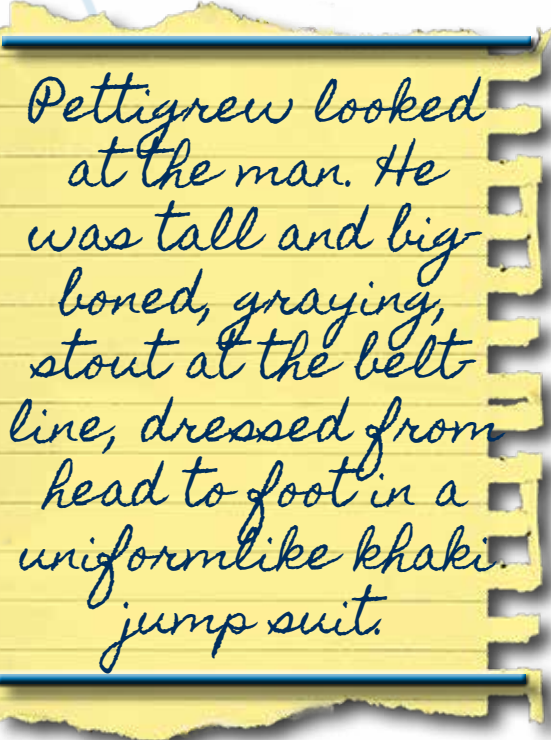
"Yeah!"

The man motioned him to shore. He picked up the fish and began to make his way back to the bank, tracing a twisty route, stepping from block to tilted block across flowing channels.

At the shore, the dirt bank was slick and he shifted the stringer and rod to one hand and steadied his climb with saplings on the bank.

"Rufus, I reckon you didn't recognize me the other day."

Pettigrew gained the roadway and looked at the man. He was tall and big-boned, graying, stout at the beltline, dressed from head to foot in a uniformlike khaki jump suit. Pettigrew searched for something familiar in his fea-



Pettigrew looked at the man. He was tall and big-boned, graying, stout at the beltline, dressed from head to foot in a uniformlike khaki jump suit.

tures, trying to imagine the face as it would have looked 40 years ago. He prepared to extend his hand.

“It’s Ray Townsend.”

Pettigrew stiffened slightly and stifled the gesture. He turned and started walking up the road toward his place. Townsend followed. They passed a couple of run-down fishing cabins set on poles on the riverside. Pettigrew stepped onto his porch. Townsend followed him without invitation.

“What you need?”

“They sent me over to check on you. How does it feel to be out, Rufus?”

Pettigrew put the fish in a bucket of water and turned to his visitor.

“How did it feel when they let you out, Deputy? I heard you did time yourself on marijuana charges.”

Townsend looked away for a second and then faced him again.

“I suspect my time in federal custody was a pie supper compared to yours inside the Walls.”

Pettigrew hung his fishing rod from a nail on the porch post. He didn’t turn around. For a moment he could almost smell the cell-block, a complex mix of sweat and tobacco smoke, disinfectant and sour mop. Townsend sidestepped to get a better view of Pettigrew’s face.

“I’ve come to clear up some things I’ve wondered about. I’m way past doing anything to you now. We found your car behind the barn,

we found the liquor, but we never did find the Deacon. I just want to know what you did with the body.”

“Nothing. I didn’t do nothing.”

“You didn’t get the old man’s money. I know. I took it myself after you had already gone to Brushy. He had it hid in a coffee can behind the smokehouse.”

“I didn’t look for it.”

“Why else would you kill him? Pure meanness?”

“I didn’t kill him. I don’t know what happened to him.”

Pettigrew reached for a filleting knife. His hand trembled.

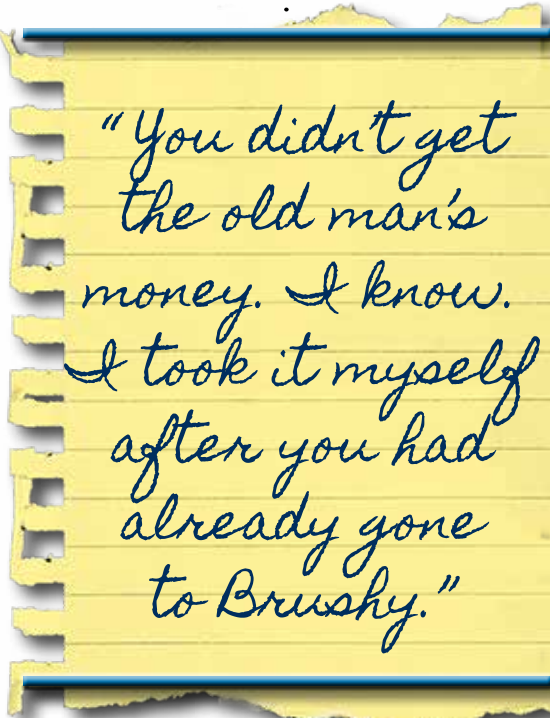
“Huh. You went out on the river with the old man. You come back without him. You told us that much yourself.” Townsend’s voice was detached, matter-of-fact, as if he was explaining something to a jury. “I knew when the spotlight hit your face. Something scared the piss out of

you. And you were cut up like you’d been fighting a wildcat. I always figured you left him in the deep water under the bluff; that’s got to be the place. We couldn’t snag him with the hooks. And he never showed up downriver.”

Pettigrew glanced toward the door.

“Look, I didn’t kill him, but I paid the state’s price anyway. They let me go. Now you get out of here.”

Townsend paused in the door.



*“You didn’t get the old man’s money. I know. I took it myself after you had already gone to Brushy.”*

“They just let you go because you’re too old to hurt anybody anymore.”

The Blue Hole was about a mile from his trailer, and once a day Pettigrew walked to it along the river road. He had pledged himself to stay active. He always looked away when he saw the nursing home on the four-lane in Jefferson City.

A small, shiny foreign car passed him as he rested on the railing above the spring. The young couple inside were having a lively conversation, gesturing and laughing. The car had a decal from the Baptist college in the rear window and stickers on the bumper. He squinted to read: “God Is My Co-Pilot,” “In Case of RAPTURE, This Car Will Be Unmanned.”

Pettigrew walked briskly back to the trailer. By the time he got there, the car was parked in a pull-off just past his cabin. The couple was gone but he heard their laughter out on the river. He spied them on a blanket spread across one of the flat slabs at mid-river.

He busied himself, washing his breakfast plate, making the bed, and sweeping out the trailer. Then he moved outside and began to sweep the porch. He was almost finished when he glanced to the rock where the couple were sunning.

Both appeared to be dozing; she was nes-

tled under his arm with an open book shading her eyes. Water lapped at the bottom of their blanket, and the rock ridges were disappearing as the river rose.

“Hey,” he hallooed. “Hey! You’uns! On the rock. Hey!”

They didn’t respond at first, but after a few moments the girl looked toward him. He heard a faint yelp when she saw how high the water was. Pettigrew threw himself down the bank and began to make his way across the rocks toward them. The boy was gathering the blanket and their textbooks.

“Let it go! Let it go!” The boy paid him no heed.

The girl moved ahead of the boy from rock to rock. Pettigrew reached her as the river began to cover the slabs. With water flowing around their ankles, he guided her to

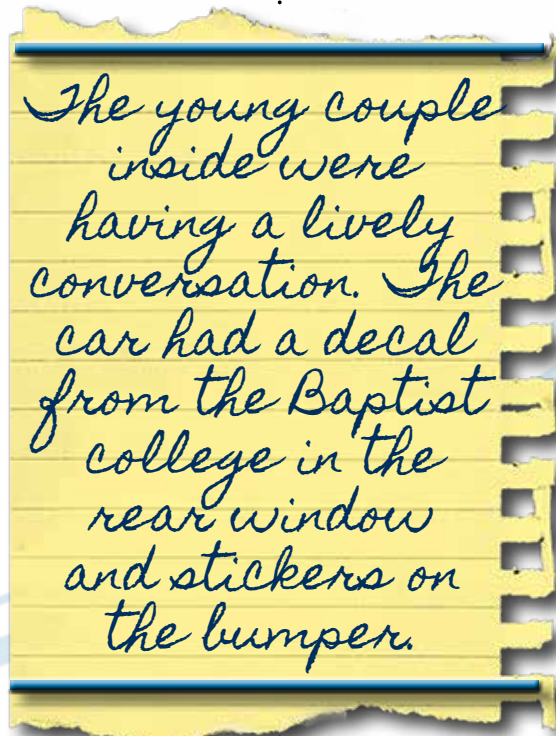
surer footing. Clutching blanket and books, the boy followed as best he could. At the bank, a book tumbled into the river. Before it could drift off, Pettigrew pulled it out soaked and dripping. He helped them up to the road.

“That water’ll surprise you when they start making electricity at the dam.”

“Thank you, Mister.

You were meant to be here today.” The boy shook himself energetically, almost dancing with relief. “God sent you to look after us.”

“You’re our angel.” The girl threw her arms around his neck. She smelled of flowers and



The young couple inside were having a lively conversation. The car had a decal from the Baptist college in the rear window and stickers on the bumper.

powders and softness. He coughed and waved a hand.

"Here's your book. I'm afraid it's ruint." He looked at the limp paperback in his hand: "Left Behind."

The girl pushed it back at him.

"Why don't you keep that. You might want to read it. It's about the Rapture, when Jesus will come back for his chosen." She gave the boy a conspiratorial smile. He took her hand.

Pettigrew watched them get into the little car and drive away. He

retreated to the trailer, turning aside to drop the sodden book into the can where he burned his trash.

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Pettigrew was fishing from an aluminum johnboat chained to the bank next to one of the other cabins. Upriver at Cherokee Dam, the turbines were turning, and the river was at full flood. The weekenders kept their boats chained and padlocked, but he could push out into the current as far as the chain would take him.

He had fished for four hours and was beginning to think he might have to open a can of Bush's beans for supper when he hooked half a dozen decent bluegills in quick succession.

As he pulled the chain and brought the boat back to the bank, he heard a car coming along the river road. He looked up to see a late-

model sedan, slope-shouldered and shiny, pass slowly. He raised a hand automatically, but it wasn't any of the regulars who came to the cabins on weekends to fish and drink.

He took his fish to the back porch and cleaned them, scraping the guts into a bucket and putting the fish in a shallow wash pan. He slung the entrails back into the river, set down the bucket, and carried the pan inside to the two-burner gas stove. As he got out an iron skillet, he heard the car pass again, back the way it had come,

still going slow. The oil was smoking in the skillet and he was rolling the last of the fish in seasoned meal when he heard a step on the porch.

"Ruff?"

Pettigrew started when he heard his nickname.

"Is that you, Rufus?"

He reached for a towel and brushed the breading off his hands back into the bowl.

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Lloyd. It's Lloyd." A balding, portly figure was silhouetted in the door. "Somehow, I knew I'd find you 'round here."

Pettigrew grunted and motioned him into the trailer.

"How are you, Lloyd?"

"Not bad for a fat old man with too many debts. How are you, Ruff?" Lloyd seized his hand and reached out with his left to knead Pettigrew's shoulder. "I heard you'd come

*"It's me. Lloyd. It's Lloyd." A balding, portly figure was silhouetted in the door. "Somehow, I knew I'd find you 'round here."*



home. It's good to see you."

"Can I get you some supper? I was just about to eat."

"No, no, you go ahead. I got a touch of sugar and..." Lloyd looked at the fish sizzling in the skillet. "Well, I might eat a little."

Pettigrew poured oil into another small skillet and turned on the oven. He pulled a half gallon of buttermilk out of the cooler, brought out a canister of meal, and began mixing a recipe of cornbread.

"Let me have some of that. I haven't had any in years."

Lloyd poked through the cabinets until he found a couple of jelly glasses and poured buttermilk into them. He put Pettigrew's on the table and took a long pull on his.

"Brenda don't even keep sweet milk anymore. She buys that zero percent stuff. Tastes like chalk."

The grease spattered and popped when Pettigrew poured in the cornbread batter. He shoved the small skillet into the oven, then took up the fish, and opened a can of Bush's turnip greens into a small pot. When the smell of the bread began to drift through the trailer, he took it out of the oven and turned it onto a plate, sliding a table knife under it to keep the bottom from sweating. He moved the bread and greens to the table and got out vinegar and margarine.

"Such as it is, here it is," he said by way of blessing.

Lloyd cut the cornbread in pie-shaped

pieces, then moved a slab to his plate. For several minutes they didn't speak as they filled their plates and ate. Lloyd ate with relish, and Pettigrew ceded him four of the fish.

"Mighty fine, mighty fine. Puts Red Lobster to shame." Lloyd pushed back a little but then took another wedge of cornbread. "I don't fish anymore. Got all the gear and a nice bass boat, but I just can't make the time to get out on the lake."

Using the bread as a sop, Lloyd leaned over the plate to let the crumbs and pot liquor drop back onto the plate. Pettigrew put down his fork and pushed back, and they lapsed into a companionable silence.

"Do you ever think back about that night?" Lloyd looked up at Pettigrew from under bushy eyebrows.

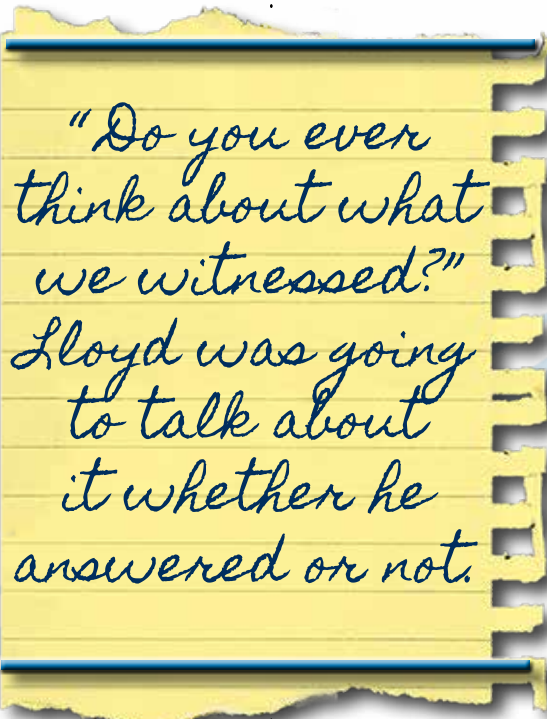
Pettigrew gave a noncommittal shrug and let his eyes drift away from the table.

"Do you ever think about what we witnessed?" Lloyd was going to talk about it whether he answered or not.

"I'd preached it, shouted it, sweated it, breathed it in and out. God was going to come back soon and claim his chosen and leave the rest of the world to the Tribulation. Ye know neither the day nor the hour when the

Son of Man cometh." For a moment Lloyd's voice became sonorous, cadenced.

He looked at Pettigrew. "But now we do know—September 7, 1953, around 1 a.m. Eastern Standard Time. He came, just as he



"Do you ever think about what we witnessed?" Lloyd was going to talk about it whether he answered or not.

said, just as I said. Only he didn't take me."

Lloyd pinned Pettigrew with an earnest stare. Pettigrew glanced away and shifted in his chair. Lloyd looked to the ceiling. "I was mad for a while, but pretty soon it was a relief. The emotion, the self-inspection, the details—all behind me. The last night of the revival I packed my duffle, kissed Mama, and moved to Dalton, Georgia." He reached into a back pocket and dragged out a red kerchief. "The carpet mills were hiring and I made a little extra trading cars. Pretty soon I had a small lot and was able to quit the mill. With a little help from Brenda's daddy, I bought a Chevy dealership." He daubed at his mouth.

Pettigrew poured more buttermilk in their glasses. He looked up at Lloyd, caught his eye and held his gaze.

"Why didn't you step up for me?"

Lloyd looked at his plate and then around the immaculate trailer before he met Pettigrew's eyes.

"Ruff, they'd lock up a Holy Roller preacher as quick as they'd lock up a bootlegger. Think about it. Would you believe it if you hadn't been there?"

Pettigrew didn't answer.

"No, I knew then that my call was at an end. Now there's not even an echo left. I go to the Episcopal church. They put on a good show on Sunday mornings and they buy pricey cars. My youngest is a sophomore at

Vanderbilt and, when she's finished, I'm going to sell the dealership and me and Brenda will move to Hilton Head for good. I've got enough to see me through to the end."

Both men were quiet for several minutes. Lloyd looked up.

"What about you? You were there, too."

Pettigrew let the silence rest between them.

"Did you regret going up for a man you didn't murder?" said Lloyd as the pause lengthened.

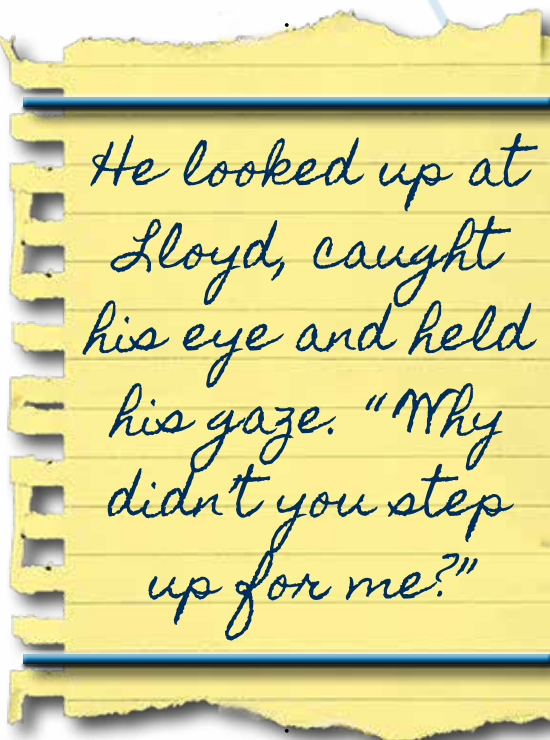
Pettigrew absentmindedly blotted up cornbread crumbs with a finger and looked down. His eyes lost their focus and he spoke slowly, as if trying to read a sign that was far off.

"I didn't hurt the Deacon but, hell, I was rough. I killed a bootlegger from Cocke County. We tied a couple of cinderblocks to him and threw him off Swann's bridge. I always figured I was where I was supposed to be, just not for the right crime."

Lloyd played with a fork and looked at Pettigrew.

"When I got to Brushy, I joined a prayer group. A lot of the new ones did. Hoping a jailhouse conversion would yank me out of that hellhole and back among the living. Later, when they moved me to the main prison, I did a lot of reading, but I never could find any record of people disappearing. But then 144,000 ain't a lot of people, even in 1953."

Lloyd nodded sympathetically but remained quiet. The sheet metal roof gave a pop.



“It burned something out of me. It made me want things I’d never wanted before, things you couldn’t have where I was. When you miss your chance, it’s gone. This place is as close as I ever was to it.” He looked around the tidy trailer. “As close as I’ll ever be.”

They sat silent a few minutes. Pettigrew began to clear the table.

“I appreciate the supper.” Lloyd stood by the door and held out his hand. Pettigrew put a hand on his shoulder and guided him through the door to his car.

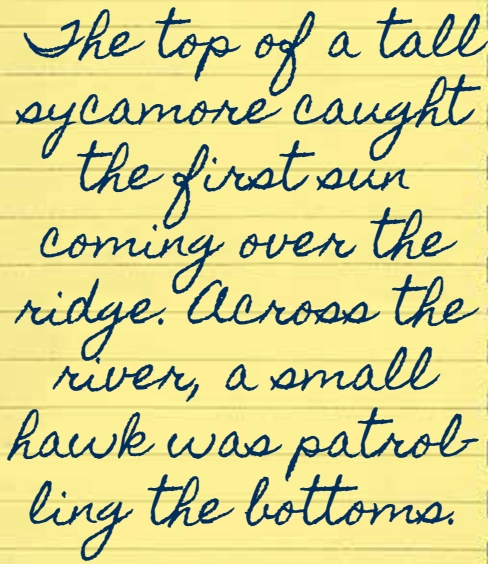
“You look after that diabetes.” Pettigrew let a ball of spit fall from his lips to the pavement. Lloyd did likewise.

“We’ll see you, Rufus.”

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The water was still up when Pettigrew went to the river in the morning. Fog rose in jagged tendrils from the surface, dancing crookedly against the brightening sky.

Downriver, the cliff beyond the spring was still in shadow. Setting his can and pole down carefully on a boat seat, Pettigrew looked at the bluff for a long moment, thinking about his supper with Lloyd. He stooped abruptly and picked up the chain that fastened the boat to the bank and gave it a jerk. Again, long and hard, he yanked at the chain and the boat began to move back toward the shore. Pettigrew strained, and the muscles in his neck grew taut, but the padlock held, and



The top of a tall sycamore caught the first sun coming over the ridge. Across the river, a small hawk was patrolling the bottoms.

the iron stob buried deep in the bank did not loosen. After another yank, he gave up and dropped the chain.

The boat swung downstream with the current, the water bubbling underneath. Pettigrew studied the river’s swell and play. Sometimes it dropped low enough for herons to fish the shoals mid-river and sometimes it rose

high to gnaw away the bank, swirling around a snag, sweeping away refuse or carrying down treasures, supplying supper or denying, hiding secrets. Whatever it did, it was always there, a constant.

Pettigrew looked to the hills above him, terraced where generations of cows had cropped grass on the shaley slope. The top of a tall sycamore caught the first sun coming over the ridge. Across the river, a small hawk was patrolling the bottoms. His head bent, Pettigrew put a hand over his eyes. He sighed, then lifted his shoulders and relaxed. He picked up the pole and baited the hook.



**Bill Dockery** is a native East Tennessee writer and journalist who explores the way religion, literature, and geography intermix in Appalachia. His day job is writing about research for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. An earlier version of “In Case of Rapture” won a graduate writing award in the UT English Department in the mid-2000s.

## Play it by Ear

By Niles Reddick

# W

hen Grandpa Reddick went to heaven, Grandma had the funeral home men put his casket on top of the drink cooler in their country store instead of at the church and said, “Nobody needs a drink during a funeral.”

“But, Mama, what if people get hot in here with no air conditioning?” my daddy had asked her.

She said, “If they’re hot, they can fan themselves with funeral home fans.”

“What songs do you want the musicians to play?”

“Whatever they want. They’ll know what to play and will play it by ear like they always do. None of them had any training. Just handed down to them by their older relatives.” She walked off, her pumps clapping on the unfinished hundred-year-old wooden floor, never getting hung on loose nails that had come out or stumbling on pieces of wood that had been chipped out from work boots, tools, and from heavy cabinets being moved around over time.

I recalled the ice had been delivered from buggies, and later trucks, out back as had the bags of mail they handed out when folks came for flour, sugar, or other grocery items, or when rural people traveled on Friday and Saturday night to hear the bluegrass music they heard across the tobacco fields. If

*If crickets and cicadas were quiet and the wind blew from East to West, people almost heard it on the Chattahoochee River out from Benevolence and Cuthbert.*



Photo by Steve Robinson

crickets and cicadas were quiet and the wind blew from East to West, people almost heard it on the Chattahoochee River out from Benevolence and Cuthbert.

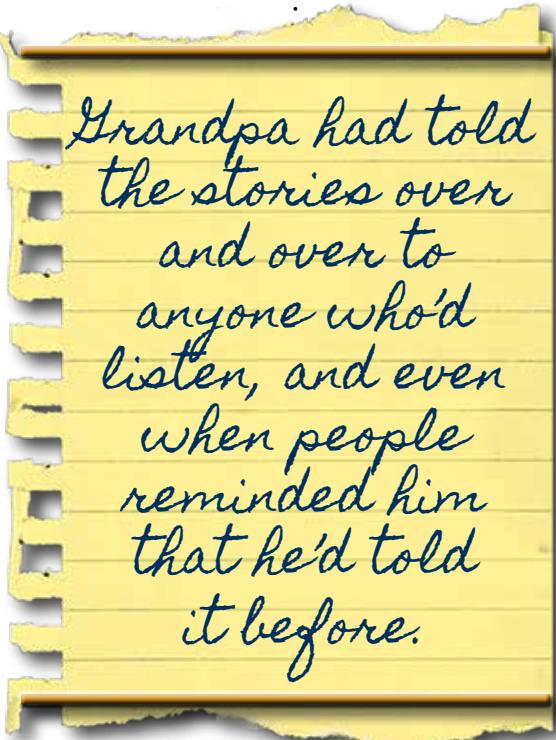
We knew Grandpa had gone on to a better life in the great beyond where all his family were because that's what he mumbled when he had the stroke with a saltine cracker and piece of hoop cheese in his mouth. He figured heaven would be like their home village his own grandpa had talked about from the hills of Germany and alongside the Rhine River. He knew there would be no winter, no food shortage like he'd heard about in his family, and no need to indent oneself to get passage in heaven.

Grandpa had told the stories over and over to anyone who'd listen, and even when people reminded him that he'd told it before, he launched into it again. It was as if he got stuck like a needle on a record that had been scratched. His family had sailed from Cowes, England to Tybee Island, Georgia where they were towed upriver to Savannah at high tide. They were crammed in the bottom of the ship for nearly three months; one of the babies had died somewhere in the Atlantic and was tossed overboard. When they arrived and settled Vernonburg as ser-

vants to the British, they ate well but hated the heat and humidity, bugs and snakes, and the disease that killed off their mother and German friends. Grandpa talked about how much they hated the Revolution—they didn't

know if they should support the British or go with the Patriots, but on the promise of land grants after the war, they finally went with the Patriots and moved to Western Georgia where red clay replaced mud and sand in Savannah, where rattlesnakes were fat and grew up to twelve feet unlike the cotton mouths back near Savannah, and where a sea breeze was a thing of the past.

When cars and trucks pulled into the patchy grass and dirt front yard and off to the sides of the unpainted store for Grandpa's funeral, the women in their dresses, panty hose, and pumps sat first, while men in khakis and short sleeved shirts mostly propped on the counter or against the unpainted walls that I used to imagine faces in—faces that watched me steal candy and drinks when Grandpa was out back, faces that frowned me into going to church, faces that nudged me into the aisle to get saved at church, faces that scorned me when I stole after I was saved, but faces that I don't see now as I scan the clapboard walls of the country store.

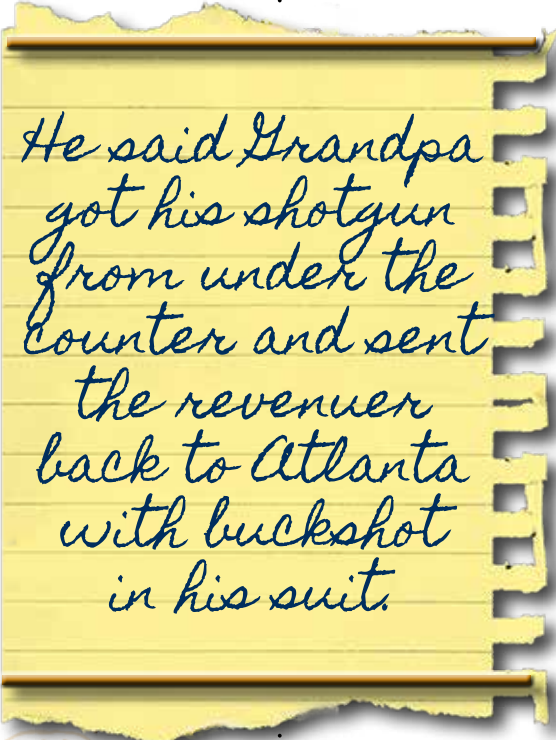


*Grandpa had told the stories over and over to anyone who'd listen, and even when people reminded him that he'd told it before.*

Then, one of Grandpa's old friends spoke up. Grandpa and his friends would usually gather at the store on Saturday nights and either play music or cards. When they played music, it was bluegrass songs...all played by ear. When they played cards, it was Spades, Hearts, Go Fish, and an occasional Poker game. And, on some occasions, Grandpa would bring out a bottle one of his customers had given him in leau of money for groceries. This old friend told a couple of stories no one really believed; one was the time a revenuer came by and threatened Grandpa, demanding him to tell who made shine and sold it. He said Grandpa got his shotgun from under the counter and sent him back to Atlanta with buckshot in his suit. And another of his stories was about the time a psychic gypsy woman came by and told of bad times to come and wanted a donation. Grandpa had told her there never were any good times, and if she knew so much, then maybe she should've known she'd be a poor old fake psychic gypsy and pulled his shotgun and told her to "Git."

The funeral home man, who doubled as a preacher and traveled the circuit of Western Georgia Methodist churches, read the same scriptures we'd all heard a million times

about dust to dust, but Grandma didn't dab her eyes until the band broke out in "Farther Along" and "Life's Railway to Heaven." I'll be the first to admit I choked up and felt a lump in my throat.



He said Grandpa got his shotgun from under the counter and sent the revenuer back to Atlanta with buckshot in his suit.

They planted Grandpa's pine box under the old Oak shade tree behind the store where a handful of other relatives were buried, and Grandma told my Daddy it would be a few weeks before the marble headstone came in. The store stayed open until Grandma died, and then we kept it as a storage barn and parked old cars there when they quit running. We lived

just a mile down the highway, but when I left my window open, and there was a breeze, I imagined the smell of sausage cooking and heard the bluegrass music being played by those old men who played by ear, and I pulled the patchwork blanket up to my neck, closed my eyes, and dreamed of my grandparents visiting me one more time.



**Niles Reddick** lives in Jackson, Tennessee with his wife and two children. His books are available on Amazon.com and in iBooks. For more information on the author, visit his website at [www.nilesreddick.com](http://www.nilesreddick.com).





## In a Pickle

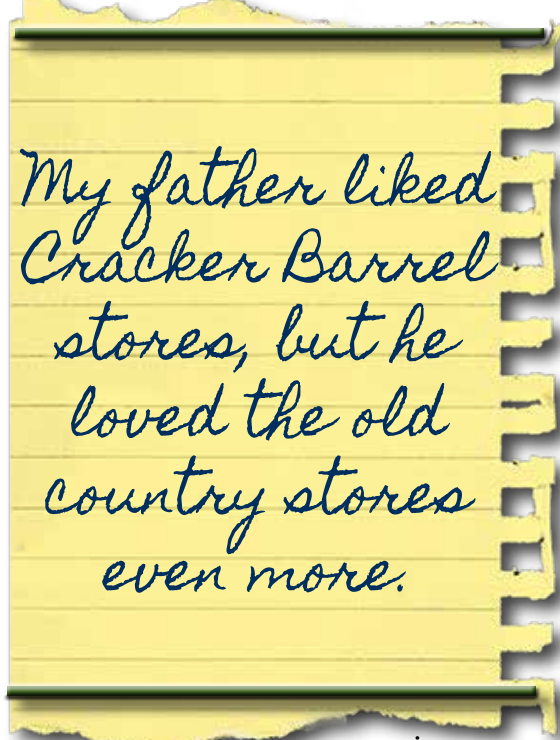
By David Ray Skinner

**I** don't recall my father ever being passionate about pickles. However, as disconnected as it may seem, country stores were a different matter—he loved country stores. He *liked* Cracker Barrel stores, but he *loved* the old country stores even more.

As a matter of fact, Dad lived right up the road from the original Cracker Barrel—store number one, which was created in 1969 on Highway 109, on an exit off Interstate 40, between Nashville and Lebanon, Tennessee. It was initially a convenience store with gas pumps that was modified by Shell Oil Sales Rep Dan Evins, based on the old country stores he remembered from his childhood, with the goal of improving gasoline sales.

Similarly, some of my own childhood memories involve riding through the countryside with my dad, usually after a hot summer morning of fishing. We'd go in search of an *ancient off-the-beaten-path* store on some old pock-marked county road in the middle of nowhere, ostensibly to buy lunch. That meant cheese and crackers for me and a tin of sardines for Dad. Mom was not a fan of the smelly sardines, so those “boys’ days out” gave him the opportunity to indulge in a guilty (and salty) pleasure.

The old stores that Dad looked for were typically weather-beaten wooden structures, tenuously perched atop large creek stones or eroded concrete blocks, with a rusted gas pump or two out front, strategically positioned in a dirt-and-gravel parking lot. Up the wooden steps, on the front porch, there would sometimes be a couple of overalled men passionately engrossed in a lazy checker game, usually in front of a big red “Ice Cold Coca-Cola” cool-



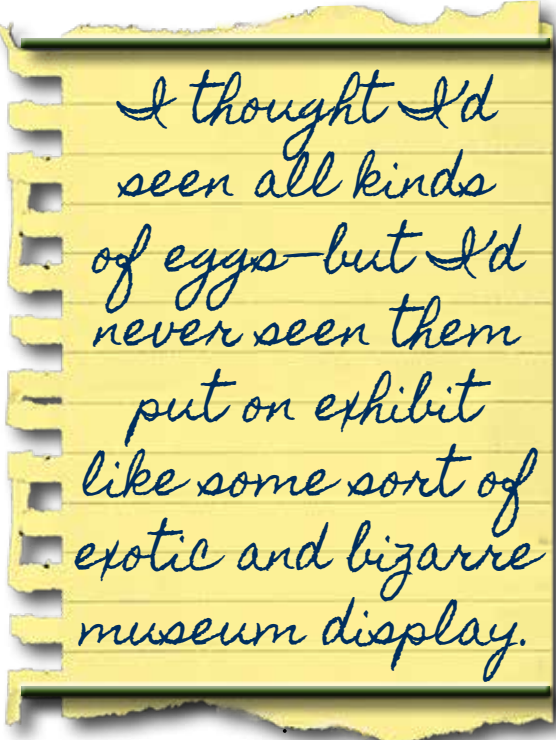
My father liked Cracker Barrel stores, but he loved the old country stores even more.

er with nickel Cokes, Sprites and Nehi's floating in the cold ice water. It was often the same from store to store—almost like the same type of set, props and characters were sent to each location by central casting. It was nice to know what to expect. However, suburban kid that I was, I was still usually a little creeped out by the visits—the stores were a far cry from the shiny Krogers that were my usual stomping grounds. Also, everything inside appeared to be old and dusty and time-forgotten.

That didn't bother Dad—he was always happy to discover a “new” old store—it brought back memories of his own childhood as a boy growing up on a Tennessee farm. My grandmother's grandfather had built a store there in the farming community in the late 1800s, and upon his death in 1918, the store was passed down to two of his sons. There not only was an age difference in the two sons—eighteen years, in fact—but there was a difference of opinion, as well. Things got out of hand over the ownership of a tree that separated the properties of the two, and the younger brother left the partnership and built his own country store—across the street from the original one. Dad said that they'd visit both stores—they'd go to one for specific items and then cross the street to the other store for additional supplies. Between the two stores, my grandparents would visit with my grandmother's

two uncles and then buy food, clothing, seeds, fertilizer, first aid supplies, pots, pans, and dishes. Then Dad and his sister—and whatever cousins were along for the wagon ride—would sometimes get a stick of gum, a piece of candy or maybe even a slice of hoop cheese and bologna and crackers. For Great Depression Era kids, it was the equivalent of a new video game.

Dad never mentioned a big ol' jar of pickled eggs, so I assume that it wasn't mandatory for



*I thought I'd seen all kinds of eggs—but I'd never seen them put on exhibit like some sort of exotic and bizarre museum display.*

those old country stores to prominently display one on their counter next to the jangly old cash register. That's why my first sighting of one was so traumatic. In the dim light inside that old fan-cooled store one summer Saturday afternoon, the jar loomed bigger than life with its white orbs bobbing in the glass tank of briny vinegar. I thought I'd seen all kinds of eggs—scrambled, poached, fried, boiled,

and deviled—but I'd never seen them put on exhibit like some sort of exotic and bizarre museum display.

“Want one?” Dad said, trying to look serious. “They're pickled.” I jumped back in horror, but before I could manage a response, the store's screen door (with the tin Sunbeam Bread logo on the outside) creaked open and slammed shut, admitting a grizzled old man with a faded Co-Op cap and tobacco-stained t-shirt that may or may not have been white at some point. He held two small round containers full of black dirt and animated

earthworms, some of which were almost escaping.

“How much’r these Nightcrawlers?” he barked at the be-speckled man behind the counter, but his gaze was on the big jar of pickled eggs, “Oooo! And one-a these?”

Before the store’s owner could answer, the old man had shifted all of his Nightcrawlers to the crook of his left arm, specks of black dirt and worms dropping to the dark and worn wooden floor. In one deft motion, he unscrewed the lid of the big jar and plunged his grimy paw into the murky vinegar, fishing wildly for a particularly big pickled egg that hovered like a round white catfish close to the bottom of the jar.

Dad had finished his sardines and was enjoying the show. However, I had lost my appetite and I trashed what remained of my cheese and crackers.

Later that afternoon at my aunt’s house, Dad delighted in re-telling the story. “I knew he was a picky eater,” he said, gesturing toward me and grinning, “He usually only eats hamburgers and sometimes cheese and crackers when we visit a country store, but I thought that there was a slim chance that he’d go for a pickled egg. After all, he eats dill pickles on his hamburger, and sometimes he’ll eat an egg in the morning, so I thought just maybe—”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry; it was one thing to be the center of attention, but obviously, they were laughing at me, not with me. My aunt rescued me and brought me into the kitchen where she poured me a glass of milk and cut me a slice of chocolate cake.

“Don’t mind them,” she said, “Your dad don’t even like pickled eggs. I seem to recall him being a little bit of a picky eater hisself, until the Army Air Corps and World War II got ahold of ’im. I guess being shot at over the Pacific makes you appreciate anything as long as you make it back to base alive to eat it.

I don’t know if they served pickled eggs on his base. We’ll have to ask him.”

“I didn’t even know you could pickle eggs,” I said, digging into the cake.

“Gracious, child, you can pickle any edible thing that grows, long as you can pull, pick, or catch it,” she laughed.

“Rabbits?”

“I can’t catch no rabbit,” she laughed, “Pickled rabbits? Really?”

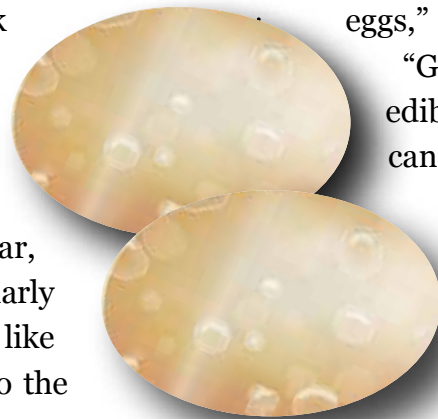
“Then like what?” I asked.

“Like...’sparagus, beets, bell peppers,” she was counting everything on her fingers, “Blueberries, carrots, cherries, grapes, green beans, peaches, radishes, strawberries, squash, tomatoes, even onions. But mostly cucumbers...homemade dill and icicle pickles. Better than store bought, any day of the week. It just takes an acid base—like vinegar—and a good, simple recipe. I could teach you...”

“Most of those things I don’t even like ‘unpickled,” I said, shuddering.

“I’m not sure if they pickle hamburgers,” she said, grinning, “At least you like the dill pickles that go on ’em. You really should try a homemade dill pickle.”

I didn’t have the heart or nerve to tell her that I preferred the dill pickles fresh off the shelf from my suburban Kroger. I still had the vision of those eggs bobbing in the greenish gold liquid in the jar on the counter



in the fan-blown darkness of that old store.

That particular afternoon happened well over a half century ago. As I've gotten older, I've come to understand the pride and love that goes into pickling, and the fact that my aunt was right—homemade pickled anything is better than store bought. Also, pickling must be in the DNA of southern cooks. My wife's grandmother—Mawmaw—cooked dishes that were indistinguishable from those of my mother, grandmothers and aunts. Mawmaw also had recipes for icicle pickles, as well as dill pickles. Going to her house was like picnics, dinner on the ground and family reunions all rolled up in one.

Her pickles were legendary, and she prepared the kind of home-cooked meals that Cracker Barrels have used as a template for their success.

As for pickles and my picky eating, it took

moving to New York City a decade or so later to expand my personal menu preferences. After I'd lived there for several years, Dad flew up for a visit, and one night for dinner, I took him to my favorite Lebanese restaurant, a few blocks from my Brooklyn apartment.

"Are you going to be able to get a hamburger here?" he asked sarcastically as the waiter brought the menus and some glasses of water. I just smiled and pointed at a dish on the menu and handed it back to the waiter. Dad ordered, and we talked about home, kinfolks, and my job and New York while we waited on our food.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing with his thumb at a good-sized jar on the counter next to the cash register. Inside the jar were bright pink stalks floating in some sort of liquid.

"Pickled turnips," I said, "It's the Lebanese version of a big ol' jar of eggs." I'm pretty sure he was on the verge of asking if I was going to bring home a jar, but the waiter interrupted by bringing our dinner. Suddenly, Dad's focus quickly shifted to the dish that the waiter placed in front of me.

"What in the world did you order?" he asked, incredulously.

"Meat pies floating in hot yogurt," I calmly answered. The "something floating in something" concept was very similar to the pickled eggs, and the look on my father's face must have been similar to the look on my face in that old country store all those years ago. At any rate, Dad didn't mention the pickled turnips on the counter by the cash register, nor did he ask if I was going to bring home a jar. Also, he never again accused me of being a picky eater. Better yet, I never had to try a pickled egg.

## Mawmaw's Icicle Pickles

- 10 Cucumbers
- 3 Cups White Vinegar
- Cup Water
- 3 Cups Sugar
- ¼ Cup Salt

Peel and remove the seeds from large cucumbers. Cut in strips 1/2-inch wide, cover with ice water. Let stand overnight. Drain and pack upright in jars. For 3 or 4 jars; boil together for 3 minutes the white vinegar, water and sugar, then add salt. Pour over cucumbers to fill the jars. Seal, let stand 6 weeks before using. Enjoy!



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# Back to Brushy Creek

By Charlton Walters Hillis

S

ome of this came from my daddy's written stories. When he was old, he sat down and began to write, and it just went on and on. He never went to college; he went to flying airplanes instead, when airplanes were new.

He was born in 1907 and was flying before he would have been a senior in high school. He never had time for learning to write, but when he did sit down to write, he wrote like a man who was a natural story teller. He could handle the English language in a good and simple way. I know where it came from. It came from all those evenings when he sat down after work and read books, whether it was the Bible or *Readers' Digest* Condensed Books or everything Louis L'Amour ever wrote. There was never a television in the house; my parents did not care to have one. They both read books, and they both wrote, and they made readers of their children.

Much of the following came from my sister, Connie. Over the years, she's done extensive genealogy work on us and has all the dates in her head. She told me stories Daddy told her that he didn't write down. She told me stories from our aunts Frances and Jean, from a cousin, Wilma Massey, and from other relatives. If my brother, Dan was here, he could tell more, being the oldest. As it is, he wrote the poem "Grandma's House," which is about as good as it gets.

One tale led to another, and one question asked and answered sometimes changed the whole course. When you attempt this sort of thing, you begin in a way to hear their voices, the voices of the ones you never knew, and the voices of the ones you never knew past childhood. It's always that way. This is a story unique to us; at the same time, it is the story of a lot of other families.

My grandmother, Mellie Massey Walters, was my only grandparent still alive when I was born. She had a longer name, but very much disliked it, so out of respect, she will remain just

You begin in a way to hear their voices, the voices of the ones you never knew, and the voices of the ones you never knew past childhood.



*Grandma sidesaddle: Mellie Massey  
(lithograph print by Charlton Hillis)*

Mellie, the only name her grandchildren ever knew before her death. Way after her death. It was not even in the obituary. She was an uncommon spirit. She always looked old to me, coming along as late in her life as I did. She stood around five-foot-three or so, soldier straight, thin and wrinkled, with deep-set blue eyes. She had a slight, closed mouth smile and a firm and determined set to her face. Her white hair was long, and every morning she put it up in a bun in back, without ever looking in a mirror. In advanced years, she had it cut.

Her hands and arms were weathered, veiny and tough. Under long skirts, what showed of her legs were pencil thin in thick stockings that bagged near the tops of her black lace-up high shoes. When skirt lengths rose just a little, her legs remained just as thin and her stockings just as thick. She was feisty and spoke her mind. She was not loud, but she said out loud whatever she thought needed saying, sometimes alarmingly so.

“My mother was a woman of strong opinions, and she took care not to lose any of them,” my father wrote.

At some point in life, we realize with a start that old people used to be young. My moment came when I saw a lovely photograph of my Grandma on a horse. Not that that was news, but here she was, riding sidesaddle—it was that long ago. In her early years, people didn’t take photographs very often. When they did, it was usually to line the family up in their Sunday best and shoot them ramrod stiff and stern. Today, people take too many pictures,

so many they lose their treasured status. There was a time in between the stiff and the selfies, when people took more informal pictures. The ones I’m looking through now are all black and white or duotone. In that sidesaddle photo, Grandma was a teenager, according to my father. That was back before they even coined the word “teenager.”

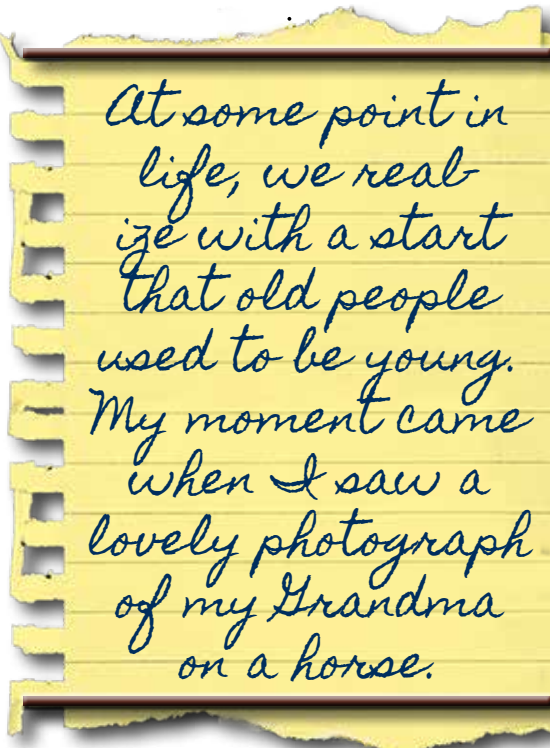
All my father’s side of the family were East Texas people, from a place called Brushy Creek, down near Palestine, all the way up to Tyler. We say that as if Texas is the be-all, end-all, but our first records of them are in South Carolina.

The westward expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was largely birthed by the desire for cheap land

and more independence and opportunity for small farmers. Among the wagon trains leaving South Carolina were several branches of the Welborne family. Mississippi was still frontier territory when the first ones arrived, and Jones County in the Piney Woods region drew settlers such as the Welbornes for its land, forests and water. Many of them later went on to Texas. As early as the 1840s it was said in Mississippi, “‘Texas fever’ is high.”

Sometime in the middle of the century in Brushy Creek, Anderson County, South Carolina, the extended clan of A.G. and Nancy Welborne packed up and headed west, to the black soil of Mississippi. Jones County. A.G. was reported to be both a farmer and a preacher. Nancy was the mother of their nine daughters, among whom was my great grandmother, Susan.

In 1865, Sherman’s army came through





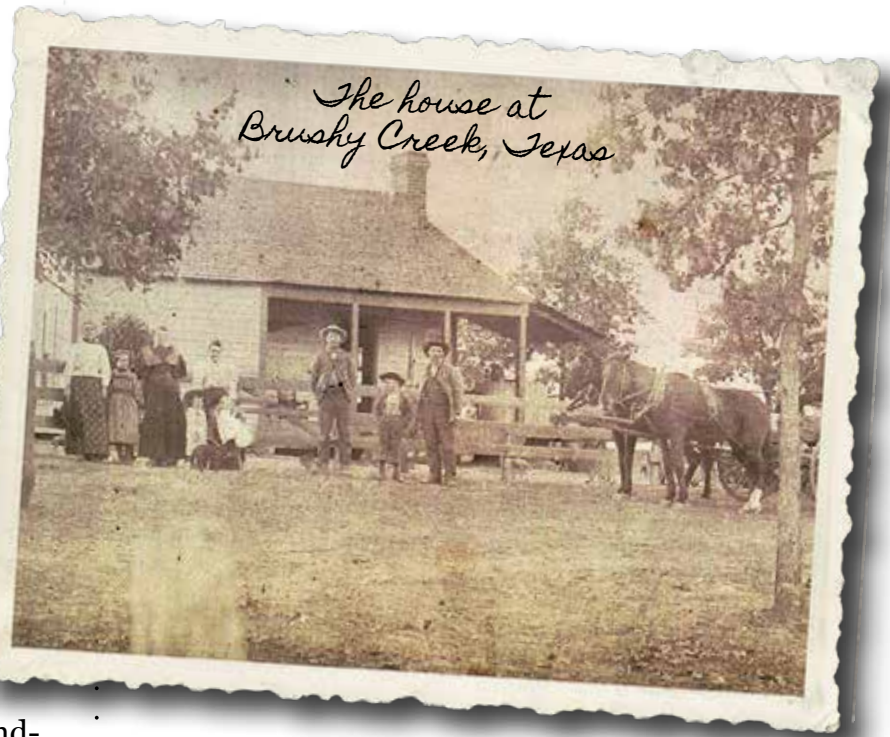
Chesterfield County, South Carolina, burning everything in its path, including the courthouse. The following legend—gleaned in the time-honored tradition of children listening in on adult conversations—was of a genuine villain, cruel to family and foe alike. As a witness to abuse, John Massey's fifteen-year-old son, John William, stepped in to protect his mother, Martha. The boy held a gun and, accidentally or not, it went off in the struggle. James Massey was wounded, and he died a few days later at the home of his mistress.

John William Massey was my great grandfather. Had the courthouse not been burned, we might know more details.

We do know Union troops ransacked the Massey plantation. When they set about to burn the modest-sized (by plantation standards) house, Martha Hilton Massey reportedly stood in the doorway, refused to leave and told them they would have to watch her burn with it. Against orders and all expectations, they left.

We know they left, because the soon-to-be-abandoned house remained until at least 1969, when my second cousin, Wilma Massey and her daughter traveled there and took pictures. The owners allowed them to take whatever they wanted, as the house was marked to be demolished. They took part of a mantle and some doorknobs. A bullet-ridden weathervane was also removed and placed with family at some point in time. An old man on his death bed had told of buried gold coins and silver in that house. He said Sherman's men took what they found, but most was hidden under the house or inside the walls ahead of their coming. This got out, and over the years many searched for it, destroying much in their futile treasure hunts. They should have known Martha had taken it with her.

In 1865, Martha Hilton Massey and her



two sons, John William and George, left South Carolina to live first in Alabama, where she remarried, then in Jones County, Mississippi and later, of course, in Texas. In Texas, she bought land with her gold and silver.

The Civil War was over by the time the Masseys settled in Mississippi, but wartime Jones County history is riveting. Jones countians—and some from neighboring counties—against the war rebelled, leading to a secession from Mississippi (it's still debated as to whether the secession was ever official). *The Free State of Jones*, it was called. Deserters from the Confederacy. Several Welbornes—we know for certain a cousin of my great-great grandfather—joined the Knight Company, named after their most visible leader. For a brief time in 1864, the U.S. flag flew over the courthouse, according to a report to the Confederate Secretary of War, pleading for more troops.

Now some of these combatants were honest-to-goodness opposed to slavery from a moral viewpoint. Others saw the Civil War as a rich man's war in which they had nothing to gain and much to lose. And just as in that war, families were deeply divided, with brothers and cousins taking up arms against one

another. The Knight Company was more than fighting men. Women and children—black and white—famously hid, fed, and spied for them. By the time that war within a war was over, the county had seen men mauled by the Confederates' bloodhounds, hung from trees and shot in front of their families. When Mississippi went back into the Union after the war, Jones County voted to go back into the state of Mississippi. They made a movie about it all. *"The Free State of Jones."*

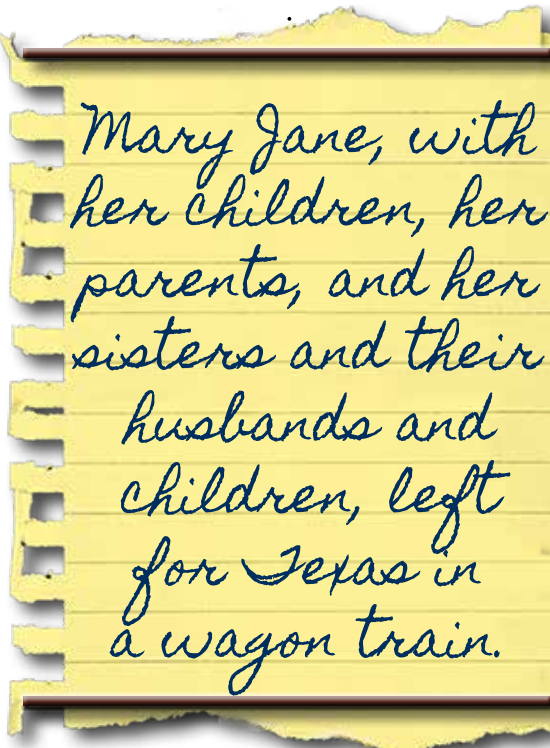
There in Jones County just five years after the Union flag flew over Ellisville, John William Massy married Susan Welborne Dossett, one of the nine Welborne sisters. Susan's first husband came home from the Union prison camp at Rock Island and died just after the war ended. Their baby daughter followed him a year later.

My family may never have left Mississippi but for one chilling incident in 1874. A man accused his wife, Mary Jane—one of Susan's sisters—of witchcraft. The Salem witch trials were two centuries past, but such wildly false charges were still not uncommon. The specter of public condemnation and worse loomed large.

Mary Jane, with her children, her parents, and her sisters and their husbands and children, left for Texas in a twelve-wagon train. They camped on the east side of the Mississippi River two nights. At Natchez, they were invited to board a steamship for dinner and dancing. And there at Natchez they started at sunrise to ferry the river. By sundown the last wagon had reached the west

bank. The husband of one of the sisters died that night; there is nothing more on that. The next day they started through Louisiana and sixteen days later, reached Brushy Creek in Anderson County, Texas.

In 1875, J.W. Massey bought one hundred and eleven acres there. One Welborne daughter, my great grandmother's oldest sister and husband, had skipped Mississippi to go straight to Texas and been among those who first settled the area in the 1850s. Many years later, her husband told his son they chose to stop there because of "wood and water." Good hunting, good water, good farmland. They named the place after their old home in South Carolina; that the counties also have the same name is what they



Mary Jane, with her children, her parents, and her sisters and their husbands and children, left for Texas in a wagon train.

call coincidence.

Brushy Creek is too small to be on the map (there is a place by the same name near Austin). Its enduring monument to history is a brush arbor built in 1873. It was the site of many early camp meetings, which were a central part of the Second Great Awakening. The original beams and rafters still support the roof, now covered with sheet iron. The Anderson Campground is marked with a plaque and is listed in both the federal and state registry of historical sites.

We have a photo of the Massey house at Brushy Creek, or rather, it is highly likely that this is the house. We are not one hundred percent certain, and that can be maddening. Historians and those devoted to historical accuracy demand that I put in that disclaimer. It was in Grandma's box of family photos. Anyone who has ever longed to visit the past

in fly-on-the-wall mode stares hungrily into an old photo, as if just by looking it will somehow come alive. The one I'm staring at now includes not only the house but an intriguing placement of people, as well as a wagon drawn by two horses.

It's a clapboard house with a large shingled roof, a brick chimney, and a large porch. The view seems to be of the side of the house. A wood plank fence between house and people stretches in both directions to the ends of the picture. At left is a young tree and then a tight group: a woman, a half grown girl, a second woman, and a third with two small children in front. After this are two men with a half grown boy in the middle; these stand more loosely spaced and are almost in the center. They all face forward. To the right of the men are the horses, standing still, facing the men and hitched to a wagon. Another young tree on the right is in front of the wagon, so the driver in dark clothes is overlooked.

The women wear leg o' mutton sleeves, full-length skirts and, strangely, no bonnets. The men wear work-worn fedoras, shaped by sun, wind, sweat and time. They wear hopsack jackets. The boy is hatted, but not yet in long trousers. They pose in front of a sturdy, home-built dwelling. You get the feeling they pose there proudly and that there's a story there of something that just happened or of something that's just about to happen. We'll never know, and just who they all are, we don't know for certain. The original photograph is small and faded, and Photoshop does not make facial features much clearer.

We've been told the back yard sloped down

toward Copperus Creek and boasted fruit trees, pears for one. And there at Brushy Creek in 1884, my grandmother, Mellie was born to Susan and J.W. Massey.

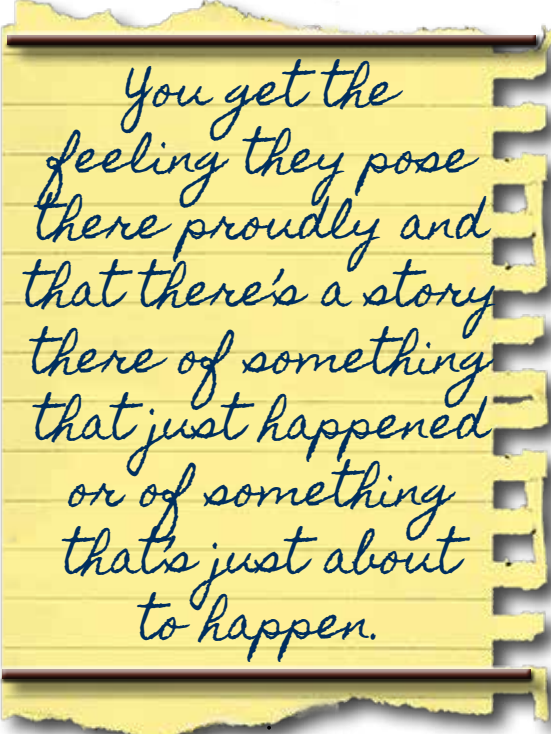
J.W. had dark hair, a full dark beard, straight nose, firm mouth, and dark eyes that look out at you calm and unafraid. My

great grandmother, Susan Frances Welborne Massey had big, deep set blue eyes and a thin, pretty face that always looks a little sad in the pictures. She looks almost frail, but she was not frail.

She had ten children, and buried four of them young—two in Mississippi, two in Texas. It was not unusual back then. You can walk through any old cemetery and, if you pay attention to the dates of birth and death, find the babies.

Some were newborns who lived only one day, some a little longer. Susan's babies were one year, three months, one year, and eight years old. Losing just one would tear a mother apart in a way nobody can know who's not gone through it. And every time, after the burial, there was no let up. She would have to get up before the sun and wear herself out taking care of the others—every single day. Maybe that's what made women like that strong. It either made them strong, or it broke them.

We know the story only of the one who lived to be eight; no one who heard it could ever forget. Sweeny Massey was playing with his sister Mellie on a July day in 1889, when he said his head hurt. He went inside and told his mother he saw a big bird flying around that had a face like a person. Susan knew, and she said, that was an angel. Sweeny died a few days later of no known cause. Had they done



You get the feeling they pose there proudly and that there's a story there of something that just happened or of something that's just about to happen.

an autopsy, they might have found he had an aneurysm, but they would never have been able to explain that angel.

J.W. and Susan Massey sold the Brushy Creek land in 1891 to buy a sixty-acre farm up near Tyler. They were truck farmers, selling their produce in town. Grandma once said they never went back much because the road was so bad, and they once became badly stuck in the mud and the ruts.

Mellie would grow up to marry Crawford Walters, whose people before him had also been one of the divided families of Jones County, Mississippi. Always when telling these things we call our grandfather by his given name, Crawford, because we never knew him as Grandpa. He was a fine man by all accounts, and I wish we had known him as Grandpa. He had a good tenor voice, and we've been told he played the fiddle. He was sparing with words and patience, and he balanced out my grandmother's more impetuous nature.

"He had infinite patience with other people's problems and they brought them to him," my father (who had no patience) wrote.

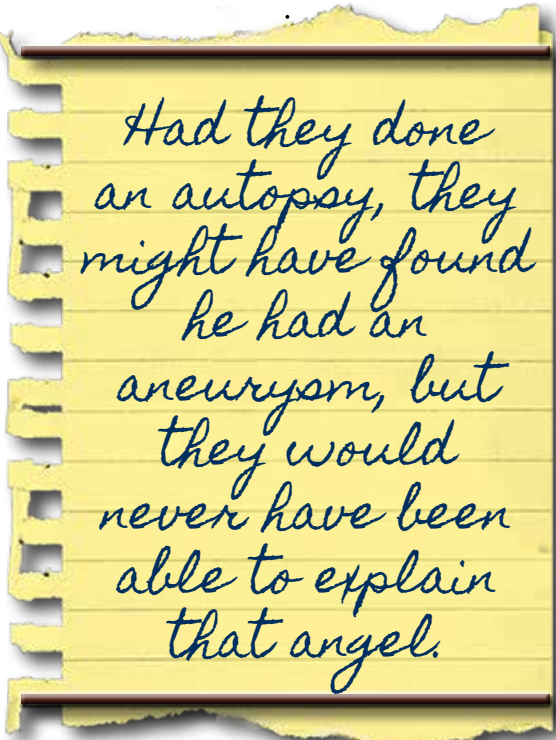
Once in Tyler, a neighbor propositioned my grandma. Highly offended and spitting mad, she told Crawford he ought to kill him or at least beat him up. She was so mad that Crawford began to feel sorry for the man. "Mellie," he said. "You oughta be flattered. He chose you over all the women up and down the road." I imagine he smiled when he said that, and I imagine it just made her madder.

There's a good, Sunday-best photo of my grandparents when they were young and

had only two children, my father Glenn, three years old, and my Aunt Frances, a babe in arms. It looks like a studio portrait. In those days an itinerant photographer would advertise in advance then spend a whole day shooting people from all around, in someone's parlor. Eudora Welty wrote a story titled "Kin" that took place right in the middle of such an event. Maybe this picture came from a day like that. In the photo my grandfather has dark wavy hair and a dark moustache and is dead serious. All four of them are dead serious. My grandmother's face is full and pretty. She wears her brown hair, thick and wavy, piled on top, and a big black bow on her white blouse.

Crawford Walters often reached out to the underdog. He once took in a young man in need, letting him stay in the house and work on the farm. Whenever he wanted to go to town, my grandfather would loan him his horse, as well as his own overcoat. Then Grandma, who sold her eggs in town, began to notice her chickens were not laying as they should. She knew her chickens, and she became suspicious. One day she saw the suspect getting off on the horse, wearing the overcoat, with bulging pockets. She called out to detain him, grabbed the reins out of his hands and began beating furiously on one of those pockets. Her missing eggs began to break and to run out, but there would be no more chances for any more to be lost.

Crawford Walters was on the school board the time the principal needed an ally. My daddy told me about it in a letter in which he wished me to know my grandfather better.



*Had they done an autopsy, they might have found he had an aneurysm, but they would never have been able to explain that angel.*

The principal, a small, weak-looking man, faced a big problem. Buck was an oversized bully who was fifteen and could pass for twenty. He liked to physically harass girls. The girls were afraid to even go out in the schoolyard for fear of him, but he feared no one. Something had to be done. A board meeting was called.

The evening before the meeting, the principal came to my grandparents' house to tell Crawford what happened that day and to make sure he was in his corner. During study period, Buck was leaning around his desk, feeling of the girl in front of him. She was

crying quietly. The principal walked softly to the rear, and from behind grabbed Buck by the throat and squeezed with all his might.

"Buck flopped around so violently," my father wrote, "he almost tore the desk loose from the floor, but the little man held on. Soon the bully's face began to turn dark, and he became still. In a moment he quit breathing."

The principal told how he had dragged him off the desk, laid him on the floor and gave him artificial respiration. When he was breathing again, the principal helped him up and to the door and ordered him to go home and not come back. My grandfather told the principal he did not think they would have any trouble at the board meeting. He did not mention it, but he had already heard the story from my Uncle Russell, who was there and

· saw it all. Buck never came back to school, · and the little principal stayed several more · years. There were no headlines or lawsuits, · but that was the way it was back then.

· Susan Massey, seventy-two, one of the · strong ones, died in July of 1918. Those who · knew her knew her to be a woman of faith,

and a woman who lived her faith, and I wish I could have known her. J.W. was left alone in the old house on a high hill. There were two high hills, and a man who was said to be his best friend lived on the next one. His friend had a little trouble waking up with the chickens. He apparently had none, and he refused to buy an

alarm clock. He had a better idea. He taught J.W. to yodel. He asked him to go outside and yodel over the way early every morning. When he heard it, he would yodel back to announce he was up.

His friend was a black man. This was East Texas in the early twentieth century, where racism ran deep and the KKK ran loose. It's only speculation, but I think my great grandfather must have vowed early on to take the opposite path his father, a slave owner and a cruel one, had taken. "And a cruel one" is an unnecessary phrase, because slavery itself is cruel, but people flounder around and say things like that to differentiate between types of evil. There is an evil that comes in purring with a soft tread and in expensive clothes, so that some begin to whitewash it, and there is



an evil that rushes in with a roar, unwashed and unclothed in all its horror, so that even those defenders of the first are quick to condemn the second. They are both evil, and they are both cruel.

In his later years, J.W. Massey was a slim man with a white beard and round wire rimmed eyeglasses over dark eyes that look out at you calm and unafraid. A kind face. Known to be a man who, like his wife, was rooted in faith. Loved his grandchildren. Walked with a walking stick.

On New Year's Day of 1927, having eaten of Grandma's chicken and dumplings, black eyed peas, greens and hot water bread—that's not documented but is highly likely—he sat a while then set off for home. Crawford jumped up and offered to drive him, but he said no, he'd just walk. It wasn't too long before a neighbor came running to say there was "a man down on the trail." J. W. Massey had gone home. He had apparently leaned hard on that walking stick, and it was still stuck in the ground.

In the back of an old photo album that belonged to my Daddy's cousin Jake are the handwritten last requests of John William Massey, who died at the age of seventy-seven. Here's part:

"Put this on my slab.

*'Good by, children;*

*Meet us on that beautiful shore.'*

Brother Dunn make a talk at my grave.

Sing: 'O think of the home over there.'"

After his death, my grandparents moved into the house on the hill. There is a black and white picture of them in their Sunday

clothes beside their car, which looks like maybe a 1939 Ford Coupe. Crawford is holding a cigarette. Grandma wears a long dotted Swiss dress, high black shoes, and clutches her Bible. White hair. She went white early.

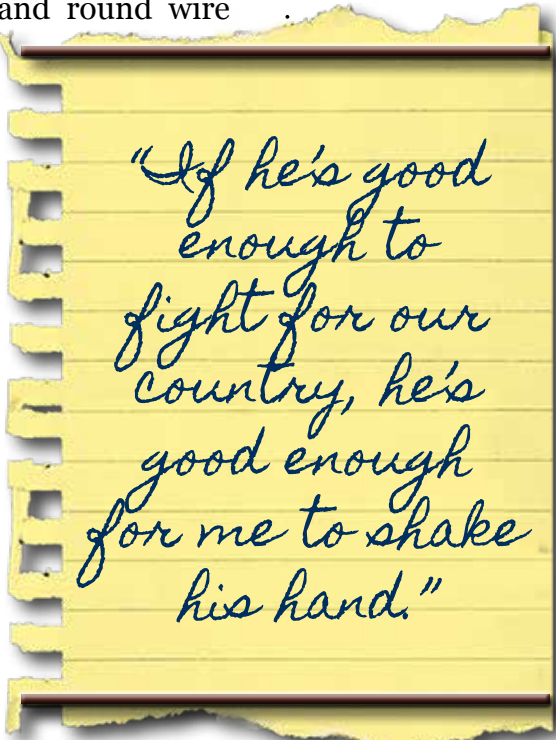
Grandma was known to have a way with horses, back before we ever heard of any horse whisperers. And I doubt she whispered to them; that wouldn't have been her way. Daddy told of a time when he was grown and she was no longer young. He was trying to break a particularly difficult one, and she was sitting on a fence watching. Finally she could stand it no longer (she never mastered patience the way she did horses). She yelled, "Give me that horse!" He did, and she proceeded to have him under control

before long and rode off.

"In one word I have always thought of Grandma as *fearless*," Connie said.

Like the old photographs, they all lived in a black and white world, a severely segregated world, when black soldiers returning at the end of World War I had to ride in the back of the train. Daddy told of a time he was in the field with his father, and a young neighbor, a black man, was walking the fence row, going home after the war. Crawford leaned over the fence and shook his hand. Later, my Daddy asked about that. Never in his life had he seen a black man and a white man shake hands. Crawford said, "If he's good enough to fight for our country, he's good enough for me to shake his hand."

Crawford Walters loved his mules, and even after he had a tractor, preferred to plow with them. On a hot day in June 1945, he got down



"If he's good enough to fight for our country, he's good enough for me to shake his hand."

to open a gate, and the mules spooked at something. They ran forward, knocking him down, a pole broke, and the jagged end punctured his chest. At the hospital, there was no pain medicine. It was all at the war front, and there were few antibiotics at the time. My Aunt Jean, his youngest, sat beside his bed. She told how the nurses offered him whiskey for the pain, as they had nothing else to give him. He refused it.

“I don’t want to go into eternity drunk,” he said. That may not have been his last words, but nearly so, and as last words go, I can’t think of any finer. He died of an infected carbuncle of the lung. Sixty-four years old.

It was in the years after Crawford’s passing that the house on the hill came to be known simply as Grandma’s house. This verse of my brother’s poem says it all:

*“This was Grandma’s spot of earth;  
She saw its beauty, knew its worth:  
A place where man and nature found  
A way to live on common ground.  
Old times were not so far away,  
And lips long dead still had their say...  
For Grandma’s life was a bridge of years,  
Back to the world of the pioneers.”*

Not long before I was born, Grandma sold that old house because of encroaching development. Her spot of earth was soon to be a city, and every part of her very being belonged in the country. That house was where she lived after moving to Tyler as a curly headed girl of six, where she grew up, and where she lived again after her parents’ death. Also, where she raised her three younger ones the better part of their childhoods.

All my life I have heard them speak of Grandma’s old house, emphasis on *old*. It was where the roots were. It was the setting for the stories, and I always felt something akin to



jealousy. For me, it would always be in the time before memory. They tell me it was just an old white farmhouse built on blocks, with six wide steps up to the front porch. Inside were large wallpapered rooms. There was a low rock wall out front, and a black iron water pump under a big oak tree.

We have a picture. In front is a family group that includes a young Mellie with a dog.

Much has been written about the lasting power a place can have over the people who live long there. And if the house is a symbol of the self, as some say, then all the weight attached to this particular one is fully understandable. Selling it had to be hard on a much deeper level than anyone watching might have thought at the time. Everywhere my Grandma turned was a memory of some kind. Inside, in every room. Outside in every direction. In every place her eye rested. I know, because it was that way when we sold the place where I grew up. And in her case, the memories had a lot more time to take root and grow all over everything like vines.

When Grandma sold the old house, she sold it all but for one bedroom. My Aunt Anne, by this time a young widow living back home,

decided to take her whole bedroom with her. It was an addition to the original structure. With an efficiency bath and kitchen, it was converted into a little house out back of her mother's new one.

It was the color of an early green tomato, this new house Grandma built, and it was smaller than the old one on the hill. On a dirt road that later became Loop 323, it was near the creek on my parents' property. A cow trail ran between their house and hers, making easy access for grandchildren. I was too young for all that and only remember the visits back after we moved away.

There in the summer at the end of the day, Grandma would wash our dirty bare feet in a wash tub on the porch. But first she checked us all over for ticks. Waiting in line was always a dog, black and white, long haired, named Shep. When Shep grew old and died, she named the next dog Shep. I'm not sure just how many Sheps there were. She liked dogs. In earlier years, she's seen in several pictures with a dog of some sort or other either just in front of her or in her arms. Dogs were useful in the country, and not only as watchdogs. When Grandma went to pick out a chicken to cook, she had Shep trained to go after the exact one she pointed out and bring it to her.

Grandma was and always had been a farmer, a horse woman—and a chicken raiser, neck wringer and cook. She was known to wake up the household with the noise she made cooking a big breakfast. She banged pots and pans and dropped things, just like I

do, but she cooked a lot better. In early afternoon, she would get a pillow and lay down on the bare wooden floor to take a nap. And with indoor plumbing in the new house, she was slow to adapt. She still kept a pee can, otherwise known as a chamber pot, beside her bed for the night.

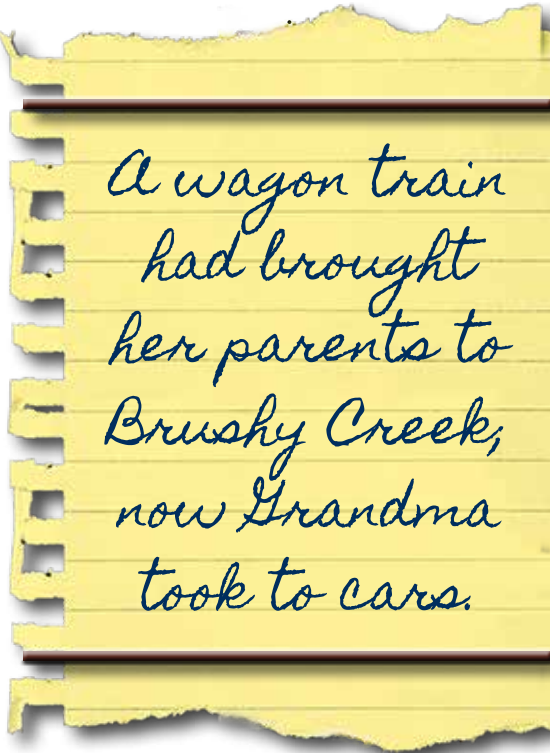
She poured a little coffee from her cup into her saucer and drank it from the saucer, and I could never figure out why. I was told she did that until the coffee in the cup cooled down enough to drink. She wore sunbonnets, and she put flour on her face instead of powder, but she did not hold back from new things if she took a liking to them.

A wagon train had brought her parents to Brushy Creek; now Grandma took to cars.

She always liked to be going. In her later years, she liked driving her black Plymouth around the country roads of Smith County, Texas and into Tyler. In between our school age brother and myself, my sister was the one who got to go with Grandma, whenever she wanted to go. They would stop at watermelon stands, and pick blackberries or wild plums that grew along the road. They would visit kin and connections, as she called them.

They visited one of Grandma's sisters, Emma. Aunt Nim, they called her. Aunt Nim lost both her daughter and her son to tragic deaths before they ever reached their teens. Later, she had another baby and named him Franklin. As a result of her grief, she spoiled this one rotten, according to my father. And as a result of that, there was a lot that might be told.

What Daddy did tell was that his younger





brother, Russell ran around with that cousin. And on nights when they were running from the law, Franklin turned off the lights and speeded up and took to the back roads. He could see in the dark, Daddy said. He said they always got away. Russell turned out well; maybe Franklin did, too.

Grandma never lost any babies that I know of, as her mother did. But she outlived her own daughter, Anne by several years. She said then that Anne's death was the hardest on her, and she had already lost her husband, parents and siblings. That's how it always is.

She, Mellie Massey Walters, was a woman of faith. As with Crawford and as with her parents before her, it was a strong, no nonsense faith born of a hard working life. She believed in a God who controlled the weather that made or broke the crops that fed her family. The God the wind and the sea obeyed. With people like that, even if all was demolished and life looked grim, their faith just dug in deeper and grew thicker, more solid. Not that they were perfect. They were faulty people, my family. You could pick faults on them like ticks on Shep. Sometimes faulty people have the most tenacious faith of all, because they know just how much they depend on grace.

When she was way up in her eighties, on a visit to our ranch in Oklahoma, Grandma said she wanted to ride a horse again just one more time. When she said that, she was sitting in the platform rocker in the dining room, next to the gas heater. Most old ladies sitting cozy in a rocking chair aren't so inclined, but she wasn't just any old lady.

She was my Grandma, the horse woman.

I estimate it had been twenty years or more since she last rode up there on that red East Texas hill, and it was most likely on my Aunt Jean's horse, Prince. We have a black and white picture of her mounted on Prince, this time astride, wearing overalls. That day in

Oklahoma she was wearing a dress as usual, and I don't remember her ever changing, but she must have.

When she said she wanted to ride a horse again, I went out and saddled one up for her. She got on and rode at a walk for just a little while. She rode around and around in a big circle. At this point, I might say I imagined her remembering horses she rode as far back as Brushy Creek, but I

would be lying. I was just a teenager and not that interested in family history.

I did always think of that as a landmark day. It was a Moses on the mountain sort of thing, knowing she was nearing the end. An unspoken commission to me, her only accomplice that day, to carry on. She lived on to be ninety-four, but that was her last ride. Wish we had a picture.



**Charlton Walters Hillis** has a fine arts degree, but her first love is creative writing, primarily the short story.

*Books consulted:*

*The Free State of Jones, Victoria E. Bynum, 2001*  
*Our Massey Ancestry, Ellen Crespo*

Sometimes faulty people have the most tenacious faith of all, because they know just how much they depend on grace.

# The Family Pontiac

By Marshall Lancaster

A

seasoned veteran of the world now at age 53, I often think of those things which have exercised some influence on my own coming of age—the things I would be hard-pressed to forget.

My thoughts often turn to those things or those people that did exist but are now no longer at the small crossroads where I was born. There would be too many great relatives to mention, parents included, all of whom came and went and made a lasting impression. Today, though, I pledge my allegiance to Pontiac—no matter the model or the year. I grew up in the tiniest North Carolina town imaginable, a mere rural crossroads with two competing country stores, a defunct country store, and an elementary school, where I first discovered there were many Pontiacs roaming the earth. It all started when I asked my father about the snazzy white car featured in my parents' honeymoon pictures. Someone had written "Gone to Florida to get a little sun" all over the fenders and hood.

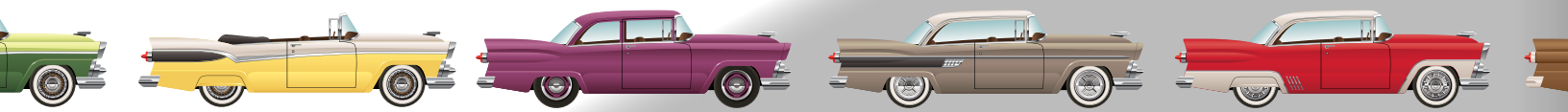
When I asked Dad about that picture in the photo album, he grinned from ear to ear and said, "Yep. She had a 389 in her, a V-8. A two-door sports job. A Catalina. Now that was a car."

Not knowing a thing about these features, I responded, "A two-door? Who is Catalina?"

I looked with longing at the picture of the white car with its slick and glossy black vinyl top. Yes, I would drive that one day, assuming we still had it. Sadly, it was long gone before I turned five years old.



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We had upgraded to a goldish tan four-door Pontiac Catalina with an AM radio. My memories of this car are fleeting, but in some ways they are made more vivid by the radio. I remember singing over and over to Frankie Valli's "My Eyes Adored You" and Elton John's "Island Girl" while waiting for the doors of the schoolhouse to open and before taking the steps up to the classroom. It was Roberta Flack who blissfully remembered the first time she saw someone's face.

Every morning of winter, my mom and I would come out early to start the car and warm it up so that she could take me to school. The AM radio was always an added treat. It took the bitter edge off of a car that refused to start on demand.

When the car finally started, I remember Mom gassing up the engine.

Could you blow up an engine? I only lived a half-mile from the school. On many cold mornings it did not appear that I would be making it to school at all. I have many memories of what she used to say:

"This jalopy is flooded. Do you smell the gas?"

"Come on, Tin Lizzy. Your daddy bought a piece of junk."

"It's too darn cold for it to start. That's the problem."

"I wished your daddy hadn't bought a Pontiac. We could be here all day, freezing our buns off."

I have distinct memories of a Burton

Cummings' song, "Stand Tall," playing on that radio while waiting for the car to start. It seemed to be the message to Mom not to give up on the car. Ironically, however, I don't remember missing a single day due to the car's not starting. After much tapping on the accelerator and a few loud "High Ho Silver"s, the car miraculously started, and I arrived rarely, if ever, late. I thank Pontiac

for those days of transport even if our fate seemed questionable on numerous mornings. In the end, the Pontiac would get us there and bring us back. We always made it to school no worse for the wear. I am, at 53, trying not to remember Mom's routine of tapping the accelerator as if she were drilling for oil. But it worked. Pontiac was about to win me over.

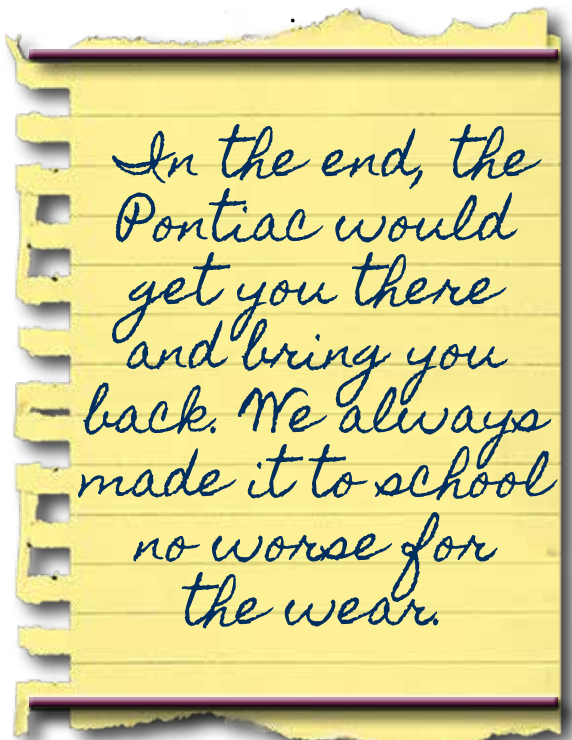
Somewhere along the way, though, I am quite

sure that my mother pleaded her case to Dad for a new vehicle, probably in 1978. I figured another Pontiac was in our future.

The request might have gone something like this:

"How do you expect me to drive into town, shop for groceries, and get back here in time to cook your supper in this jalopy, which takes all morning to start? I never know when it will fail to start. Is this what you want?"

She had had just about enough of the Pontiac's whimsical mornings and the extra demands on our schedule. The "new car" that Dad bought, a used one, was a dark brown four-door Caprice Classic by Chevrolet. This



In the end, the Pontiac would get you there and bring you back. We always made it to school no worse for the wear.

car ran well, but it became the subject of some weird events in our lives. Trusting the car after several months of good performance, we had set off for town one day to buy groceries. When we reached the crossroads, which featured the three country stores (one defunct) and my elementary school, my mother noticed my grandmother (Granny) picking peas in a field. Boy, was it hot. This field had a precipitous dip in it as you traveled north, a decline into a woods and pond below. In her usual polite manner, Mom pulled the car up to Granny, shifted into what seemed to be park, and started asking Granny questions. Granny looked up from her bushel basket.

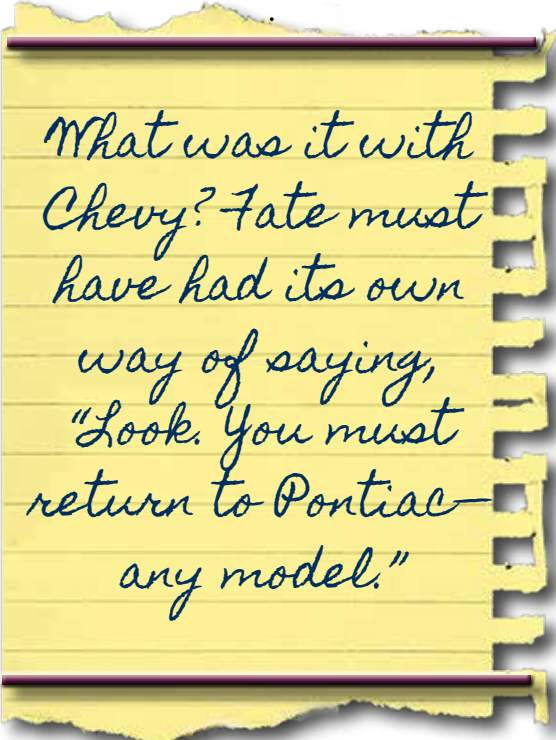
Mom asked, "Can we bring you anything from town? The chickens are on sale at Winn-Dixie."

It was common for Mom to bring Granny on any trip to town, especially to buy groceries on Thursdays. This was not a Thursday. The country stores sold only a few of the things she needed when she was in a pinch (e.g., a loaf of bread or a small carton of milk).

My mother got out of the car to better understand my grandmother's response. When she did, the car, with me in the backseat and my brother standing beside his car seat, rolled forward, gaining momentum. Absent-mindedly singing "Chuck E.'s in Love," I almost went into cardiac arrest, not so much for myself as for my little brother, who would get the worse end of this imminent crash

at the bottom of the hill. Not to be doubted with her two sons' lives at stake, Mom mustered a speed at which I would never again see her travel. She chased the car down, swung open her door, sat down, and quickly applied the brakes, in the calmest manner imaginable. The catastrophe was averted in a matter of seconds.

My brother and I were still a bit shaken up, naturally. Mom clearly was the lady for that job—our Wonder Woman. We continued to town almost like nothing ever happened—almost. What was it with Chevy? Fate must have had its own way of saying, "Look. You must return to Pontiac—any model." Chevy is, well, not your thing. This



*What was it with Chevy? Fate must have had its own way of saying, "Look. You must return to Pontiac—any model."*

trend would continue.

By the time fall of '79 had rolled around, Mother was driving this same Chevy on a family outing to the neighborhood seafood restaurant some 12 miles away, Taylors' Fish House. A quarter-mile from our near-crash and not many days later, a deer ran out in front of us and mom hit it. It was stunned but somehow managed to retreat to the neighboring woods. The damage to the car was minor, but the Caprice did spend a day at the body shop. Exactly one week later, on a Saturday, not one-hundred feet from the previous accident, Mom hit a second deer, this time totaling the Chevy. Believe it or not, those were the only two deer I saw in my youth, even though I spent it in rural Aurelian Springs, N.C., deer capital of the world.

This time, we did not have much choice as to what vehicle would replace the Chevy. It would have to be a Pontiac.

My father was adamant that this was going to be a Pontiac, and it was: a light blue four-door Bonneville with fender skirts. This car started whenever you wanted it to do so and boasted an AM-FM radio with an 8-track player. This car would prove to be the best family vehicle we owned as evidenced by the five years that we owned and serviced it. It plodded along with very few problems and my father grew more and more proud of the decision he had made: Pontiac was our car. Gone was that lingering feeling that we were risking our lives in a car. We had found safety and dependability.

I was always leaning over the bench seats and attempting to operate the radio from afar. My parents thought I was a little bit obsessive. I can hear my dad say, "Leave the radio alone. It's where I want it." We embraced the first half of the 1980's throwing caution to the wind, sold on Pontiac, even Mom. Much to my surprise, on a random Saturday in the summer of 1982, my father, mother, and I were driving around Roanoke Rapids, N.C., ten minutes from home. We were really just getting me some driving experience with my newly-earned learner's permit. I remember his words.

"Turn in right here and pull into a spot. You see the Pontiac? It's cherry red!" he said with excitement.

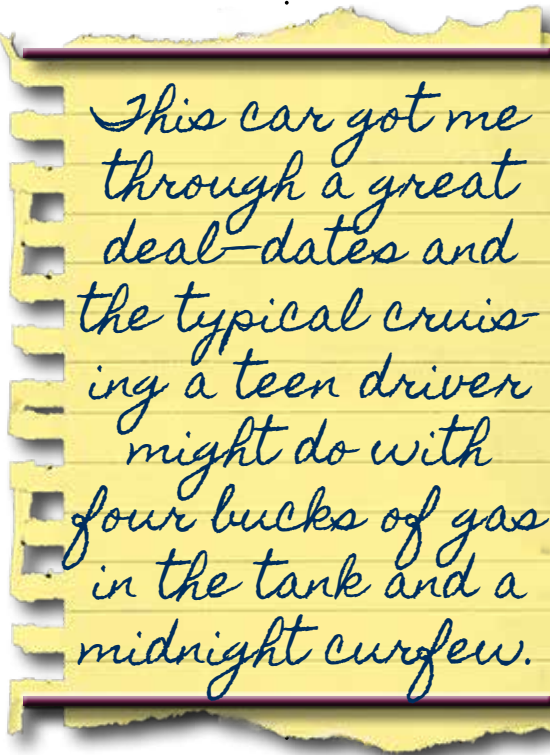
There it was: a red two-door Pontiac Le Mans with a missing black vinyl top which took nothing away from its beauty. Was it mine? He said that the price was right, and we now owned it, this red Pontiac of regal stature. I loved the idea of having a car one year before I was to get my license. I got the greatest thrill from driving the car in the maze of

trees in our front yard. Not a week later, my cousin said he would come by and install an AM-FM radio and cassette player which he wasn't using. This car was about to develop some character—a Sanyo system with speakers in the back!

I drove this beloved Pontiac, a Le Mans with the prowess of the celebrated GTO, for all of the summer of 1983. It was nearly maintenance-free and we only had it in

the shop for a day or two to have the heads shaved (whatever that meant). I understood the points and plugs treatment. I loved everything about this car—the color, the look, and the condition. Soon, I had a tannish suitcase of cassette tapes (Men at Work, The Fixx, and David Bowie) and a naughahyde animal which served as car mascot. I am not sure what animal was represented as it looked like its own species. This car got me through a great deal—dates and the typical cruising a teen driver might do with four bucks in the tank and a midnight curfew.

Sadly, in what can only be described as a ridiculous move, when December had rolled around, I cheated on this Le Mans with a red



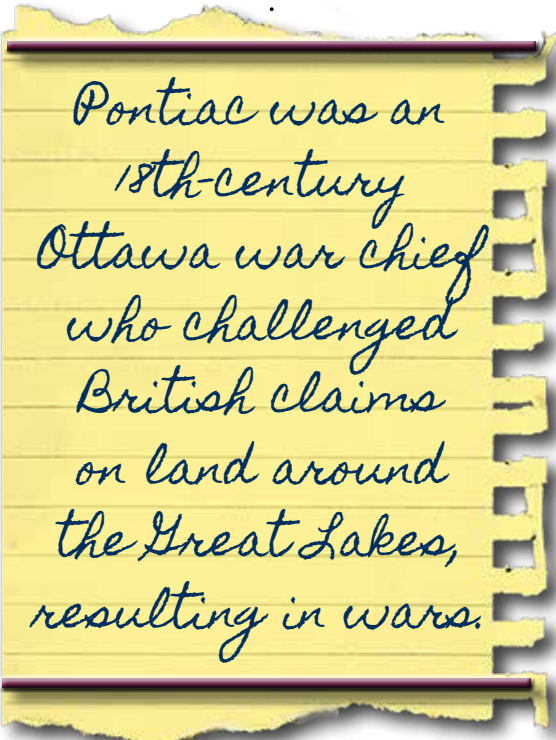
*This car got me through a great deal—dates and the typical cruising a teen driver might do with four bucks of gas in the tank and a midnight curfew.*

Camaro Rally Sport, a 1976, which caught my eye while driving home one night. A man who had expressed an interest in my Le Mans eventually bought it, and there ended my family's obsession with Pontiac. It had been abrupt. I parted ways with a car that had served me so well in so many important ways. I had driven it to school for half the year, giving several people rides to school, many of them relatives. I had added a Sparkomatic radio with an auto reverse cassette player and equalizer. The dullness of the cherry red paint job had not deterred my love in the first few months as I feverishly washed the car and applied wax at the request of my Uncle Jimmie. I imagined no severing of ties, but Dad entertained my foolish whim to move on. I wish now he had challenged my capricious and callow impulsiveness.

I was a fool to let this car go. It has been 37 years now since I parted with the Le Mans. Nostalgia tempting me at every turn, I recently checked the internet prices for this car only to discover that one could pay as much as \$30,000 for this car in good condition. Refurbished, it brings even more. I have chosen to buy compacts these days to save on gas and get updated features, but a part of me wonders what would have happened had I kept the Pontiac. Have you ever turned your back on reliability? I surely have. When I have those memories of Pontiacs roaming the earth, back when the

world was flat, I think about how we were all grounded in Pontiac as a family. If I ever had sentimental attachment to anything, then it was this car and this brand. At the time I was not smart enough to realize it. I consider the red Pontiac Le Mans the one that got away.

The paintjob was a faded red, but I must've washed it every Friday night anyway. That is pride I guess. Out of reverence, I decided to gain a bit more knowledge about Pontiac. I knew about the city in Michigan where the car was made (outside of Detroit). Pontiac was an 18th-century Ottawa war chief who challenged British claims on land around the Great Lakes, resulting in wars. In our one-horse town,



Pontiac was an 18th-century Ottawa war chief who challenged British claims on land around the Great Lakes, resulting in wars.

the name Pontiac was revered, especially in the family, and many cousins in recent years bought GTO's. At 53 years old, as I look at photos recently sent by my cousin, I am able to appreciate how Pontiac has been synonymous with trust and dependability. What if I had kept the car? In the modern day many think of Acura or Mercedes-Benz as the ideal car; my thoughts turn to Pontiac. What could be finer?



**Marshall Lancaster** is currently English Department Chairman at St. Vincent Pallotti High School in Laurel, Maryland.





# The Real ‘Real McCoy’

By Ron Burch

T

here are quite a few theories about the origins of “The Real McCoy.” Even today, we frequently hear the question: “Is this the real McCoy?” Over time, the phrase, “*the real McCoy*” has become a popular reference for anything thought to have value.

Most people assume that the *real McCoy* has something to do with the famous Hatfield-McCoy family feud that enlivened the West Virginia-Kentucky border in the 1880s, but there’s no solid evidence of such a connection.

Another popular theory traces the real McCoy to the prizefighter Norman Selby, who boxed under the name *Kid McCoy*. McCoy was bedeviled by imitators and so, took great pains to assure audiences at his bouts that he was indeed *The Real McCoy*. But while Kid McCoy certainly existed, there is no evidence connecting him and the phrase, the real McCoy.

Legend also surrounds the African-American inventor, Elijah McCoy. In 1871, he invented a device that lubricated the critical moving parts of a machine while it was still in operation. Many look-alike systems followed, but buyers insisted that their new machines have the McCoy lubrication system. They would settle for nothing less than what they called the real McCoy.

Yet another theory asserts that “*McCoy*” was originally “*Macao*,” and that the real McCoy meant pure heroin imported from that Chinese island. Again, there is a lack of evidence to support this theory.

Since it fits my story, I’m going to vote for the legend that traces the phrase to a Florida bootlegger named *Bill McCoy*. According to the story, he was once a rumrunner. His rum was so good that people started to call the good stuff *the real McCoy*.

Moonshine whisky is as old as America itself. It dates back to colonial times. Settlers from the old country brought their stills and knowledge of making whisky along with them to the new world. Even the father of our

Over time, the phrase, “the real McCoy” has become a popular reference for anything thought to have value.

country, George Washington, owned a still. It's on display to this day at his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia. Congressional passage of the 18th Amendment in 1918 prohibited the manufacture, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages. Twenty-nine states ratified the amendment the next year, and prohibition became law on January 16, 1920. The demand for bootleg booze was on.

The nation was at war. Most of the men folk—especially the young ones—were off fighting in a foreign land. The president, Woodrow Wilson, was a sick man. As a result, his wife ran the government. She was also head of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. This group had a huge amount of support and power among those that believed alcohol was immoral and destructive to family life. And since the voice from the women folk was louder than the voices from the old men left behind, the bill passed.

However, neither soda pop nor fruit juice could ever quench a man's thirst for a strong drink. Sometimes called White Mule, Skat, Stump Juice, Mountain Dew, Fire Water, Painter's Piss and Rot Gut, moonshine became a sought-after substitute for legal whiskey in a dry nation. In Garrett, Pennsylvania—a town known as Moonshine town USA—people boasted that every third house possessed a still.

More of a problem than the secret manufacture of moonshine was *transporting* it to market. Moonshine was smuggled out

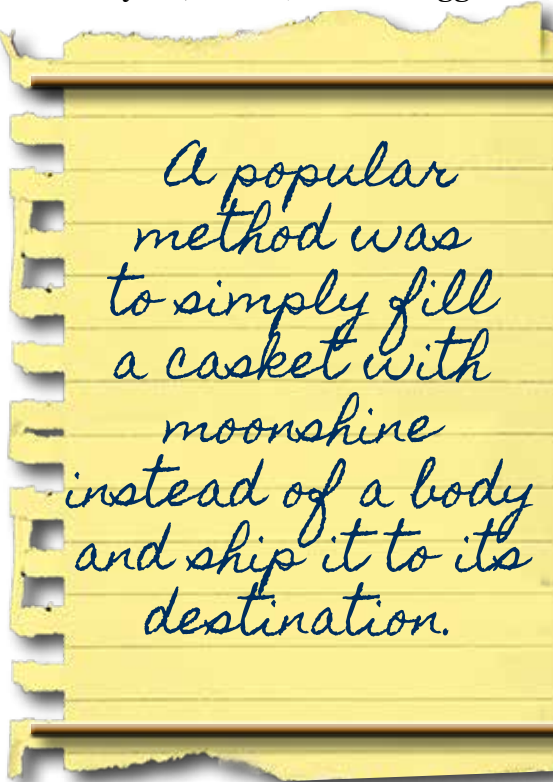
of the towns where it was brewed in many different ways. In those days, no one dared open a casket to see a dead body. So a popular method was to simply fill a casket with moonshine instead of a body and ship it to its destination.

Bootleggers were the men that illegally ran whiskey from hidden stills to hundreds of markets across the South and into the northeast. Soon terms such as bootlegger, bathtub gin and speakeasy became household words. Perhaps the country's first manufacturers' reps, many bootleggers purchased the contraband from the brewer and drove their load down thunder roads at high speeds late at night, often with the police in hot pursuit. The penalty for losing the race was jail, the loss of their illegal inventory and their livelihood.

As bootlegging boomed, the drivers built faster and faster cars to elude capture. Soon they began racing among themselves to see whose car was the fastest. After attending church on Sunday morning, they'd race on Sunday afternoons at dirt tracks in Georgia, Tennessee and Kentucky. Then they'd use the same car to haul moonshine Sunday night!

Inevitably, people came to see the races. Racing the moonshine cars became extremely popular in the back roads of the South. Legend has it that this is where NASCAR was born.

The government's effort to regulate people's behavior soon ran into trouble. While Herbert Hoover called prohibition a noble experiment, enforcement of prohibition



became very difficult. Gangs of hoodlums became more powerful as they trafficked in alcohol and prostitution. By the 1930s, a majority of Americans had tired of the noble experiment and Congress repealed the 18th Amendment.

The glory days of moonshining may be over, but there are still pockets of resistance. I once had a friend who served as chief pilot for the State of Alabama. It was during the administration of Governor James "Big Jim" Folsom. Known as the little man's best friend, Big Jim stood six foot eight inches tall. Despite his size and bravado, he was uncomfortable flying. Even though the airplane had the capability to fly high above the weather, Big Jim always insisted on flying low enough for him to see the ground. The governor also had a penchant for strong drink. On one occasion, while entertaining at his summer place on an Alabama lake, he ran out of booze. He directed my friend, Bob to accompany a state trooper to a nearby cabin, where they could purchase several gallons of moonshine.

They arrived at the cabin and knocked on the door. The door cracked open. When, the occupant spied the state trooper, it slammed shut. Bob blurted out, "We're not here to cause trouble. Big Jim just needs some whiskey for his party." The door cracked open again. A voice from the shadows whispered, "Wait right here."

Bob said he heard another door open, then a screech like a piece of furniture being moved across the floor, followed by the creak-

ing of steps on a stair. In a few moments, the figure in the shadows handed them three one-gallon jugs. A voice said, "Now you tell the governor, Jeb said to have a good time." Bob always believed that if he went back to the cabin and somehow got inside, he could find the hiding place for the moonshine.

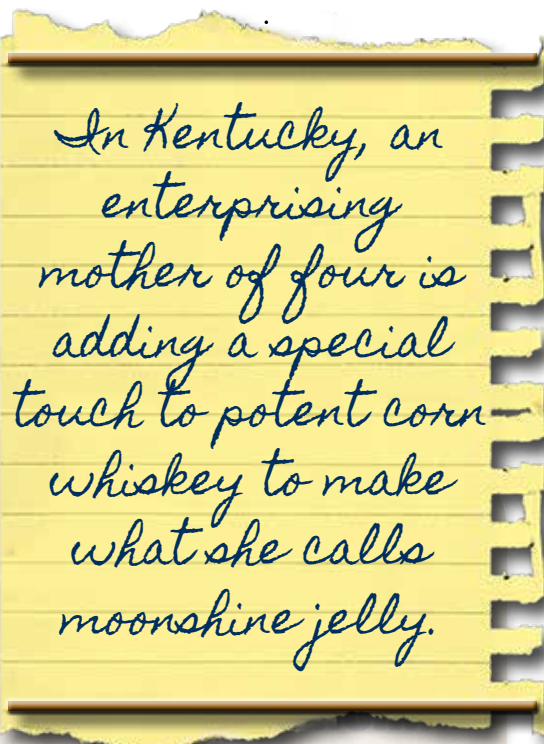
That isn't to say that the government has given up in its pursuit of moonshiners. One chilly November evening a few years ago, my wife and I arrived back at DeKalb-Peachtree airport during the wee hours. We walked into operations to order fuel for the airplane and use the bathroom before driving home.

Several men stood talking in the lobby. They wore flack jackets with an ATF patch on the sleeve. They were also armed to the hilt. My wife asked who they were. They explained that they were an enforcement team from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. She asked what they did. They snickered and asked her if she'd ever

heard the phrase "smoke on the mountains." She hadn't. It seems several times a month, agents from the ATF fly over the mountains in the predawn hours, hoping to spot the stills as the operators vent the steam. So even today, the popularity of moonshine whisky is legendary.

In Kentucky, an enterprising mother of four is adding a special touch to potent corn whiskey to make what she calls moonshine

jelly. The product literally flies off the shelves in gift shops all across Kentucky. "Oh, yes, it's



*In Kentucky, an enterprising mother of four is adding a special touch to potent corn whiskey to make what she calls moonshine jelly.*

popular,” she says, holding up a small jar of the smelly jelly that goes for about \$2 per half pint. “People buy it up about as fast as we make it.”

This entrepreneur is taking advantage of what some have described as a moonshine craze that is sweeping through Appalachia—again. This time, it’s fueled in large part by tourists intrigued by the liquor’s mystique. Working alongside her mother, this mountain lady makes moonshine jelly in a spotless 55-gallon cooker. They add store-bought corn liquor—the legal kind—to a boiling mixture of pineapples, water and sugar.

She says the jelly, when spread on toast in the morning, is an effective waker-upper.

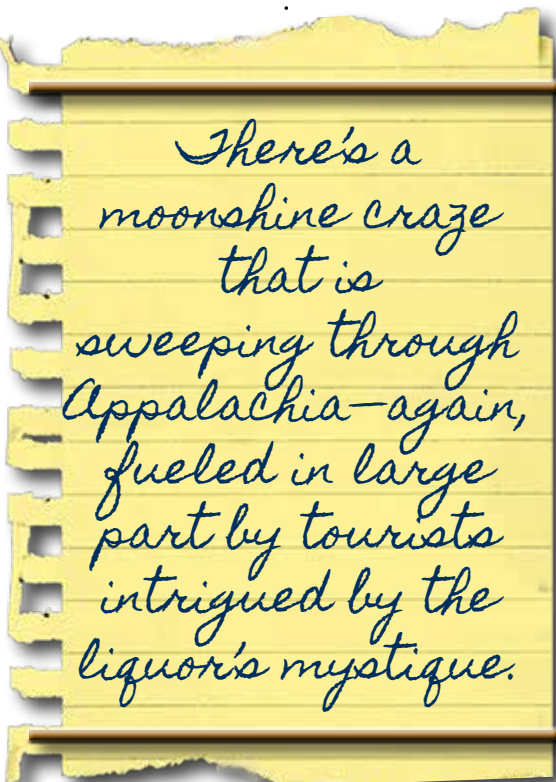
“We don’t wear the bib overalls, the flannel shirts and the boots, like them old-time moonshiners,” she says, “but after we make a batch of this jelly, we sure smell like ‘em. The odor really gets in your clothes.”

An organizer of the Hillbilly Days Festival in Pikeville, Kentucky says tourists ask where they can find moonshine, saying, “They’re looking for the essence of hillbilly culture.” He adds, “There’s nothing that more symbolically captures that essence than moonshine liquor.” A Nashville, Tennessee attorney, who once worked as a state revenue agent, says there’s very little homemade whiskey made now compared with the good old days. “There’s always been a trickle of it; just enough is going on to keep it from becoming a lost art.”

Tourism officials in Appalachia confirm that many urban visitors tend to equate

mountains with moonshine. That has pushed the price of the black-market elixir to \$20-\$30 a quart. Some believe the demand has

grown because communities suffering from job losses in the coal industry have begun to concentrate on heritage tourism and legacy moonshine as an economic base. One modern-day moonshine buff offers this opinion: “History is a circle. With the increases in sin taxes and the restrictions on alcohol, moonshine is making a come back. Who knows, in time we may again experience a whiskey rebellion similar to the one that started



*There's a moonshine craze that is sweeping through Appalachia—again, fueled in large part by tourists intrigued by the liquor's mystique.*

when George Washington placed a seven-cents per gallon tax on it. That spurred a revolution in western Pennsylvania. Citizens there eventually called for secession from the union. It got so bad that George Washington had to send a militia of 13,000 men to subdue the uprising.”

It’s an interesting theory. But in my opinion, I suspect that the popularity of moonshine whisky, now as then, comes from what one old mountaineer said recently during a TV special. When asked why he drank the stuff he said, I just like to get drunker ‘n’ you-know-what.” Real McCoy, indeed.



**Ron Burch** is retired from a career in advertising and marketing and has since authored a number of published essays and magazine articles, in addition to a full-length novel.



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