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Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

A man in a dark suit and red tie is looking down at several slices of watermelon on the ground. The background shows a town square with buildings and awnings.

Saucers in the Valley

A short story about aliens and farmers

The Point of East Tennessee

Getting Bert

Sometimes getting even means getting odd

Diversity and Democracy

A commentary by David Clark

The Culture of the Redneck Riviera

Sugar Cane

Sweet memories from a time long gone

davidshimmer

What's the Frequency, Kenny Bob?

A while back, I received an email from someone asking about *SouthernReader*, specifically, its submission requirements, its overall theme (what exactly does the watermelon represent?) and its frequency.

I told him that a submission needs to be interesting, yet tame enough that the oldest lady in his church would not be embarrassed upon reading it; *SouthernReader*'s theme is "all things southern"...the watermelon is merely an edible icon of that quest for southern-ness; and as for *frequency*...uh, could I get back to you?

That word *frequency* can conjure up a lot of memories. Just ask Dan Rather. I'm sure he still cringes when he hears it. It's hard to believe that it's been nearly 20 years since that strange New York City evening in October of 1986 when Rather was confronted by a crazed man on Park Avenue. The man knocked Rather to the ground and continued to kick him, all the while screaming, "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" (Some reports claim the question was: "Kenneth, what is the frequency?" but, either way, the gist is the same.)

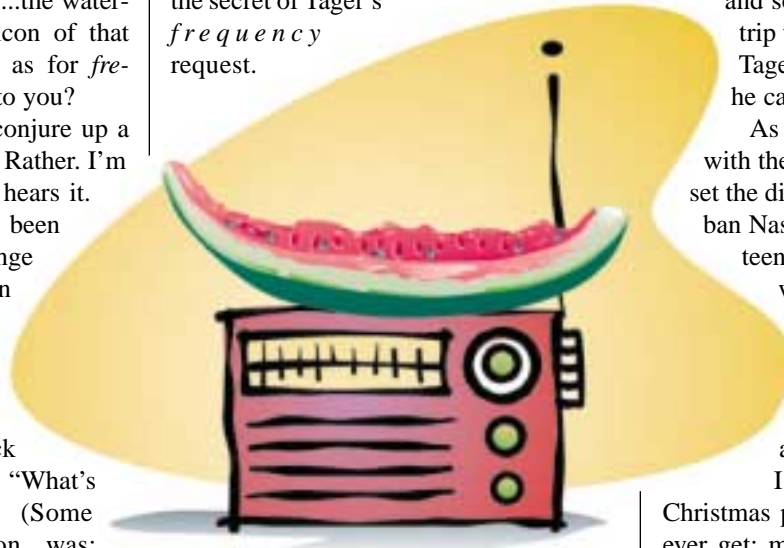
The assailant escaped, leaving Rather bruised and battered and quite unable to explain either the reason for the beating or the cryptic message. The police, CBS and their viewers, and America at large all scratched their collective heads.

Just when everyone had nearly forgotten about the incident, in 1994 R.E.M. reintroduced it with their *Monster* hit, "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" And just to underscore the *real* in surreal, Rather appeared with them on the *David Letterman* show, complete with shades and attitude, and sang the song with Michael Stipe and the band backing him.

This kind of thing could only happen in American pop culture, where a major network news icon gets attacked in a *rather bizarre manner* (no pun intended), and then a few years later, self-parodies him-

self on late night TV.

It wasn't until January of 1997 when Rather finally figured out his assailant's identity, one William Tager, and learned the secret of Tager's *frequency* request.



The word, "frequency" can conjure up a lot of memories. Just ask Dan Rather.

Tager was serving time for murdering an NBC stagehand outside the *Today* show studio, and Rather identified him as his assailant from photos provided to him.

One account claims that Tager believed that he was born in 2265 and was a volunteer to be sent by his government back in time to the past and to a parallel universe, namely New York City, 1986. Before Tager left the future, Kenneth Burrow, the vice president of his planet's uni-government (who looked amazingly like Dan Rather), informed him that he had been implanted with a transmitter in his brain which would be removed once he returned to the future and reported on his mission.

However, (the account goes on to report), he was wrongly jailed for putting coins in expired parking meters (can you say, "Cool Hand Luke"?), and missed his window to return to the future. Then he began getting hostile messages in his head from Vice President Burrows demanding that he return immediately. Tager felt that if he could just identify the precise frequency, he could possibly block out the messages and sort things out before his return trip to the future. Unfortunately for Tager, it will be 25-to-life before he can book that return trip.

As for my own personal wrestling with the precise frequency, we have to set the dial for the early 1960s in suburban Nashville, Tennessee. I was a pre-teen, DJ wanna-be, and my father was the foreman of the cutting die department of a downtown Nashville electrotype company by day and a frustrated electrical engineer and inventor by night.

I had received the greatest Christmas present an early-60s kid could ever get; my Uncle Ray had given me a genuine portable reel-to-reel tape recorder. It was very similar to the one that would always self-destruct each week on *Mission: Impossible* after providing Mr. Phelps the plot and seamy details of that week's show and caper.

With the availability and popularity of the cassette recorder in the early 70s, tape recorders became commonplace, but in the early 60s a home tape recorder was quite a novelty.

That following summer, my father brought home a little device he had created that would trump even my tape recorder; out of carefully-bent sheetmetal, some transistors and vacuum tubes that would shock the snot out of you if you touched them, he had fashioned an honest-to-goodness AM radio transmitter. He called it his "little project"; I called it radio station WKID.

When he arrived home with his creation that late summer afternoon, he asked

for my portable reel-to-reel, and when I retrieved it, he unplugged the recorder's small white microphone and plugged it into the little transmitter.

He then uncoiled the yellow insulated wire and said, "Here's its antenna. Now let's see what it can do." Producing my mom's leather-cased transistor radio, he began simultaneously talking into the mic and twirling the transistor radio's dial until he heard his own voice.

That was the thrill of the thing for him...just to know that his creation worked. After that, it was time for us both to move on to other projects.

I assembled a "KID Playlist" from my 45s (and occasionally, 78s), and every morning I would re-attach the mic to the tape recorder and ride my bike around my neighborhood, interviewing my friends and taking their requests (always from the KID Playlist, naturally). Then, every afternoon I would plug the mic back to the little transmitter and host my radio show, complete with interviews and requests from the neighborhood kids. I also discovered that if I attached the transmitter's yellow insulated antenna to the screen in my bedroom window, the signal would carry quite a bit farther than the short distance down the street that my father had assumed my broadcasting would reach.

As for my dad's next project, he began creating one beautiful, two-tone, green and white 1956 Ford Crown Victoria out of two beat-up '56 Fords. To finish it off, he installed a custom AM radio with a "Wonderbar." Pressing the Wonderbar activated a small electric motor which moved the tuner knob and pointer to the next AM signal detected by the Wonderbar circuit.

One summer evening as my dad was on

his way home from work, he pressed the Wonderbar and discovered, much to his pride and horror, WKID, *the kid on your radio dial*. Visions of FCC G-men kicking down our front door flashed through his mind.

The Crown Vic's engine was still running in the driveway when he burst through my bedroom door, and before I could even protest, he yanked down the yellow antenna in the middle of Johnny Horton's "The Battle of New Orleans."

"Good grief, David Ray," he said, visibly shaken, "do you know what your frequency is?!!"

Interestingly, after all these years, I've found that there is a correlation and similarity between *SouthernReader* and

WKID. I never know who is going to hit it, either by pressing their Wonderbar or surfing Google. So far we've had hits from just about every continent in the known world. My only fear is that one of these days, some uni-government G-man from the year 2265 will kick in my bedroom door and, tearing out the yellow modem line from the back of my Mac, will, in no uncertain terms, demand to know the frequency.

David Skinner

dskinner@SouthernReader.com

Table of Contents

Saucers in the Valley In this short story by David Ray Skinner, a Tennessee farmer reports a UFO sighting to the local sheriff and discovers a bad night can get a lot worsepage 4

Sugar Cane Monica Lawrence reflects on her bittersweet childhood years spent on her grandparents' picturesque Tennessee farmpage 8

Getting Bert M.C. Frier describes how she and an accomplice got even with a difficult character who shared their "junk business" patronagepage 12

Thoughts About Diversity & Democracy Georgia writer/musician David Clark explains the relationship and compliment of diversity and democracy and how they work togetherpage 14

The Point of East Tennessee Maryville, Tennessee attorney Stephen T. Hyder chronicles his obsession with finding the easternmost point of Tennessee (not to be confused with the *tri-state point* of Tennessee)page 18

The Culture of the Redneck Riviera Atlanta writer Ron Burch takes a look at the attractions and distractions of vacations he has experienced down on Florida's famous panhandlepage 23



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Saucers in the Valley

a short story by David Ray Skinner

Maybe it was because he had been deep in thought, pondering what to do about his youngest, Varnella, who had been driving him and his wife crazy moping around the farmhouse and pining for her on-again, off-again, so-called fiancé, Billy Tom.

Maybe it was because he had been distracted by the old pickup's AM radio—the New Orleans radio station's signal, although powerful at night, sometimes had trouble making the giant electronic leap over the mountains into his Tennessee valley, and DJ Charlie Douglas was sounding less like the *Voice of the American Trucker* and more like a staccato ad for white noise.

Or maybe it was because he was not accustomed to being at the far end of his property, what he called the upper forty, this late at night in the middle of July—a few of his cattle had made it through a narrow gap in the wooden fence, and he had tracked them to that pasture at the foot of the mountain.

Whatever the reason, Varnell was snapped out of his complacent trance by

the bright swirling lights and the menacing electronic hum as the two aircraft hung low over the far end of the pasture where it met the mountain woods. He blinked several times, and rubbing his eyes, he jumped out and stood in front of the idling pickup, and was silhouetted in the yellow glare of the dim headlights. They looked like big shiny pot lids, he thought, similar to the one Varnella had used that afternoon to cover the green beans she had snapped before running out of the kitchen in a Billy Tom crying jag. But these were much larger pot lids, with spectacular running lights, and one of them toggled back and forth in what Varnell interpreted as some sort of salute as he stood in the pickup's makeshift spotlight. After hovering low over the pasture for a minute—he could see the missing

cattle frozen stupidly in the glow of their running lights—the two gleaming objects abruptly shot up vertically several hundred feet in tandem and disappeared into the summer night sky.

Varnell stood there mute as the old pickup behind him sputtered, and the headlights dimmed and brightened in rhythm with the engine. The radio jumped into focus with Charlie Douglas's familiar voice cutting through the humid night. "That was *The Blue Sky Boys* coming to you wherever you are from way down here in New Orleans!"

Varnell quickly gathered himself and swung back behind the wheel of the truck and ground it into gear, kicking up dust which turned red behind the cracked taillights and leaving the errant cattle to their private stupors. He tore out of the upper pasture, cut across part of the garden and through the chicken yard, and hit the dirt-and-gravel driveway in high gear, fishtailing as he rounded the bend by the farmhouse. His wife, Ruby Nell, and Varnella were in the swing on the front porch, and

they watched him with open mouths as he flew by the house, on down the driveway and onto the main road at the bottom of the hill. "Well, I..." said Ruby Nell.

Once on the valley road, which ended at the main highway that led into the small town, Varnell began to collect his thoughts and rehearse his story. *It did sound far-fetched*, he thought. The radio started to crackle and hiss again, but he didn't even notice. Before he knew it, he was rolling onto the town square and pulling up in front of the police station. He parked the pickup and hurriedly climbed the steps and threw open the frosted-glass front door. Just inside, in the lobby, Sheriff McAnnally was leaning back in his black wooden office chair with his crossed boots stretched out across his cluttered desk. He held a torn newspaper in one big paw, and scratched at his slick black thatch of hair with the other. On the desk was a small electric fan which whirled noisily, fluttering the "1974 Girls of the Appalachians" calendar on the wall behind him.

The two men had known each other for most of their lives. They had actually been friends once, around the second or third grade, but with the advent of football in McAnnally's world, and 4-H and Future Farmers in Varnell's, the two had been distant since junior high. In high school, their only communication had been when McAnnally greeted Varnell rudely in the hallways with a swift and powerful punch to the arm. This particular night, he glanced up slowly as Varnell came to rest in front of the desk.

"As I live and breathe...Varnell Pugh. What brings you out on a hot summer night in the middle of the week?" he said, looking back down at his paper.

"Uh, hey Sheriff," Varnell began. "Uh, I just saw something real strange."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"One of them AFOS."

"What in the Stamp Hill is a AFO?" said McAnnally quizzically. "Sounds like a Yankee social club."

"Alien Flying Object," Varnell said excitedly, "Martians...I don't know. Up on my land, right there where it meets the park boundary at my upper forty."

McAnnally, suddenly interested, folded his paper and sat up in the wooden chair.

"That so? Tell on, Varnell."

"Some of my cattle got through the fence again," he began, "and I got a late start, but I followed their tracks up to the upper forty. I wudn't payin' too much attention, I guess, but once I got up there and started lookin' around, something shot up around the tree line. Real quick-like." Varnell held out his hand, straight and palm down in a clumsy, almost comical imitation of what he had seen. "Saucers. Two of 'em."

"You weren't on county park land, were you, Varnell?"

"I wudn't. I saw them from my field, but I sure can't vouch for them saucers. I don't know where they been or they goin'."

McAnnally massaged his temples with his big right hand. "You sure about this, Varnell?"

"I know what I saw."

"Alien Flying Object," Varnell said excitedly, "Martians...up on my land, right where it meets the park boundary."

"Okay." The sheriff sighed and pushed back from his desk. "Kenslow! Git in here!"

A skinny deputy stuck his head in the doorway. "Yessir, boss!"

"Kenslow, could you please escort our friend, Varnell here to holding number three."

Varnell looked at Deputy Kenslow and then back at McAnnally and thought, what kind of a fool joke is this? It's late and I got to get home. That dad blamed McAnnally.

"Varnell," said McAnnally, "we needs to get some paperwork fixed, and I, of course, got to get what we call a formal statement from you, so if you would be so kind as to just wait a few minutes in our, uh, formal statement room, we would ever so much appreciate it."

"But..." Varnell said, confused. He looked back over his shoulder as Deputy Kenslow took him by the arm and led him out of the lobby and toward the back of the building.

"Thank you, Varnell," McAnnally called out after him, his thin lips pursed in a forced smile. "Be a good citizen, now."

Varnell felt tired and dazed. He had been up since four that morning. He should be in bed now. He should have been in bed hours ago. He's never going to get to sleep now. He didn't even tell Ruby Nell where he was going. She was going to be real mad. And Varnella was probably still on the porch crying. *That Billy Tom*, he thought, *I'm going to have to kill him just to make our lives halfway normal again*. He was looking at white concrete and thinking of that worthless Billy Tom.

The loud clang of the cell door behind him jarred him back to reality. *Their formal statement room sure looks like a jail cell*, he thought wistfully. *Think. Think. Think, Varnell, you dad blamed fool*. He began mentally retracing his steps and the events of the evening. *Okay, let's recollect. Were you speeding? Come on Varnell, not in that old truck! Did you run the stop sign? Why would I care on a night like*

this? Did you pay that parking ticket? Good grief, that was three years ago. None of his questions made sense. Then Varnell started thinking about what he had said and how his story must have sound-

ed. *That fool McAnnally has got to know that anything is possible out there in the valley. Especially on a summer night when every living thing is hot and miserable, inside and out. He has to be familiar with that part of the county. In fact...*

Varnell stopped mid-thought and sat down on the little bed in the holding cell. Come to think of it, he *had* seen the sheriff's patrol car driving by the house late at night--always on nights when he couldn't sleep. On nights when he *could* sleep, the sheriff and his posse couldn't have roused him with lights on and sirens blaring. Right at that moment, however, there were fuzzy pieces of a big puzzle in Varnell's mind, and they were shifting in and out of focus, connecting and flying apart. He had always been something of a dreamer, but it had been years since he had gotten into trouble over it, and trouble had never meant being locked up the county jail. Then suddenly a picture of a moonshine still came into focus in his brain.

"Dad blame, that's it," he said. Everyone in the county knew about the rumors of McAnnally and moonshine. Some people said he looked the other way

in return for a piece of the action; others said he *was* the action.

And some even said that his moonshine operation was somewhere on the park land owned by the county—land that was off limits to the public...land that butted Varnell's property.

"That dad blamed buzzard proplee thinks I'd lead ever-body, friend and foe, up to that park land," said Varnell out loud, "That's exactly what he thinks. Newspaper reporters, TV news-types, and every crazy AFO freak in the county—the *state* for that matter—all climbing over his dad blamed moonshine still looking for Martians. It'd be pretty durned funny if I wudn't laughing inside one of his cells. Deputy! Yo, deputy!"

"Stop yer hol-lerin'. What you want?" Deputy Kenslow came over to the cell wiping peanut butter off his upper lip.

"I want you to go git the sheriff."

"You want to make a statement?"

"You might say that. Jest go git him."

From the other side of the door, Varnell heard their muffled conversation, but he couldn't make out what was being said. He could tell, however, that someone, probably the sheriff, was loud and upset. Sometime later, McAnnally slowly rounded the corner. "What is it, Varnell?"

"Sheriff, can we talk?" Varnell had calmed down at this point, and had even practiced his speech.

"Why, of course, Varnell. We're all friends here."

"I gotta say, Sheriff, it took me by surprise, you throwin' me in here..."

"You mean in the formal statement room? That was for your own protection, Varnell."

"Look, Sheriff, I got a pretty good idea

why I'm in here, and a prettier good idea about why you're so concerned about that park land up by my upper forty."

The relaxed grin left McAnnally's face and was replaced by a forced smile. "Yo, Deputy, gimme your keys a minute."

Kenslow obliged and then stepped back behind the sheriff.

"Leave us," the sheriff said, turning his massive gaze on the hapless deputy.

sheriff of this here dry county."

"Sheriff, I ain't accusing nobody of nothing. All I'm saying is if you put me in here..."

"In protective custody..."

"...whatever. For whatever reason. If that reason was that you was afraid I was gonna tell folks about what I saw, and those folks started coming up to my pasture and onto the county park land..."



"First of all. I ain't *afraid* of nothing, 'specially nothing little ol' you could stir up. Secondly, that up there is county land. It is off limits to the people. It is a protected area."

Just then the door leading to the cells opened and a large man in green scrubs with "STAPH STAFF" stenciled on the front stepped under the swinging light bulb in

the narrow hall.

"Whoa, now!" said Varnell turning white, "I ain't no STAPH looney!"

The large man turned his back to Varnell and McAnnally and proceeded to fiddle with something in his attaché case. When he

turned, Varnell could barely make out the embroidered type on the back of the man's scrubs: *Southeastern Tennessee Area Psychiatric Hospital*. Varnell opened his mouth to protest, but McAnnally quickly jackhammered his huge fist into Varnell's right arm, spinning him around and driving him to the floor of the cell.

"Just like old times, eh, Varnell?" he said, and then he turned to the huge man in the scrubs. "There. I softened it up for ya."

The small cell was swirling around Varnell's head, and it all went dark for a second, but when he opened his eyes, the man in the scrubs already had the needle in his arm. "Hey! That's not necessary, you!" he said. But the man ignored him and efficiently finished up, wiping Varnell's arm with an alcohol swab.

"Whoa, now!" said Varnell turning white, "I ain't no STAPH looney!"

Once Kenslow quickly shut the door to the hall leading to the holding pens, McAnnally turned back to Varnell and began fidgeting with the key in the lock. "Do proceed, Varnell."

"Okay. Maybe you got some kind of interest in that property. I don't know. It ain't my business."

"What kind of *interest* do you think I have, Varnell?" The sheriff had the cell door open wide and was leaning against the bars on the inside, almost daring Varnell to make a run for it through the open door.

"Well, there's always been talk..."

"Talk? What kind of *talk*, Varnell?"

"Like I said, it ain't none of my business, but, you know, talk of moonshine."

"Varnell! This is a dry county. And I'm

“‘Hey,’ I said,” Varnell complained, rubbing his right arm.

“Go on out there,” McAnnally told the man, his back to Varnell. He thumbed in the direction of the outside lobby. “Wait for us. We’ll be right out.”

The man nodded and collected his attaché, leaving as quickly as he had arrived. Varnell knew he should somehow make his move. Bust McAnnally in the chops and sail on out of there. *They left the doors open! You could grab his gun... nobody would stop you.* But he just sat there staring up at the glaring sheriff.

“Here’s the thing, Varnell,” the sheriff said slowly. “I gotta hand it to you. You were right on the money...I *do* have interests up there. Not too far from your land. In fact, right on the other side of that ridge above your property...just out of sight. And you were right again on the moonshine. We make it and we sell it. But what you didn’t know is who we sell it to. That’s the big secret. Or it *was* the big secret until you saw ‘em.”

“Saw who?” Varnell slurred.

“My biggest clients. And they ain’t Martians...they’s *Venusians*.”

“Ven-youshee whats?”

“Venusians, Varnell. Boys from Venus. They’s a long way from home. But they love the ‘shine. Their ship runs on it! They say it’s better than gasoline or diesel, or better even than their nuclear stuff. Ain’t that a hoot!”

“Hoot!”

“Come on, Varnell, they’re waiting.”

Varnell slowly got to his feet and walked out of the cell with McAnnally behind him. “This sure turned out to be a real interesting night,” he said.

“I hear you,” said McAnnally.

Out in the lobby, Varnell was surprised to see Ruby Nell sitting at the sheriff’s desk filling out some papers. She was as pretty as the day he married her. Varnella was there behind the desk in front of the sheriff’s calendar, waving as they walked through. To her right was Billy Tom, and he was tuning his guitar. Some of his long-haired friends were next to him with their banjos and fiddles. Deputy Kenslow had changed clothes and was playing mandolin on the other side of Billy Tom. They were all dressed alike.

Once Varnell and the sheriff got to the middle of the room where the big man in the scrubs stood waiting, the musicians

started in on a *Blue Sky Boys* tune as if on cue. “They ain’t half bad,” Varnell thought. “Matter of fact, they’re good...real good!”

Behind the musicians, the walls had been freshly painted with a scene of a big oak tree in a grassy field on a beautiful August late afternoon. And to Varnell’s surprise, there was his Aunt Edna under the oak tree carrying a plate of her fried chicken. “Ain’t you been dead ten years, Aunt Edna?” Varnell asked.

“Varnell, you come over here and have a piece of this chicken, and you tell me.”

Varnell plopped down on the blanket in the wet grass, and with his fingers laced behind his head, he gazed up dreamily at the afternoon sky. The warm breeze tickled his cheek and hissed through the branches of the big oak tree, shaking loose a lone Mockingbird, whose outstretched wings were lit up by the sinking sun.

dskinner@SouthernReader.com

To hear the song, “*Saucers in the Valley*,” go to <http://www.SouthernReader/SaucersInTheValley.MP3>



Sugar Cane

A memoir by Monica Lawrence

It was a time and a place unlike any other...a time when innocence prevailed, and a child could feel like a princess. And there was the white, two-story house with a big front porch, supported by white columns, where I would find myself swinging round and round and hearing Mama cautioning my upcoming fall.

I cannot ever remember not going there. My grandparents—I called them *Mama and Dad*—had lived there since I was born. They had purchased the small farm in 1948 for \$14,750—a meager sum by today's standards—which consisted of 192 acres. My mother, however, being the second of ten children had never lived there and consequently never felt the magic that her daughter came to know.

Dad was a farmer. He was tall and thin with an undeniable faith, and one who drew immense love and respect from his children and grandchildren. Dad was loving and gentle, but it was Mama with whom I had long talks...and I followed her every step and loved her with all my heart.

Summer was my favorite time. I could roam over the small farm, seeking out new and forbidden finds or pick berries from the low-lying branches that hung over the pond down by the barn.

I would sometimes take the path along the fence row and pick Queen Anne's Lace, or tempt myself with the luscious looking polk berries and wonder just what would happen if I ate them! I would build a playhouse

out by the smokehouse where the delicious aroma of hanging meat lingered faintly in the air, and where Mama would

set up her table to chop cabbage getting it ready for sauerkraut. It was only a few steps to the vegetable garden where I

remember watching Dad turn the soil, walking behind the two mules, calling "whoa Jake!" Jake seemed to require the most discipline as I don't ever remember hearing the other's name.

A near perfect day would be when my aunt and I, she being only a few years older than myself, would slip a salt shaker out into the garden, sit on the warm earth and get our fill of juicy, ripe tomatoes.

The only stern disciplinary measure I ever got from Dad was one day when I was playing with the cat much too near the table of cabbage. Dad had already warned me about keeping the cat away and when I didn't heed his warning he scolded me (much too harshly, in my eyes), and kept walking. My feelings terribly hurt, I did as I was told and felt bad because Dad had to scold me in the first place.

I can never remember Mama getting upset over anything I ever did. Aunts and uncles would laughingly and lovingly say I was Mama's favorite, and even if it were not so it did wonders for my childhood ego and gave me an underlying strength throughout my growing-up years.

Knowing how loved I was, not only by Mama and Dad, but also by my mother's sisters and brothers, brought a profound sense of security and deep love for all my family.

My mother had left home right after high school. When opportunity first put its knuckles to the door my mother flung it



I could roam over the small farm, seeking out new and forbidden finds or pick berries from the low-lying branches...

open. Wanting to get away from the small rural country life she had grown up in, she chose schooling in cosmetology about 100 miles away.

Shortly after completing her course the war broke out and she moved to Nashville, taking a job at Vultee Aircraft. She was then transferred to Atlanta with Bell Aircraft and worked there until the war ended. She packed her bags, moved back to Nashville, and began her career again in cosmetology.

My mother was beautiful. I always loved flipping through her picture albums and seeing her in gorgeous clothes, posing in front of the homes where she lived on Sweetbrier Avenue and Peachtree Street. She roomed with four other girls, one of whom was the granddaughter of the couple who owned and also lived in the house. I'm sure this was of some comfort to my grandmother, knowing my mother was well-chaperoned, living on what probably seemed to her, another planet. Eventually, Mother did return. While home on vacation she met a tall, dark and handsome man decked out in his Navy uniform. Her life was never the same.

My dad was then stationed in the tropics. They wrote letters and married in 1945. I was born while he was stationed in New London, Connecticut, and after returning to Tennessee and to Mama's, I began my visits and my deep love for my grandparents.

There were so many things to do, so many places to play. I could escape to a whole other world and let the imaginations of a child run rampant over the acres of the farm.

The barn loft was one of my favorite places and also held an attraction to my younger brother, who took a nasty fall one summer afternoon and consequently ended up with a leg full of stitches. Superman, being very popular in the fifties, may have been the underlying cause for his leap into the air.

There probably wasn't a square inch of that farm I didn't explore or prowl. Even the hen house and gathering eggs held some enchantment. Cattle grazing in the fields of red clover was such a peaceful sight and more often than not I would run barefoot, invariably getting stung by a bee

and halting my play for the moment.

The small orchard held more than the luscious fruit which was prepared religiously and meticulously and placed jar after jar, row after row for delightful consumption during the cold winter. It also became a fortress for hide and seek, tree climbing, and could magically become tree houses as my sister and I outfitted ourselves in dress-up clothing and took turns visiting each other in our make-believe houses.

Sometimes a cousin of ours would be there to play, but more often than not, it was just me, my younger sister and brother. I was selfish with my special time spent there and knew when it was only me I could do pretty much as I pleased.

An excitement worth waiting a week for was the arrival of the peddler with his rolling store. He still made his rounds in the rural community bringing staples such

The cutting of the sugar cane was a real treat, and although I wasn't allowed near the cutting, I always managed to beg a stalk or two.

as sugar, flour and coffee.

There wasn't a square inch in the back of his enclosed truck that wasn't covered with some such item. Sometimes fresh eggs were traded for a pound of coffee or some other needed commodity. Wooden crates held RC, Pepsi and Coca Colas. Packages of grape Kool-Aid were nestled among Baby Ruth and Three Musketeers candy bars. A hunk of cheese or a stick of bologna could be sliced on the spot.

If you were in need of a jar of kerosene, that was available too, usually hanging by a small tank on the back of the truck.

A wired coop usually held a live chicken or two ready for sale. I would most always be allowed a choice of a candy bar which made the day complete.

Weekdays were full with chores to be done, with the running of the farm and a helping hand from everyone. Mama always seemed to keep things running smoothly, but even with her enormous load of work, she always had a sweet smile and time for me. She sometimes would sit at the end of the day, take loose her tightly-wound bun, and let me brush

her long, graying hair.

Even when I grew tired I would never tell her for fear of hurting her feelings. Somehow she knew though and would thank me for such a relaxing gesture. Sometimes, being more of a hindrance than a help, I always reaped the sweet rewards of harvest. The cutting of the sugar cane was a real treat and although I wasn't allowed near the cutting I always managed to beg a stalk or two. Breaking open the hard stalk and sucking out the sweet syrup was pure delight. Another treat was the taste of the juicy, sweet ripened peaches that were brought in by the bushels for canning.

Sundays were very special days. Dad would always be dressed early sitting patiently, with his hat nearby and his Bible, always open, in his lap. I knew never to interrupt, as I knew never to misbehave in the little country church they attended. Dad always sat up front, in what was known as the "Amen Corner."

Of course I sat with Mama, she in her best dress and accessories that were strictly for Sunday. They were always homemade, sometimes cut by guess and fashioned only to perfection.

Sunday afternoons would consist of Sunday dinner—usually fried chicken, fresh cream-style corn, sliced tomatoes and a whole table full of side dishes.

I did have some reservations as I watched Dad wring the chicken's neck and its body flopping all over the back yard. I always kept my distance as I wanted no part of the necessary deed nor the plucking.

Aunts, uncles and cousins would always visit on Sunday afternoons, with the big front yard accommodating everyone. The days were long and the summer nights held an enchantment all their own. Sometimes I would lie in the sweet smelling grass, gazing at the stars and listening to the soft voices in conversation around me.

The house took on an entirely different atmosphere when the winter came. Graciously open, the house was bright and inviting during summer, but just the opposite in the long, cold winter months. The family room, added on in later years, was a welcome addition to the house.

The side entrance door was used as entry into the den by way of the small wood room that held kindling and slabs of wood for the wood-burning stove. Much to Mama's dismay it usually held trash and splinters fallen from the wood, and in the wintertime, it became a constant effort to keep the room clean and tidy.

Mama's house was a source of pride to her, from the gleaming wood floors that I used to slide across in my sock feet to the sparkling kitchen windows that didn't seem to be there. So thought the redbird that kept flying into the kitchen window one spring until Mama had all she could take and set a trap for it. She caught her bird.

The kitchen was small and cozy and usually painted blue, with fresh white paint on the wooden cabinets. There was always the smell of coffee and usually a pot made or being made. Uncles who lived nearby and helped on the farm were always in and out and always ready to sit for a moment with a fresh cup of coffee. That was the beginning of my love for good, strong coffee.

The dining room and living room were connected but open and airy by a wide doorway. Bedrooms led off from both rooms, as did the stairway. Openness and warm weather brought an invitation to prowl.

One of my favorite pastimes was pulling out dress-up clothes and *who-knows-what* from boxes in the unused upstairs. I could feel the stifling heat hit me with an invisible force as I reached the top of the stairs. I usually didn't play long there in the deep summer's heat but always went for a while just the same.

Wintertime brought a whole new mean-

ing to the word "warmth" for me. The only heat that was allowed was from a wood-burning stove in the den, so there were only two heated rooms, albeit large

sheer agony, knowing I had to somehow get my body to the warmth of Mama's cozy kitchen. Most often the aroma of bacon frying and coffee perking would lure me out of my cozy nest. Dad had perfected the art of opening the stove door and throwing in the heavy slabs of wood, then banging the hot door shut.

One such special occasion for heating the rest of the house was Christmas. And oh, what Christmases! Mama would work for days polishing and shining the wood floors only to have 10 children and a brood of grandchildren converge on their peaceful existence. For me, Christmas began at Mama's when the little Christmas village was set in place. It was made only with cardboard, but it was glittered and frosted to seem so real. The little village was then set on imitation sheets of snow. This little scene brought hours of pleasure to me.

A giant peppermint stick was a small but necessary gift for Dad's Christmas. They were hammered into chunks and slivers as occasional treats and usually lasted until the next year. A huge cedar tree was always placed in the living room. Gifts for

everyone were placed under the tree from Mama and Dad.

There were gifts for daughters and sons, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law and every grandchild...no one was left out. I wondered sometimes how they managed so many gifts.

The Christmas dinners consisted of every good food imaginable. And every daughter and daughter-in-law proved themselves as the culinary artists they all were. Mother would always make her famous ambrosia, a dish I thought was so elegant and so like



ones, in the entire house.

Dad would not allow a fire to be built in the living room unless there was a special occasion. I never knew why, and I never asked why. It was just Dad's rule, and I

**Sundays were very special days.
Dad would always be dressed early
sitting patiently, with his hat nearby
and his Bible, always open, in his lap.**

never questioned it. Going to sleep under layers of homemade quilts was a warm and cozy feeling. Waking up that way was

my mother, herself. The house was filled with cheer and good conversation, laughter and squeals from the children, and as the day progressed some strict admonitions from the mothers.

Years went by quickly. Ironically, as the distance shortened, via progress and better highways, the less I visited there.

Throughout my teenage years, I only went for brief visits. Then I married and eventually had three children and a full time job.

I remember coming home from the hospital with my newborn twins and Mama and Dad being among my first visitors.

They beamed with pride as they stood over my old baby bed admiring the newborn boy and girl. How ironic that they, too, many years before had looked upon their own set of twins, also a boy and a girl.

There for a few brief moments the sunlit room held an aura it would never hold

again. Propped up in the newly-painted four-poster bed that belonged to my parents, I held my son and smiled at the three generations that were in the room.

They beamed with pride as they stood over my old baby bed admiring the newborn boy and girl.

It was a warm, sunny day in June when the auction hammer put its finality on a house and a home that once was. As I stood watching strangers and family members wander around the precious possessions, I could almost hear the voices of Mama and Dad. "This is the way we want it, the way it has to be."

Most of the personal furnishings and possessions were bought by the daughters and sons. When the house and farm was finally sold to one of my uncles an unspoken happiness and relief was felt by every family member.

An aunt took cuttings from Mama's beautiful rose bush and rooted cuttings for all. My few treasures from that house such as Mama's glass fruit bowl and etched glass plate hold an honored place on my dining room table.

And so, with a storehouse of how things were, the vision of an overflowing bowl of fruit, the taste of a rich peppermint stick, the smell of cedar, I shall now make my own memories...memories for a granddaughter yet to be, one who will watch me, love me and remember me.

monica.lawrence@pfsfhq.com

Monica Lawrence has been writing poetry and short stories since the age of ten and has poems published in several anthologies; she has also written several children's stories. She resides in Suwanee, Georgia.



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Getting Bert

by M.C. Frier

Iknew something was up when Marla came in with a box and an impish look. “I found a way to get even with Bert,” she announced. This was welcome news. Bert’s behavior had antagonized everyone in the junk business. Someone put salt in his coffee one morning, but no one had thought about actual world-class revenge.

“Delicious!” I rejoiced, throwing my arms up in hallelujah. “S’bout time! Whatta ya gonna do?”

“I read somewhere about this prank. It was so-o-o funny, and I thought it would be perfect for Bert.” She put the box down and hooked a hank of silky brown hair behind her ear. “Especially since we have THIS.”

She pulled a fat roll of wide, screaming yellow plastic tape from the box. Bold black letters spelled “Crime Scene—Do Not Cross” along its length. We had acquired this in a box lot at an estate sale

and saved it thinking it might come in handy as strapping tape.

“Gonna tie him up?” The vision of wispy Marla wrangling burly Bert rodeo style was ludicrous. I couldn’t begin to put myself in the picture.

“Even better,” she promised. “Bert’s in Mt. Dora this weekend. We’re going to decorate his house.”

I could see how it might pique the curiosity of the neighbors. Bert would come in late Sunday night from the weekend sale, near exhaustion after packing, loading and the two-hour drive, then find

he couldn’t get in his own house. Naturally he would think he had been robbed. The neighbors would pounce asking for details. How long would it take him to realize it was a prank? Just too good!

Still, I thought she was crazy. I added that I was too old to be involved in hoaxes and pranks. But when I asked if she knew where he lived, she knew I was game.

“He must be in the book.”

“Yes, but I’m going to auction tonight.” I tried to manufacture an excuse but Marla was plainly in charge.

“Just go preview and leave a bid if you have to. This is our chance. I’ll pick you up. My car is quieter.” We closed the shop and I went home to empty the dog.

Fritz is part golden retriever and part sidewalk setter, medium sized, a pale butterscotch color with a silky brush tail. He speaks dog and I speak English, but we

understand each other perfectly. Three little squeaks from the top of his throat plainly said, "Are you going to leave? Can't I go with you? Please, please?"

"I'm sorry." I soothed, "Can't take you tonight. No dogs in Marla's car."

Fritz told me what he thought of that with a haughty snort and went to drown his sorrows in his water bowl before he took to his bed in a pout. His nose rested on the pillow but his eyes followed me for any sign that I might change my mind.

At Prouder's that night, I couldn't keep my mind on business, so I gave it up. The prospect of mischief was putting a spring in my step. Nothing can make a person feel so young as a little childish behavior... better than an avocado facial any day. I could hardly wait for Marla to pick me up.

It was only fifteen minutes away. It was a cinch. We went after nine o'clock, giggling all the way.

Bert's street ran along a drainage canal overgrown with a jumble of Brazilian Pepper trees and scrub oaks tangled with grape vines. It was a modest neighborhood of two bedroom houses with open carports. Conveniently, the street was dark and the houses separated by overgrown hedges. Lights were mostly bare yellow bulbs at front doors or flickering blue TVs seen through windows.

Marla passed the house and turned around at the dead end. She doused her lights and coasted to the shoulder. We were aimed for the main street. Bert's house was dark except for a lone bathroom light. We sat for a moment to rearrange our nerves. The scent of a gardenia in bloom mingled with the odor of decaying vegetation from the drainage canal. The night insects resumed their serenades.

"Are you sure this is it?" My voice was barely audible.

"One way to find out." Marla got out of the car and opened the mailbox.

"Now you're getting federal." I warned her as she pulled out a letter. She showed it to me. It was addressed: Bert Zook.

"Two four letter words." I murmured.

We discovered a chest and dresser under a tarp at the rear of the carport and any doubts we had about being in the right place were dispelled.

"A junker for sure." Marla observed.

I looked toward the bathroom light. "You don't suppose he could be in the bathroom?"

"His car is gone."

"It might be in the shop."

"You think he's in the bathroom?"

"Could be."

"Why don't you go look in the window?"

She didn't seem inclined to join me so I didn't give the suggestion any more thought.

We took the spool of tape and secured the end at the back of the carport, wrapped it around a convenient punk tree, down to the mailbox, across the drive to a hibiscus bush and back to the front door. We used the last bit to add some extra criss-crosses

Marla took a fat piece of sidewalk chalk from her pocket and outlined my figure sprawled on the driveway.

for good measure. I plucked a gardenia from the bush beside the door and was ready to make a getaway from the "crime scene," but Marla had more devilment in mind.

"Lay down here on the driveway." She told me.

"What!?"

"Shhhh! Just lay down here a sec! I've got to do one more thing."

"Marla! What on earth?" I was baffled but followed her instructions.

"OK, now throw out your right arm...Yeah, that's it!"

Marla took a fat piece of sidewalk chalk from her pocket and outlined my figure sprawled on the driveway. She helped me up and we surveyed her handiwork. Marla added the outline of a Saturday Night Special as a final touch.

"Shouldn't it be more Bert's size?" I whispered.

"Just think," she argued, "If its not Bert and they don't know where Bert is, won't that cause more speculation?"

I agreed. "Besides, if they think Bert's a goner they might just say 'good riddance' and go on with their business."

We skedaddled, satisfied that we had pulled off the prank of the century. We were giggling and dreaming up scenarios Bert would have to deal with. Our only regret was that we would not be there to

watch. As always, we would have to rely on gossip.

Nancy saw the flashing blue lights first. I saw them and a chill stab of guilt rose up my back and across my shoulders. I dismissed the possibility that we had committed a minor traffic infraction. My seat belt was fastened. I knew instinctively that he must be after us because of our prank. But what could we be charged with?

We hadn't broken in. We weren't aiding anyone. Could this be considered "making a false report?"

Vandalism?

Trespassing?

Interfering with police business?

I looked at the gardenia in my hand and dropped it to the floor, complimenting myself on having the presence of mind to avoid being observed tossing something out the window.

The officer was returning her driver's license. I could already

feel the handcuffs. I wondered who I would call for bail. I wouldn't. I would be too embarrassed to have anyone know I had done such a stupid thing. I had been so busy fighting the guilt monster and a demanding bladder that I had not heard what the officer said to Marla.

"That was sobering." Marla sighed, pulling onto the road.

"Why did he stop us?"

"License plate light burned out."

We were relieved but the traffic stop had thrown cold water on our spirits, and I really needed a pit stop. All the same we were looking forward to hearing some good gossip.

"Stop at McDonald's."

"Burger King OK?"

"Any place with a clean potty."

M.C. Frier is a native of Clearwater Florida, now living in Suwanee GA. Her project "Secondhand People, Confessions of a Recovering Junker," is a collection of her reminisces and experiences in the junk and antiques business. She may be at your next yard sale.



Thoughts About Diversity & Democracy

by David Clark

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lawyer friend asked me if I had any thoughts about *Diversity* and *Democracy*. I went outside and sat in my garden, and looked over my rows of the healthiest potato crop I've ever had.

In between each potato plant is a stalk of garlic. In between the rows of potatoes are rows of beans and onions. As I walk my potato rows looking for potato beetles, what I see most is the beneficial ladybugs. This beautiful little gardener's helper thrives in a mixed environment.

I sat with my potatoes and pondered what this might mean to a lawyer. The wind was blowing pretty hard out of the northeast. I looked up in the clear blue sky and saw a big red-tailed hawk with his wings outstretched, circling lazily into the currents of cool air. A crow circled about six feet behind the hawk. There was

a difference between the two birds. The hawk's wingspan allowed him to catch the wind and move forward into it. The crow is a large bird, but is only half the size of the hawk. While the hawk rode the wind,

lore held that animals were symbols of ideas. To see a given animal was to see a message from the Great Spirit.

A hawk circling on the wind is a symbol of the big picture. The crow stands for law.

So the ancient wisdom would say that law is forever flapping its wings in an against-the-wind attempt to catch up with the big picture. And the big picture just

floats gracefully on the invisible power above, always a few feet out of reach of the law.

If one takes the time to study the wisdom of Mother Nature, one can see how diversity works. The old-growth forest is a seemingly haphazard collection

of many varieties of plants and critters. Every member of that society has a place and function which benefits the society. Old-growth forests are invariably

A hawk circling on the wind is a symbol of the big picture. The crow stands for law.

the crow had to constantly flap his wings and fight an uphill battle in his desire to chase the hawk from his territory.

Some of the ancient American Indian

healthy--that's why they live long enough to be called old-growth forests.

But man had a better idea. He began clear-cutting old-growth forests and replanting the acres in rows of pine trees. What man's wisdom didn't anticipate was the Pine Beetle. Up until that point, the little critter was relatively unknown. But when it was presented with thousands of acres of meals, the beetles flourished and grew into a tiny monster. And man looked out on his evergreen achievement to find the needles of the mightiest pines in his plot turning brown with death in the course of a season.

Diversity has become a popular topic in the last few years. People wax eloquent about the importance of diversity, but no one is really keen on having diversity happen to them. All of us reach a point where we say: "Why do things have to be this way? Where does diversity come from?"

We talk and talk about "achieving diversity" in society, but we never seem to get around to talking about the diversity within ourselves. How can society be balanced if those making up society are out of kilter with themselves?

Diversity begins inside of us. There are two halves to our brain. There are two halves to our heart. We have a right hand and a left hand, and sometimes they do not act together.

We see it in our families--what by rights should be the most commonly bound society of all is filled with differences brought about by the joining of the invisible differences inside the two parents. And the differences bring about strife and conflict, and one sibling rails against the other in an effort to achieve superiority. Each one believes his way to be the way of truth.

It is helpful to look at the original roots of the words we use so freely.

My lack of education allows me to do away with the educated man's rules of construction. This sets me free to look at words in a way the educated man might say is incorrect. And my way might be a little sideways, but it sometimes leads to a broader understanding.

The Latin roots for the word diverse have an interesting array of meanings.

One definition means "another,

different."

Then there's one that means "spotted; striped; varying; changeable; and versatile."

Another says diversity means "in different directions; opposite; remote; diametrically opposed; hostile; unsettled; individuals; opposite side; opposite view."

The Latin roots of diversity describe difference and contradiction.

So if we say we are members of a diverse population, aren't we saying that we are different and versatile stripes running in different directions that sometimes oppose one another? And aren't we saying the stripes are sometimes remote and far apart, but they meet on the opposite side? And like the braids of a rope or the weavings of fabric, what appears to our close-up viewpoint appears from a distance to be strong and beautiful.

Man looked out on his evergreen achievement to find the needles of the mightiest pines turning brown with death in the course of a season.

Taking the word apart even further, the Latin prefix "di-" means god or deity.

"Vers..." forms words that talk about various colors, about revolving and moving; about short lines of prose; about twisting and turning and rolling and bending; about disturbing and considering; and about living with and being involved and engaged with; about directions forward and backward; about dancing; about clever and smoothtalking, crafty, sly, and deceitful.

"Iter" is a noun describing a journey, passage, method, or road.

This sideways deconstruction gives the different stripes various colors, and has them undulating with life and thought which isn't always pretty and fair. My dirt-road version says the stripes are journeying together in their ramshackle way down a road paved with a divine nature towards a divine destination.

Is it possible to see diversity as something divine, when it causes us so much trouble? Perhaps the reason diversity causes us so much trouble is because we fail to see the divine inside of it.

My English dictionary says the prefix "demo" is from a Greek word meaning

people, with democracy being a government by the people.

But in literal dirt-road Latin, the prefix "demo" means to take away from or subtract. This root forms words meaning to demolish and to divert. But it also turns into demonstrate, which means to point out clearly.

The syllable "crassus" is an adjective meaning dull and stupid.

The word "crater" means a mixing bowl.

The word "cratis" describes a rib of the body or a honeycomb.

So the dirt-road Latin construction of democracy becomes a honeycomb made of our ribs, where the stupid parts of us are pointed out clearly and taken away.

The Latin dictionary says that democracy's roots are "civitas popularis" and "liber populus." These words talk about people in a community or people that are free, open, unrestricted; unprejudiced; outspoken, frank; exempt and free of charge; and autonomous.

It is interesting to note that "civitas" is only two listings past "civiliter," which means as an ordinary citizen would do, i.e. politely.

So now the different colored stripes are running in different directions, but they are doing so politely and intelligently, perhaps because they acknowledge their kinship by virtue of their ribs forming a mixing bowl. The question is open as to what is being mixed, but if we add in the mention of the divine, then our population's undulating dance of a living journey reminds us of the circling hawk that our smaller crow-mindedness can't quite ever grasp.

The overly logical Western mind cannot quite get its arms around the idea that the mystery of diversity is a vehicle for our growth. We carve out our little notches of places we call our own.

The siblings have their bedrooms.

Communities have their neighborhoods and churches and clubs.

Towns have their sides of the tracks.

And we talk about diversity being just fine where it is, but we ain't sharing bedrooms with our brother, and we don't want a family like that moving in next door.

Diversity is nothing short of a mystery.

What happens so easily in nature with no help from the brightest of men is completely baffling to each and every one of us.

The Chinese book of wisdom called the “I Ching” was in existence several hundred years before the birth of Christ. It speaks of conflict as the union of heaven and water. Heaven’s attribute is The Creative. Water’s attribute is The Abysmal. Heaven moves upward. Water moves down. The two halves move away from each other, giving rise to the idea of conflict.

The “I Ching” says conflict develops when one feels himself to be in the right and runs into opposition. And if one is not convinced of being in the right, then the opposition leads to craftiness but not to open conflict.

It further tells us that if a man is entangled in a conflict, his only salvation lies in being so clear-headed and inwardly strong that he is always ready to come to terms by meeting the opponent halfway. To carry on the conflict to the bitter end has evil effects even when one is in the right, because the enmity is then perpetuated. Conflict within weakens the power to conquer danger without.

The “I Ching” advises that the superior man carefully considers the beginning of all activities. And if one is dealing with a group, then it pays to make sure that the spiritual trends of the individuals are in harmony, so that the cause of conflict is removed in advance.

It is too late for us to consider the beginning of anything except the rest of our time after today. The nature of democracy itself presents major challenges to having anything to do with the diversity of spiritual trends of its people.

On the other hand, if we consider the

basic question of death, we can find a common spiritual thread. We may not agree on what happens to us after our death, but we can certainly agree that we do not know. And any of us who have lost a loved one can testify that diversity within a family can become a majestic picture under the right circumstances. Tragedies in communities cause the different stripes

Blackstone’s Commentaries on English Common Law.

Now, some of the younger folks I’ve talked to think Blackstone is the stuff they use to pave country roads. But some of the oldtimers remember hearing about Blackstone.

As I read Mr. Blackstone’s take on things, *English Common Law* was based

on what was known as “Natural Law.” Without saying whether this basis was right or wrong, let us assume for a moment that this was how they viewed things at that time.

My further understanding of English Common Law is that it was based on the Ten Commandments. This means that the American system of law is based on a set of rules handed down for a group of people who were didn’t know

they were about to wander in the desert for 40 years.

Certainly there was diversity in that group, just as there is diversity in our families today.

But they had a motivation that the Chinese

would call a “spiritual trend.” Their motivation was surviving until tomorrow. They were lost. They were often hungry. They had no idea what was to become of themselves, other than unprovable dreams and visions handed down from an invisible source they called God.

There are some who say that our modern world has strayed a long ways from the Ten Commandments. I’m not writing to debate that, but to ask: is it still wrong to kill, steal, or to do wrong by other people? Are the basics of today that far removed from what they’ve always been? Does diversity have anything to do with the basic notions of right and wrong?

And then I wonder: if we complain



Tragedies in communities cause the different stripes to bind together for the good of the whole fabric.

to bind together for the good of the whole fabric.

It reminds me of how the old folks sometimes say we need a good war or Great Depression to bring us all together.

Isn’t it a shame we can’t simply do it willingly?

The “I Ching” winds up its discourse on conflict by talking about the man who has carried on a conflict to the bitter end and has ultimately triumphed. He is granted a decoration, but his happiness does not last. He is attacked again and again, and the result for the man who considered himself a victor is conflict without end.

As I understand it, the American system of law was based in part upon *Mr.*

The crow chases the hawk, and the hawk keeps circling out of reach.

about the other stripes in the fabric, how come we always harm the stripes belonging to ourselves?

The crow chases the hawk, and the hawk keeps circling out of reach.

The Law seems to be a logical process of rules which attempt to anticipate the twists and turns of the Big Picture it follows. By them time the rules apply to the Big Picture as it was, the Big Picture as it is has changed.

Can we acknowledge Democracy's idea of majority rule while allowing for the Diversity's Dancing Otherness? One almost has to think the puzzle won't fit together.

It seems popular to talk about Diversity as if it is an end unto itself. But anyone can look at a group who has set themselves apart as being different and see that

after awhile they are no longer different, but have become alike. Their difference is imagined as they find themselves fitting into a world beyond the control of one group or another.

An interesting thing to ponder is the word Holy. It means separate and apart, and different from the rest. Perhaps if we began to see Diversity as Holy, then we would begin to see Diversity as something besides an end. We would begin to see it as a means, as a method, as a journey, as a dance.

Then perhaps Democracy would begin to be more than a word describing a gaggle of people who don't get along any better than required. Democracy is also a means.

If Diversity and Democracy are both means to an end, then one wonders what

the end might be.

This brings us back to the idea of the mixing bowl made of our ribs being joined together. As we stand side to side in all of our different-colored-opposite-running-stripeness, we can either look back and complain, look ahead and fear, or look in front of our faces into the mixing bowl that we form together.

The people who were given the Ten Commandments felt like man was ultimately nothing more than dust. And that dust will follow an irreversible law which is beyond the power of appeal.

The Chinese would say there's a spiritual trend in there somewhere.

The crow never catches up with the hawk.

*David Clark's website is
www.outofthesky.com.*

Email him at dclark@outofthesky.com.



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The Point of East Tennessee

by Stephen T. Hyder

To stand on the Easternmost point of Tennessee. To be at that very point where Tennessee begins and spreads South and West. Where is it? What is at that point? How do you get there from here?

Lamar Alexander walked “across” Tennessee during his campaign for governor some 20 or so years ago, and although it was but a campaign strategy (which did work), he really did not walk all the way across the state as we know.

But, what if he really did start at the easternmost point? Would it have been a hike rather than a walk? Is there a survey marker there of some sort, official or merely geographical? Does it have any archeological or other distinctive significance?

It must be there, and some of us must admit to having that fleeting feeling of going in search of it.

So, what of this easternmost point of Tennessee today? The U.S. Geological Survey has defined the point on the map as being northeast of Mountain City, in Johnson County, Tennessee, or southwest of Green Cove in Washington County in Southwestern Virginia.

The area is a part of the Cherokee National Forest and of the Iron Mountain range. The northern edge of the Tennessee State boundary line separates the Cherokee National Forest from the Mount Rogers National Recreational Area.

The “point,” which lies five miles or so from the community of Sugar Creek, Tennessee, does not appear from any map to be approachable by motorized vehicle from within Tennessee. On the Virginia side, the point appears to be about a half mile from the old Green Cove depot on the Virginia Creeper nature trail.

The nearest town of any size, though, is

Damascus, Virginia, whose downtown district is threaded by the Appalachian Trail. The Virginia Creeper Trail heads east out of Damascus and circles part way around Tennessee’s easternmost point into Virginia and then into North Carolina. Apparently, at one time, the Creeper Trail had been a logging railroad track. So, our



The “point” does not appear from any map to be approachable by motorized vehicle from within Tennessee.

point is there, for sure, and it’s surrounded by an abundance of natural resources.

My searches had yet to discover much of substance about the easternmost point until I found an article written for retirees of the Tennessee Valley Authority, “Easy Riders,” written about the Virginia Creeper.

The piece states:

The shuttle ride up to Whitetop Station winds through the woods, along the creek,

and past tidy farmhouses and lush pastures. If it’s a clear day, ask the driver to point out the rocky promontory that marks the easternmost point in Tennessee.

I awoke early on a Saturday morning with the solitariness of mind to go there.

Armed with *Mapquest*® search results and my internet-generated notes on the subject, I departed my present environs in search of this point. I learned that experience is the most important teacher.

Getting to Abington on I-81 was easy, and getting to Damascus was simple, but getting to Green Cove from Damascus

was like any automobile trip across the Southern Appalachians...winding and a torture. But to my pleasant surprise, all of the roads are marked with names and state highway numbers. U.S. Highway 58 takes you from Abington through Damascus where it becomes the *J.E.B. Stuart Highway* across Mount Rogers. The Appalachian Trail (or “the AT” as the hikers call it) is a path beside the highway. When you get to Green Cove Road, State Route 600 (after all the turns), you can turn right, and after a short piece, there it is,

Discovery Road, State Route 862, on the left. At the end I would surely see the point.

No.

Discovery Road ends with a row of mailboxes on the right and a barn with a slew of

old Virginia license tags neatly affixed. But there was a big hill at the end of Discovery Road, blocking my way to the point. In this neck of the woods, friends, a hill is just a hill.

A house sits to the right of this dead end, and a road marked “Private Drive” on the left. Behind the sign looks like the beginnings of a commercial Christmas Tree farm. No rocky promontory, no point of East Tennessee.

Surely there is a way to get there, I thought. So after some silent grumbling, I turned around and drove the short distance back to the Green Cove Station, a renovated Virginia Creeper depot. No one was there. No one was at the community center, either. Also, no one was at the bed and breakfast (“Open May 1st” the sign said).

So I drove back to Highway 58 to see where it would take me traveling southeast. I ended up at the Grayson County line, which was due east of the point about two or three hundred yards. But I was then looking at a steep bank beside the road in that direction.

Undaunted, I turned right off Highway 58 just past the county line onto a state highway looking for some elusive entrance, but all I found was a gravel driveway to some very fortunate mountain dweller’s home...and the southern edge of the Christmas tree farm.

So I continued down this highway until I found *White Top Station*, the other renovated Creeper depot, and I got out to ask directions and found three elderly ladies chatting on the back loading deck.

These being the first humans I’d seen since I had a hamburger at the new *Food City* back in Damascus, I asked one if she was the proprietor, and she affirmatively replied. I told her I was from Maryville, Tennessee and asked her if she knew where that was, and told me that she knew where Tennessee was.

I explained my purpose in being there, and she asked me if this “point” was a place, and did it have a name?

“No,” I said, “it’s just the easternmost point or corner of Tennessee, where it juts up into Washington County, Virginia,” as if this *Epicenter of the World* was at the forefront of thought of every person alive.

“Well,” she said, “I don’t know about it,” but she did know about the Tennessee-North Carolina-Virginia corner, “where you can see three states. It’s on Pond Mountain.”

I glanced at the souvenir post cards and quilts she had for sale and realized I wasn’t getting anywhere, and then she said, “Why don’t you go back down Green Cove Road and cross Chestnut Mountain and talk to the man that runs the store over there in Taylor’s Valley. He probably can help you.”

So off I go, but before I get to Chestnut Mountain, I see a sign that says “Buckeye Hollow Branch Road” (SR 777). This rang a very faint bell for me as being very close

Hummer, but I got too far up to back out. So I stopped and got out and hiked a short distance until mud and slippery rocks told me I needed to adjust my plans. Ah, nature!

I found a spot on the path that could handle an eight-point turn-around maneuver and I bounced back down to the safety of Route 777. Whew! I wrote down the name and address on one of the mailboxes near the sign and got back out to Green Cove Road to head over Chestnut

Mountain. But, at the critical turn, I went right instead of straight (this is directions, friends, not politics), and ended up again on Highway 58. After all the twists and turns, I find myself close to Damascus. So I decided to chalk it up, at least for the next 10 or 15 minutes, until I arrived at Laurel Bloomery, Tennessee.

I took a state highway into Johnson County, Tennessee and upon my arrival, I pulled in the “A - Z Market & Deli,” the only place in town that had one of those *Tennessee Lottery* banners out front. I started to ask the lady running the cash register if she knew where the easternmost point of Tennessee was, but I stopped myself.

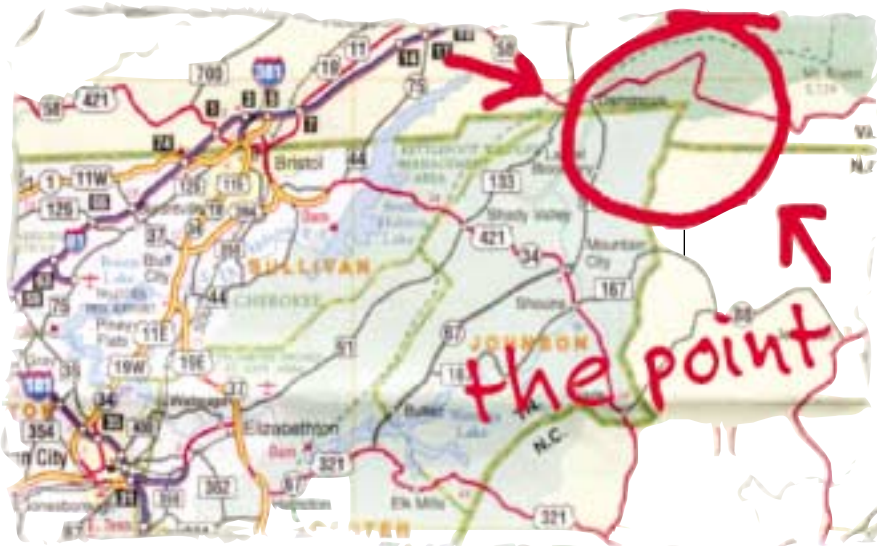
Instead, I asked her, “Where is Sugar Creek?”

The road leading to it, she said, was right across the road from the front of the store.

“Turn right at the end of that road, Gentry Creek Road,” she said, “and you’re at Sugar Creek.” I was re-charged.

If I cannot get to the point through Virginia, then *by Lamar Alexander*, I’ll get there through Tennessee! All the maps I had seen reflected that Sugar Creek was the end of the line to the point in Johnson County and still fell short of it, but I pressed on, not knowing what I would find.

But Sugar Creek Road did not stop; in fact, it changed into Taylor’s Valley Road and crossed the Virginia State Line as it traversed downward a long incline.



“Not the three-state point...the little sliver of land that juts up into Washington County, Virginia.”

to the point. Wasn’t this place referred to in the *Tennessee Blue Book* years ago? My hopes were charged up. I drove up the very narrow hollow until I saw a sign that said “Private Property.” Again. I later found out that this sign is on the Tennessee state boundary.

So I looked over to the right, and to the far right of a very steep, tall ridge with unmelted snow at its foot was a rocky, rutted and almost impassable roadway of some sort.

This was where Thomas Jefferson’s father, the surveyor, trekked to find his starting point, I conjured to myself. This is it, I thought and began driving up that path. There is a very fast-moving creek just to the right and the car was bouncing at every advance.

This is crazy; I’m certainly not in a

Oh no! The elusive point was now somewhere behind my right shoulder and there was yet another steep bank beside the roadway in that direction. At the foot of the incline, I crossed a little bridge and turned right into the heart of Taylor's Valley. I drove just a short piece and saw *Widener's General Store* and pulled into the front.

The man was sitting out front, reading a magazine, and as I got out of the car, he reacted as if he was expecting me. He stood up and turned and walked in and held the door open for me.

The store, *Widener's Grocery*, was crowded with merchandise and dimly-lit, like from the 1930's or 40's. He slipped into the space behind the well-worn, wooden counter that had a huge number of tins of snuff for sale on it. The late-day sun shown through the high windows on the south entrance wall, providing the only light in the place.

I introduced myself and told him my business. Surely, I thought, this man is going to know where to find the point.

"You mean the *three-state point*?" he said.

"No," I replied, "that little sliver of land that juts up into Washington County, Virginia."

He went on, "I've been to the three-state point, well, a long time ago. It's up on Pond Mountain. They used to have a gate up there you had to walk through, and then, there you are...there's a little monument there that you can see. Three states."

He pulled out a map, an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven rendering of the entire eastern half of the United States, and, trying to stay focused, I showed him the "notch" of East Tennessee and its point, barely perceptible on his map.

"There it is, see?" I said, making the point.

"Hmmm," he uttered, "I've never thought about that before, but you know, it does jut up there a little bit, doesn't it?"

A customer came in with a baby on her hip which had eyes as big as saucers and stared at me like I had a hole in my head. He called her by her first name and asked her if she knew where the point was

"where Tennessee goes up into Washington County?"

She said, "No," looked at the map and asked him, "Did you get those diapers, yet?" and he affirmatively nodded.

He then told me that the "ladies" back at the White Top depot, "where they rent the bicycles during the summer" could help me more than he could.

So I asked him where the road out front led to and he told me it went over Chestnut Mountain and back to Green Cove. At this point (excuse me) I was getting very oriented to this area, but I was beginning to



This was where Thomas Jefferson's father, the surveyor, trekked to find his starting point, I conjured to myself.

realize that my search may be over for that day.

I left to take a drive over Chestnut Mountain. It is a graveled road over a mountain with steep grades and only a minimal number of turns--much less torturous than Highway 58 east of Damascus. It was very forested, and at the pinnacle, the road builders had cut a pathway through a pointed rock. "Rocky promontory," I laughed to myself.

With the figurative last gasp of the day, I drove past the entrance to Buckeye Hollow Road to Discovery Road and sat there trying to burn the image of the area unto my memory. It was a blustery, early March day, and the clouds kept moving in and out all day long, not unlike the roller-coaster my hopes had entertained.

"I'll be back," I said to myself to make a point, and returned to Laurel Bloomery, by way of Taylor's Valley. I waved to the man and his magazine on my way out.

I am relentless though, if nothing else. It was still daylight, and if I can find any route, I'll take a final stab at it. Back on the road to Sugar Creek, I found Dry Gap Road, which runs back up the incline to the left, closer, if anything, to the point. I would not be denied.

Dry Gap, though, is a different type of road when you get into it; it starts out with good pavement like Taylor's Valley, but it gets steeper, narrower and the pavement gets noticeably thinner.

Then it started looking like a narrow driveway, with rocks and serious bumps. This is *déjà vu*, friends and I was not driving a Hummer. So I backed out to find room to do another maneuver and headed home. But this is *my point*, and I will find it.

On my way back home, I stopped at my mother's place in Johnson City to lick my psychic wounds and get some consolation (in the form of KFC fried pies). She has tolerated a lot of these "up-and-bolts" of mine in the past, like the time I hitchhiked to New York City...but I digress.

I had assumed that it would be a relatively easy goal to meet, like getting up to Clingman's Dome or straddling the state line up there. I had bolted up to the

northeasternmost point with the idea of finding a holy grail of sorts, like Lewis and Clark...I knew it was there and had a fairly good idea of where it was. All I had to do was gas up the car and head off. This was going to take a different level of effort. The explorer in me told me to do it all myself, to hammer away at the goal until I reached the point, but that had not worked. This would be a long row for me to hoe. I had to admit that I needed help. Even Lewis and Clark had Sacagawea.

I called the Johnson County Property Assessor's Office and talked with the county mapper, Mr. Stout. His familiarity with Johnson County is likened to the back of his own hand, I figured. It is his job to know. I explained my predicament to Mr. Stout, about how I had traversed to

the entire northeastern part of his county looking for the point, and at first he thought I was talking about the three-state point on Pond Mountain. He said the tri-point was a "pretty far piece" from Green Cove, and that I needed to get to White Top Mountain before I could get there. Again, I explained that I was only interested in the point, "where it juts up into Washington County, Virginia." Mr. Stout understood, and he told me that he had a difficult time getting there himself.

"Can you get there from within Johnson County?" I asked, hoping for some real information.

"If you can, I don't know how," he said, "the property is surrounded by the Cherokee National Forest, and you would really have to know exactly where you were going in order to get there from here." At the least, my efforts had not been stupid ones, only ignorant ones.

I asked if he had ever been to Buckeye Hollow Branch Road, and he said he had, so I asked about the rocky trail on which I had impetuously attempted to conquer.

"That's just an old road that goes to a house back there," he said. So much for my following the footsteps of Thomas Jefferson's father.

Mr. Stout told me that he, too, had gone down Discovery Road and had seen the Christmas tree farm and the "Private Road" sign. He went on back anyway, he said, and got to the point.

I asked if the property owners had any objection and he laughed, "No, nobody shot at me."

I asked him if there was any kind of a rock there at the point, and he reckoned that he could not "rightly recall." It had been a while, he said.

After some more searching, I spoke with Roby Phillippi, a Park Ranger with the Cherokee National Forest. I told him I was a "hiker" to mask my impetuosity with credibility, and that I needed information about Tennessee's easternmost point.

He knew about it, said it was part of the first areas purchased by the Federal Government when the Forest came into existence. Roby initially thought I was asking about the tri-point and gave me the hiking directions from the terminus of Gentry Creek Road in Johnson County;

logging roads and the Rogers Ridge Horse Trail up to Cat Face Mountain and Pond Mountain.

"No," I said, "I'm talking about the far northeast point, where it juts up into Virginia." I was wearing out this phrase for sure.

He was aware of it, he said, "I helped paint the state boundary line there."

I asked him if there was any type of rocky point there, and he answered in the negative, stating that the only large rocks were at the tri-point. He said there was no trail to the Easternmost point, that the area from Gentry Creek Road that led to it included open forest areas and dense rhododendron growth, and that the point was probably three to four miles from Gentry Creek, and he added the implied warning "cross country."

"Roby," I whined to myself, "I spent an entire day trying to locate the point when

ous search.

The words "rag land" came to mind. Professor Joe Mac Ragland, of Winchester, Tennessee had taught me in law school, so I had looked up the etymology of the words. "Rag land" refers to a remote, poorly defined provincial boundary line, usually at a frontier. *Was this easternmost point Tennessee's rag land?* In ancient times, provinces went to war over the right to claim the rag lands. And Virginia and Tennessee had fought in the courts over the right to claim the area as its own. I knew only too well that the area is remote and not easily traveled. Even finding it has evoked travail.

Rag land indeed!

The owner of the property on which rests Tennessee's easternmost point told me that if I had walked to mile marker 32 on the Virginia Creeper trail (just down from Green Cove) and walked down a little trail from there, I would have come up to the point from behind his property.

"I've fenced it off," he told me, "and I can see it just out my window here.

Those mail boxes out there

that you saw, they are at the state line. We have Virginia phone service and the post office in Virginia delivers our mail. But I live right here in Tennessee."

"That's just real good," I replied to emphasize the point.

But this really made me think: *If you can't drive to East Tennessee's point from anywhere within Tennessee and the folks up there get all of their public services from Virginia, doesn't the point in all fairness belong to Virginia? Shouldn't they have it back?*

Better yet, shouldn't Tennessee or the Cherokee National Forest in Johnson County consider making the area more easily accessible from within the State?

I can see it now: "*The East Tennessee Trace*," or "*Hike to the Point*," or better yet, "*Take a Hummer to the Point*," but I digress.

Or maybe I don't.

On my way, I was forced to assess this matter. Was this scenario a metaphor for something? Were there lessons here for me? Or was I just wringing out pent-up spontaneity and riding a crest of accomplishment, be it innocently hay-wired or blustery hog heaven?

I felt in my innermost self that the east-

"I've fenced it off," the owner of the property on which rests Tennessee's easternmost point told me.

I was up there; hiking three or four miles with a compass will be a cake-walk, comparatively speaking." Not that I was, at this time, electing or foregoing that option, of course. But I digress.

My earlier flailing about up there was imbued with hope and expectancy, but had not gotten me to the point. Thus charged with my new information, I figured I ought to determine if the property at the point was privately owned.

That row of mail boxes up there at Buckeye Hollow which I had noted was the clue I needed to pursue, and my making a flurry of phone calls (an easy task for me) provoked the coup de grâce of my search. The point and the 66 acres surrounding it are privately owned and had been in one family for at least 44 years. And it is easily reached by Buckeye Hollow Branch Road.

The *point of East Tennessee* was most easily reachable only by *crossing into Virginia*. So after all this fighting over the proper boundary, Virginia is getting the last laugh!

I had been within ten feet of the Tennessee state line, which led to the point, before I had earlier charged up the rocky, slippery Pork Chop hill of my zeal-

ernmost point of Tennessee was a very significant place on the face of the earth, and I wanted to get there.

What citizen who refers to him or herself as an East Tennessean would not want to see and stand at the point? Perhaps it is no more than the mountain climber's mantra, "because it's there."

This is why I searched it out. For this and because my blood runs Tennessee orange and for no other reasons. There are many tri-points, many state *extreme* points, many points of geo-politico-psychological significance, but there is only one easternmost point of Tennessee, and my course was set.

We made it to Green Cove via Mount Rogers. With single-minded discipline, I trekked two miles up the Virginia Creeper Trail to Mile Post 32, dodging the bicyclists and other hikers. I passed Mile Post 31 and at places off the trail, I could see the vastness of the Christmas tree farm.

Engraved on Mile Post 32 were the letters "A.T.," which I presumed to be a reference to the Appalachian Trail. But there was no trail beginning there which led to the point. Undeterred, I struck off west, southwesterly down a steep embankment of very shale-y soil. Remember, this trail had been the foundation of a railroad track.

Without a compass and my Boy Scout training on how to use it, I would have been very lost, but after some climbing and hiking through rough, forested terrain, I saw a stone fence about yea high, which

I followed for a short distance.

Finally, after all this, I saw Tennessee's easternmost point, a stone marker with a large "T" on it. Here at the top of a ridge, in the most rustic, unceremonious of surroundings, was the point at which our great state begins.

I am indeed struck by the sheer difficulty required to get here. I was forced to sit and ponder a bit: Because of its remote, wilderness-like location, this very spot could easily be, for example, up a steep climb on Clinch Mountain or off many of the trails in the Great Smokies.

Because it's there. That's why I searched it out. For this and because my blood runs orange.

The point is marked, but although it is such an important place, you really would not know it.

The owners of this property will remain anonymous, but they permitted me to see the point from their front porch on Buckeye Hollow Road. There were neat rows of old Tennessee license tags affixed to the barn. Now I know the reason that East Tennessee is associated with hills.

"What do people do here for a living?" I asked.

"We drive away every day to work somewhere else," Paul, the son, replied, "I drive to Bristol and back every day.

"When I was a boy, I would go up there and sit and watch the Creeper go by," he continued.

"Do you ever get down Knoxville way?" I asked, hoping to prompt a rapport with the owner of the world's *Epicenter*.

"Naw, can't say that I do," he replied. I gave him my calling card.

We may never know the reason that Tennessee's powers-that-were fought for the point. It is, to this day, remotely secluded from the remainder of our state, and is accessible only from Virginia, and the residents there are dependent upon Virginia.

Obviously, sovereignty had much to dictate about it. North Carolina's northern state line apparently has strict "longitudinal integrity" (it's a straight line from the Atlantic Ocean to Pond Mountain, folks) so I can't help thinking that part of the reason is that Tennessee refused to "conform" to this

line, independents such as we are.

"No," they said, "we're Tennesseans, and we ain't a-gonna go along with this line stuff just to be nice or to please King George II. Right here is where we draw the line."

Sounds good to me.

sth@prodigy.net

Stephen T. Hyder is an attorney engaged in the private practice of law in Maryville, Tennessee. He is originally from Rogersville, Tennessee, the State's second oldest town, and he infrequently writes on a wide variety of subjects.



The Culture of the Redneck Riviera

by Ron Burch

The young fellows at the table behind us spoke with an unmistakable south Alabama drawl. At least that's how it sounded in-between the curse words. They weren't hoodlums...simply four teenagers a little out of control.

They were away from home on spring break, probably for the first time. As my wife was within earshot of their foul mouths, my first instinct was to tap them on the shoulder and tell them to hold it down. However, the more we listened, the more obvious it was that they were just learning how to cuss. Their rather unusual combinations of four-letter words were crude. But creative. So much so, that instead of being insulted, we both laughed aloud.

Friends told us that this restaurant was the best place on the Florida panhandle to get a good steak. When we asked for directions from their beachfront condo, they said we couldn't miss it. There was a big plastic bull right out front. Perhaps that should have been a warning. However, after several nights of seafood on the fly at a favorite tourist spot on the beach, my wife was asking, "Where's the beef?"

The server took our order and promptly returned with iced tea. Sweet iced tea. Very sweet iced tea. While we waited for our meal, I noticed that the tops of the salt and peppershakers were rusty. So too was the paper napkin holder. My wife commented that for the price—which wasn't cheap—she expected more. Perhaps even a cloth napkin.

Soon the server returned. She placed beat-up wooden bowls containing a mixture of salad greens directly in front of us. Motioning toward my wife, she proudly exclaimed, "I hope you like Roquefort dressing... 'cause I brought you three

We were accustomed to vacationing in southwestern Florida. While there we'd found some of the best restaurants around.

Restaurants that by comparison were very upscale, yet moderately priced. This, however, was the beach closest to the big city...the Florida panhandle...lower Alabama...LA...the *Redneck Riviera*. A strip of surf and sand that stretches some 95-miles along Florida's Highway #98. From Panama City Beach to Pensacola.

Where we'd found the most beautiful beaches in the world. Sugar white sand, gently washed by an azure sea.

Panama City Beach is home to a great state park. Also many high-rise condominiums with long skinny balconies on each floor. These walkways make them look like ant farms. There's no-tell motels. Plastic amusement parks for the kids. Tattoo parlors. Beer joints, crab shacks, burger barns and tee shirt boutiques. Plus

more beach trash and trinkets than you can imagine. Panama City Beach makes tailgating at a NASCAR infield appear hoity-toity. The always-heavy beach traffic is a blend of pick-up

trucks, motorcycles, Mercedes Benz, SUV's and Beemers. Perhaps that's the charm of PC Beach—it's so funky, it's fun.

A few miles to the west, things get more civilized. There's Sea Crest, Seagrove, Seaside, and Blue Mountain Beach. Grayton Beach and Santa Rosa. Just a few years ago, these were places



My wife saw that her salad greens were literally floating in a thin, milky-white soup.

scoops." My wife looked down at the battered wooden bowl. She saw that her salad greens were literally floating in a thin, milky-white soup. The redeeming part of the meal was the steak. It was excellent and cooked to order. Afterwards, we questioned the high cost for food and service that was barely above the all-you-care-to-eat buffets scattered up and down the road.

where families like ours rented an inexpensive beach house or cottage. Then simply laid back and enjoyed the warm breezes, the dunes, the calm gulf waters splashing the sand.

Now the area is overrun with mile-after-mile of upscale beach apartments and luxury condominiums. Most all with golf access, tennis courts and Olympic-size pools. Unbridled growth connects a half-dozen or more of these little beach towns. During the months of May, June, July, August and September, folks from all over the world flock there in droves. Often spending a month's salary or more for a week's stay.

Continuing west along highway #98, there's Sandestin. A world-class beach resort with a championship golf course, discount as well as upscale malls. Then there's Destin. One of the more popular vacation and deep-sea fishing spots in the country. Fort Walton sits halfway around the panhandle.

It has a laid back, old south charm reminiscent of Mobile and Biloxi. On the western edge sits Pensacola. An old Navy town that's much the same as it was during its heyday in WWII. While the heart of Pensacola is a little mildewed, dingy and gray, Gulf Breeze and Navarre Beach are as spectacular as any you'll find along the gulf coast.

This 95-mile stretch represents the last beach frontier. Its atmosphere mixes the circus that is spring break with the old plantation south. Permanent residents include active and retired military and those who can afford resort living year round. Depending on the time of year, temporary inhabitants range from wealthy northeasterners to farm boys. Students to skinheads on motorcycles. It's a place where vacationing families, anglers, golfers, and conventioners alike go to escape the workaday world.

Once while attending a conference at Sandestin, in addition to the beach parties, one of the highlights was an elegant awards dinner at a five-star restaurant. Another was a dinner cruise out beyond the three-mile limit for some games of chance, aboard a casino ship called the "Southern Charm." The meeting planners had seen a brochure that made a dinner cruise aboard the casino ship look like a

memorable and fun experience.

Thirty-five or so of us—mostly from parts west of the Mississippi or slightly north of the Ohio River—signed-up. We took a chartered bus from our hotel in Sandestin to the dock in Panama City. That was where we boarded this tub inappropriately dubbed the "Southern Charm." Note: I didn't refer to the "Southern Charm" as a ship. She was a tub. A 175' trawler replete with a meat 'n three buffet, red plastic tablecloths, more paper napkins, plastic forks. She had three decks of crap tables, roulette wheels and slot machines.

"Southern" she was; "charming"

That was when we boarded this tub inappropriately dubbed the "Southern Charm." "Southern" she was; "charming" she wasn't.

she wasn't.

It was a muggy night in mid-September. The air was hot and heavy and the gulf waters were thankfully still. After a greasy dinner, those that drank and gambled spent hours in the casino despite the lousy odds. Those that didn't stopped pulling the handles on the slots after the money they had set aside for entertainment was gone. Teetotalers like me, found a lounge chair on the upper deck. Where the air was less smoky and slightly cooler than it was inside. As the money disappeared, others joined me. Throughout the evening, the group on the upper deck grew larger and larger. No one could believe we'd been so taken in.

A little after midnight, the "Southern Charm" pulled anchor. With a belch of black diesel smoke and a honk of the horn, she headed back to shore where our bus waited for the return trip to the hotel. Looking at the vehicles in the parking lot, there must have been five or six busloads of suckers just like us.

One woman, a rather inebriated gal from northern Alabama boarded the wrong bus. On the way back to Sandestin, she stood up and with somewhat slurred speech asked if this was the bus to Birmingham. Our even drunker bunch assured her that it was. She proceeded to

lead the rowdy group in a rousing songfest. We sang good old southern songs...*Yellow Rose of Texas, There's a Tear in my Beer, San Antonio Rose, You Are My Sunshine*, etc., etc., etc. Even though quite drunk and unaware of our destination, she was a very good sport.

She was last seen standing in the parking lot of our hotel. She had her hands on her hips and squinted in disbelief at the destination placard on the front of the bus. It plainly said Sandestin, not Birmingham. We often wondered if she ever made it home.

A few years later, we drove south to Biloxi to visit the new casinos. On a bridge near Gulfport one of the inland waterways spills into the gulf. Out the car window, I spied the carcass of the "Southern Charm." She was sitting high and dry in the Mississippi mud. Evidently, she had run aground and been left there to rust.

What goes around comes around, eh? Not so. Thanks to the Internet, I recently discovered that a refurbished and re outfitted "Southern Charm" is alive and well and operating once again. This time on the coast of South Carolina.

The culture of the Redneck Riviera is all this and more. It's Mardi Gras with a beach. A cornucopia of junk and funk. A world-class resort. It's a game of chance with lousy odds. It's beautiful beaches, magnificent sunsets, and warm gulf waters. It's nature watching at its finest with some delightful specimens clad in the briefest of bikinis.

The next time one of your yuppie pals brags that he's vacationing in "LA," tell him you are too. Then load up the pickup or the SUV, and head south on highway #231. At Panama City, go west on #98 into lower Alabama—the other "LA."

Let your hair down. Forget your inhibitions. Drink a cold brew or two. Have the time of your life. But take it from me, order your salad dressing on the side.

ron.burch@comcast.net