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David Skinner

The Classic South

I was raised in the classic South. In fact, I grew up in Nashville, the *Athens* of the South. You can't get any more classic than that. One of my first memories was my parents taking my sister, Jann and me to Nashville's Parthenon in Centennial Park to see the lights and sculptured animals of the nativity scene that was set up on the lawn every Christmas.

Nashville's Parthenon is a full-scale replica of the temple dedicated to the goddess, Athena in Athens, Greece. The Tennessee version initially was a temporary structure built in 1897 to commemorate the state's Centennial Exposition. Tennessee was admitted as a state in 1796, so the year before, 1896, was actually the centennial year, but hey, who's counting? Organizers blamed the delay on the lack of funds, slow construction and the '96 presidential election.

The Exposition lasted six months, and within two years, all of the buildings, with the exception of the Parthenon, had been torn down. When it came time to tear down the Greek replica, the people simply refused to demolish it.

So, in classic Southern style, the fine citizens of Nashville left it parked in the park like a rusty old pickup that needed a new engine. And there it remained, rusted out and up on blocks, in the park's front yard, for twenty years, until decay and erosion caused the old structure to be condemned.

Hope, however, springs eternal! In 1921 a decade of work began to transform the Parthenon into the permanent landmark of the exposition's fairgrounds. By then, the grounds had been named Centennial Park in honor of the previous century's celebration.

Some people, including most Nashvillians, believe that Nashville is called the Athens of the South because of the Parthenon. In actuality, the nickname was coined in 1840 by an east coast educator who called Nashville the "Athens of the West" because of the city's dedication to education and its various schools which concentrated on a "classical" education, including Latin. Apparently when Nashville (along with Tennessee) threw her hat into the ring of the Confederacy, she seceded from the *West* as well as from the *Union*, and, after the war, changed her nickname to the catchier and present day moniker, "Athens of the *South*."

In the 20th Century, the Parthenon was an ever-present "classic" backdrop for those of us who grew up in Nashville. As young kids, we enjoyed family picnics in Centennial Park, and as elementary school students,

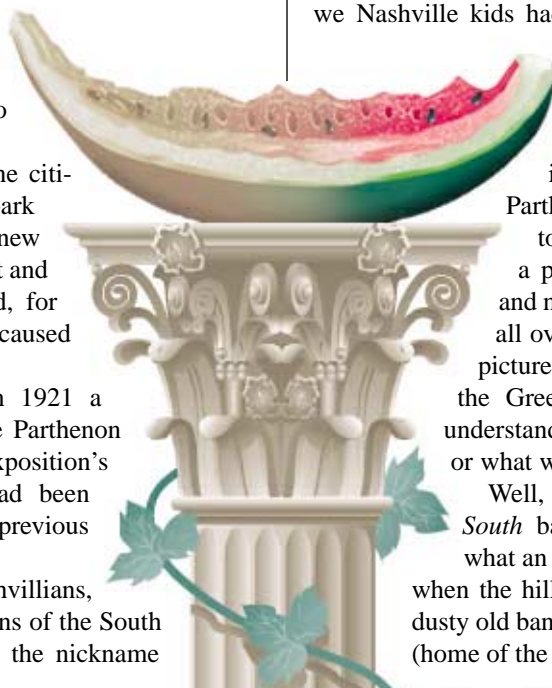
we went on many a field trip that took us inside the great doors to explore its dark and mysterious interior (I still have a recurring dream every year or so about being lost in the Parthenon's basement that somehow, at least in the dream, morphs into a bowling alley...but that's another story for another time). And, as older kids (with driver's licenses), we launched many a Frisbee from the steps and took in some pretty incredible concerts on the great lawn (my favorite was Roy Orbison in the early '70s).

However, the unwieldy bi-product of all this culture was that we Nashville kids had a somewhat skewed impression of the *original* Greek Parthenon. Imagine our bewilderment when we first studied ancient Greek culture and literature...we wondered what the big honking deal was with what *they* called a Parthenon. After all, we had one right downtown where we could sit on the steps and eat a picnic lunch. Plus, ours was much newer and nicer, and not in a bazillion pieces scattered all over the place. What's more, judging by the pictures in our history books, we also figured that the Greek Parthenon keepers would not be so understanding if an errant Frisbee landed on the roof, or what was left of the roof.

Well, anyway, you get the picture of the *Classic South* background of Nashville. So think about what an uproar it must have been in the mid-1920s when the hillbillies first came to town, dragging their dusty old banjos and fiddles. In fact, radio station WSM (home of the Grand Ole Opry) had been airing classical music when they opened the mics to that gaggle of musicians just off the bus from the mountains of East Tennessee. While the tea-and-silver set must have gasped in horror, the listening audience—most of which were rural—loved it.

And so, eighty years later, Nashville's "classic" reputation has become one of fiddles more so than violins. But it is interesting when the two worlds collide. Last year, for example, the Country Music Association's Awards ceremony—typically, a Nashville tradition—was held in New York City. What's more, the *Entertainer of the Year* was an *Australian*.

I can only guess what some of the old Opry stars such as Porter Wagoner thought about all that. Actually, I did



So, in classic Southern style, the fine citizens of Nashville left the Parthenon parked in the park like a rusty old pickup that needed a new engine.

It was a rather surreal moment in country music history...as in "Porter and Dali."

see Porter on a talk show several years ago sharing the guest couch with comedian Carrot Top. By the end of the show, Carrot Top was wearing Porter's "wagon wheel" rhinestone jacket and pretending to steer the bejeweled wagon wheel like some crazed cowboy turned NASCAR driver. It was a rather surreal moment in country music history (as in "Porter and Dali"), and as the credits began to roll, Porter stared open-mouthed at Carrot Top and announced to the talk show host and to those of us at home in TV Land, "He's a nut!"

But all-in-all, as cultures collide, the CMA Awards did much better in the Big Apple than I did; when I first landed in New York, everyone from the doorman to the sandwich-maker at the Midtown Deli snickered at my Nashville drawl, and inevitably asked what I was doing in the big city. After about the 37th time I heard the question, I finally settled on the answer: "I came up here to buy shoes for my family." That seemed to pacify most of them...at least the ones that didn't realize that I had metaphorically wrestled the musket out of their hands and pointed it right back at their scowling Yankee mugs.

I just have to wonder what the world's "classic" impression of Nashville would have been if the violin had flourished, as opposed to the fiddle, or if that would have even made a difference. In all likelihood, the die was most likely cast and the everlasting impression of the city (and the region in general, for that matter) was probably unfortunately sealed by the unpleasant cloud of the civil war.

So, to combat that provincial stereotype, I've decided to start my own urban myth...*did you know that if you look carefully at the ancient statues of the goddess Athena, you can actually see that she is fingerpicking a five-string banjo?*

Now, please copy and paste this into an email and forward to ten of your friends.

David Skinner
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AN ONLINE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

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The Long Distance Call

an embarrassing recollection by Lisa Love

We Southern girls are just raised differently than our Yankee counterparts. We are taught from day one to respect our elders, always shake the preacher's hand after the service, say "yes ma'am" and "no ma'am" to the ladies, and never, *ever* sit down in a public rest room (okay, I veered off topic on that one, but you get the idea).

As you can well imagine, we belles can be a little intimidated by our authority figures. And there was a time, not so long ago, (before cell phones and instant messaging) when long distance calls were a rare and expensive treat. Let's say crazy Uncle Stan from Memphis called one Sunday night to tell us that he had given up on women and was getting a dog. Well, we all would gather around the phone, jockeying for position by the receiver, straining to hear or be heard. As is the law of the jungle, it was survival of the fittest, so we little ones (if not trampled by the stampede to the phone) were usually forced to the extension in the hall where we were repeatedly told, "Quit breathing so loud—we can't hear!"

For about three minutes our world was reduced to the size of a phone focused on the voice of a loved one from far away. I kinda miss Sunday night phone calls—the *specialness* of it all.

To this day I have to remind myself to sit down, take a deep breath, and relax when someone from out of state calls (now living in the age of unlimited long distance it's not quite so exciting...a shame, really).

One rainy Saturday afternoon years ago I made an error in judgement...I answered a ringing phone. In our kitchen, to be exact. If Caller ID had existed at the time, this whole nasty episode could easily have been avoided. But alas, I innocently lifted



Herein was my problem--Mr. Selser was a stern, no-nonsense man, devoid of humor or patience, AND he was calling LONG DISTANCE!

the receiver off the cradle and said, "Hello."

First mistake!

"Is your Mama home?" I heard a gentleman ask.

"No sir," I politely replied with a smile (being raised right and all).

"This is Mr. Selser (Mama's boss). I am in Washington D.C. right now, and I really need to speak with her immediately."

I told him that she had gone grocery shopping and would he mind calling her back later? But No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o! He said that he would be in and out of his hotel all day, so could I just take a message?

Take a message??? My eyes frantically darted back and forth looking for a pen. Nope! A pencil, maybe? Crayon? No! A lipstick? Nada! I was well aware that Mr. Selser was WAITING! Long distance! Herein was my problem—Mr. Selser was a stern, no-nonsense man, devoid of humor or patience, *AND* he was calling *LONG DISTANCE!* An authority figure on long distance...the clock is ticking...I am pacing to and fro as far as the perpetually tangled telephone cord would let me go.

Just as I was contemplating slicing my finger and writing in blood on the fridge, I hear an annoyed, "Are you ready yet?" *Oh when will this nightmare end?*

Now here is where the Southern thing kicks in. Any normal human being would have just said, "Excuse me while I go get a pen."

Not me, though. I panicked! To put down the phone and look for something to write with would take time and being long distance and all (as we learned earlier) *time was of the essence!*

No pen, no paper, just my memory. Well, how bad could it be?

So assuming he just wanted to give me

the number where Mama could reach him, (knowing surely I could remember that) *AND* wanting to people please to the best of my ability, I bravely mumbled, “Yes Sir, I am ready.” *Second mistake!*

“Okay, here it goes.” Those were the last words I can clearly recall Mr. Selser saying to me that rainy afternoon. It all became something of a blur after that. Because without fanfare, my Mama’s boss started speaking...slowly...word after word. Not a phone number. Not something easily memorized, but a *letter!*

A LETTER!

Gamely at first, I tried to burn into my brain the words he was saying. I remember thinking if I could just get the gist of it and relay it to Mom as soon as she walked in the door, then she could call him back and straighten it all out.

But as he kept going on and on, I realized there was no way that was ever going to happen...I was in over my head—*big time!* He just kept going on and on, sentence after sentence.

So I just figured, what the heck, I gave up. A full white flag surrender. I didn’t even bother to listen to his words anymore. The sound of his voice became a bee buzzing in my ear. I thought to myself, *I’ll just tell Mama to call him when she gets in and he can dictate it all over again to her.* Yeah, that’s an idea!

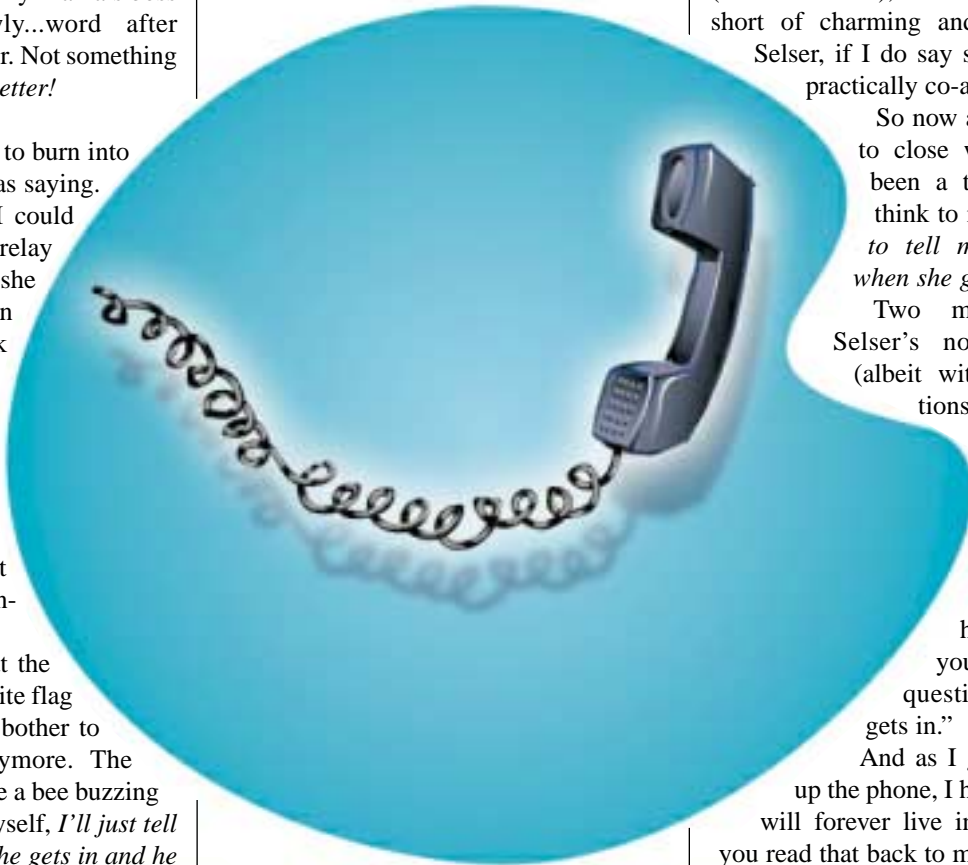
With a plan in mind, I started to relax a little, and my heart rate started to return to its pre-phone call rhythm. As my fog cleared, I could still hear him droning on, syllable after syllable.

My, he is wordy, I recall thinking! While he spoke, my thoughts wandered...*Would the rain ever stop? What’s for dinner? Will there ever be peace in the Middle East?* (Just kidding...I just threw that in so y’all would think I was deep and to make up for the stupidity that follows!)

Back from my reverie—Mr. Selser had been going on about a minute—when I start getting a bit bold. Wanting it to appear as if I really was taking down the

message, I start to interrupt him. “Excuse me, sir. Is that a capital ‘r’?” Or, “Should I start a new paragraph here?”

I start to have a little fun with this, and with this man who made my Mama’s life so miserable on a regular basis. I am actually sitting down now, feet propped on the fridge door (and remember, I *never* sit during *long distance calls!*), filing my



I start to have a little fun with this man who made my Mama’s life so miserable on a regular basis.

nails and throwing out some suggestions to help make his letter a bit more interesting.

Imagine my delight at playing editor to my Mama’s hellish boss as he dictated to me a letter I was pretending to take down.

Now, even after all these years, that is too twisted for me to wrap my mind around. But the innocence of youth was on my side, at least for a minute.

Once more I interrupted his train of thought to question the spelling of a word.

“Thank you, sir. Let’s see...that was T-e-n-n-e-s-s-e-e? I got it, Sir.”

Finally we were heading for the home stretch. I was pretty pleased with myself, thinking I handled the whole situation pretty well. Here it was, a *long distance call* on a *SATURDAY* from an *authority figure.*

I had not thrown up, nor did I panic (well not much), and I had been nothing short of charming and helpful to Mr.

Selser, if I do say so myself. Heck I practically co-authored his work!

So now as he is beginning to close what would have been a two-page letter, I think to myself, *remember to tell mom to call him when she gets in.*

Two minutes of Mr. Selser’s non-stop dictation (albeit with brief interruptions thrown in for my own amusement) finally came to an end.

I said, “Okay, Mr. Selser, I will have my Mom call you if she has any questions when she gets in.”

And as I get ready to hang up the phone, I hear the words that will forever live in infamy: “Could you read that back to me?”

My world stopped, my heart went into my throat, and I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach!

“COULD YOU READ THAT BACK TO ME?”!!!!

So, of course I did the only thing any self-respecting Southern girl

could do. I threw the receiver to the floor and screamed at the top of my lungs, “*Oh my Lord, Oh my Lord, the kitchen’s on fire!!!!*”

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Lisa Love, a talented and insightful writer with a skewed sense of humor, looks for, and often finds the absurd masquerading as the mundane..



photoillustration by Charlton Walters Hillis

Ghost Stories

nonfiction by Charlton Walters Hillis

Robert Winston is a trim man with a boyish energy about him that belies his age, which is seventy-four. Tommie Lee, his wife, is a small woman so sweet and quiet you might mistake her for docile.

Perhaps one of those types who would never want to leave her native Chickamauga, Georgia. But she's already been to Israel, is planning a trip to the Netherlands and dreams of traveling far and wide. Robert met her when he moved to Chickamauga from Valley Head, Alabama (named for its location in Will's Valley—population in 2000: 611), when he was thirteen years old. Chickamauga's not but about forty-five minutes' drive, but he never went back but twice until the other day, and once was for a funeral. He just never was interested in going back.

He never was interested in going back, but he never forgot the place. Could not

forget it if he tried. And once the subject of the supernatural comes up, he jumps on it. Promises if I'll come by the house, he'll tell me some ghost stories. Not generic ones but—as he takes off his glasses and points at his own two eyes for emphasis—things he's seen personally.

I take him up on the offer and am not disappointed, but on reflection, believe he just might have two different kinds of bogeymen in mind. Not to detract from the ghost stories, mind you. They're on one level, the others on another, less easily shared. I'm a realist, not a writer of the supernatural, and human nature fascinates me. My underlying intention is to write

the tale of an ordinary man who lived through extraordinary circumstances.

Once Mr. Winston gets to telling the ghost stories, he seems to be wanting to go back, but only for the purpose of showing someone else where it all happened. Coming off the top of the mountain at Mentone, Alabama, he gets positively excited upon pointing out to me the sign for Valley Head. Many a time, he tells me, he and a buddy hiked the two miles up this mountain to fish at the top. A straight-up trail through the woods, at night. Surely they used a flashlight? He doesn't remember having one.

We're on our way to Winston Place, now a bed and breakfast, and it isn't hard to find. Back under slavery, they divided up the children of a particular family, with half going to one white home and half to another. Mr. Winston's ancestors went to

the Winstons. By the time he came along, his father, Gus Winston, was a cook at the same house. Grew a little corn in the summer. Raised a family in a little house just across the pasture from the big house. When we drive over later, it's still there. Nobody's home, but it's now guarded by a rottweiler who takes his job very seriously. Pins Robert against the side of his Eldorado until he cannot even get the door open but finally slips around to the passenger side while my husband slides over to drive.

Before that, though, we go to Winston Place, drive over the railroad tracks which run alongside the main street of Valley Head and up the lane to the rear, where there is a small brick house and a man coming out to meet us. He introduces himself as "Colonel" Matthews, but that turns out to be from Vietnam rather than the Civil War, as one might be ready for in that setting.

While we wait in the car, Robert steps out to get acquainted, and it doesn't hurt he has a purple heart from his Vietnam days right there on the tag of his car. Colonel Matthews

is married to one of the descendants of the original owners, and he is more than happy to show us around.

Winston Place is a pre-Civil War colonial, 172 years old. He tells us the original house had four bedrooms on each side, which are no longer there. Out back are slave quarters, a corn crib, a barn and a carriage house. The kitchen used to be outside also (Robert remembers it well), but it's gone, and the kitchen inside, although period charming, is a recent development.

Robert isn't familiar with the elegant dining room—he'd not had any reason to be in there before. We are taken upstairs through all the bedrooms, and I wonder if he has ever been up there before.

He never says if he has, only, "Talk about ghosts! They wouldn't wait till night to come out here—they'd be right out there in the daytime!"

We began at the rear and end up on the front porch. It's a wide, wrap around porch with massive Doric columns, and is repeated on the upstairs balcony. The lawn is large and green with big old trees, and you just want to sit down on one of those

white wooden chairs and dream. Colonel Matthews tells us the Union army made this its headquarters in the fall of 1863 and spared it because the owner was a Union sympathizer.

Lingered, looking out across the lawn at the train going by, Tommie Lee tells me about how when she was in high school, she had to take a train every day to the black school in Lafayette. The government paid for the students' tickets rather than have them in school with white children. The whole day is a sobering experience for a Southern white girl, and at no point more so than right there on that blinding white porch.

After a down home good dinner at the Tigers Inn, a place that appears not to have changed inside or out for at least forty years (Matthews directed us there, and from the window you can see part of the mansion across the street), we set out to

way he points out a particular house. This is where, he says, more than once was discovered a small fire burning on the back stoop where no fire should have been. When the owner was alerted, he did not appear alarmed but rather resigned to it. Eventually, this man in his 80s went out and sat down at an outdoor table and shot himself.

Finally Robert pulls up into a yard to ask directions to the old church building. A man is working in the yard, and there is a Confederate flag on his parked truck. It occurs to me he might be asking the wrong fellow, and it will be the rottweiler all over again. But the man is most helpful, even gets in his truck and drives ahead to show us. It is all there up in the woods on that hill, overgrown with brush but intact.

We stand in the driveway with our guide, who stays and shares some local history. Robert had told me before that almost anyone in Valley Head could and would tell you ghost stories. This man, Gary, is a confirmed realist. He has no interest in our ghost stories. He is a just-the-

facts sort of guy. After a few subtle tries on the subject, though, Robert has him telling us about a close friend of his who was awakened by the ghost of his own dead mother checking to see if he was covered on a cold night. Things like that are not for Gary, but he is not one to doubt the word of a friend.

Several times during the day I regret having forgotten my camera. Robert says he seriously considered bringing his but decided against it. He's not sure he wants pictures in the house that would cause him to wake up in the night with nightmares. I remember his disinterest in going back to Valley Head all those years, and thoughts of Jim Crow era horror tales are looming in the back of my mind, and I'm wondering if he's not talking ghosts anymore.

It takes me a while to get up the courage to press him further on the subject. If he has not already said more, it might be he thinks I would not be interested. When I do finally ask, several weeks later, he seems ready to spill the beans. We all meet over Sunday dinner at the Plantation Restaurant in Chickamauga, Georgia, a nondescript little place with

A close friend of his was awakened by the ghost of his own dead mother checking to see if he was covered on a cold night.

look for the site of Robert's best ghost story. He likes to tell how, not just once or twice or three times, but many times he has stood at the foot of the hill and heard an entire church service—sermon and singing all—coming from the old church building in the woods which also served as the school for black children.

Whenever he tried walking on up that hill to better join the nocturnal worshippers, all became quiet and still, empty. They were still holding services in that building then—on Sunday and the occasional revival meetings, to be sure, but these were on nights when nothing was supposed to have been going on there. He used to take unbelievers there—he was a regular tour guide for the ghosts.

I wonder but don't ask about details of the story. What songs were they singing? What was the sermon about? Was it all just a blend of sound and impressions, or was it clear as a bell, and if so, has he understandably forgotten the details?

He is sure it is no longer standing, but Matthews just this morning said it was. Robert drives to where he thinks it ought to be, but has trouble finding it. Along the

great home cooking and real biscuits.

I haven't brought my notebook and wonder if there will be enough napkins to write on, but it turns out there's no need for either. Mr. Winston has been laughing at me, waiting for me to ask, sensing my questions. And he doesn't have a thing to tell me; neither one of them does.

"Guess I'm not giving you much to write about," he laughs. Raised in a north Alabama hamlet in the thirties, and in the forties in a small town in Georgia—site and name of a most famous Civil War battle and to this day proudly entrenched in its own history—this gentleman of African American heritage can tell me of no more than segregated schools and sitting in the balcony of the movie theater the one time he remembers going to a movie (it was "Gone with the Wind").

Those situations at that time seemed so normal to him, they went unquestioned. His father and his mother made respec-

story. Or is it? Maybe it ought to be spread widely so that out of the smoke of Mississippi burning and all the other too real horror tales of racism of all colors, will stand a testament to a brighter America. It's a part of our history often made out to be as doubtful as ghost stories, far from perfect but weighing heavily in favor of decent, freedom loving individuals, subject to change and improve without rewriting history. That's better than a tale of the supernatural any day.

...He says he never felt afraid walking out at night on his many boyish adventures (the exception being when he heard voices crying in the cemetery)...

tively one dollar a day and fifty cents a day, but he never went hungry. They raised their children to work, so that Robert was making his own money by the age of eleven. He says he never felt afraid walking out at night on his many boyish adventures (the exception being when he heard voices crying in the cemetery), never was a victim of racial cruelty. Tommie Lee's is a similar experience.

So aside from the ghosts, it's a non

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Another Man's Shoes

a memoir from the road by David Ray Skinner

The winter of late 1976 and early 1977 was an unusually long and cold one in middle Tennessee. It started snowing on New Year's Eve, and it seemed like it didn't stop until Spring. Or, at least the snow and ice stayed on the ground.

I was *painfully* aware of this. Just the summer before, I had gleefully bought a 1965 Volkswagen van. This was inspired by *Urge*, the one driven by David Ray Davenport (no relation) in Gurney Norman's "Divine Right's Trip," a novel that had been printed in its entirety in the lower left- and right-hand corners of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. I called mine *Van Go*, but unfortunately, most of the time, it didn't. The microbus looked okay on the outside, but the interior had been stripped down in an apparent failed attempt to convert it into a hippie wagon. There was no upholstery, shards of metal where the door handles were supposed to be, and the only two seats in the van weren't even bolted down...they were held down by the seatbelts, or I should say, they were held down if the seatbelts were used. If they *weren't* used, they flopped around like renegade rocking chairs. I had thrown lounge chairs in the back for when I had more than one passenger.

Once the weather turned cold, I discovered that the van's heater wasn't hooked up. (Even when Volkswagen van heaters worked correctly, they were ineffective at best.) The old VW vans captured the heat from the engine, which was located in the rear, and piped it through the interior. That was, unless the upholstery was dismantled to convert it into a hippie wagon. Since that was the case, I could turn the heat on, but it just blew out the tube in the very back of the van...a long, long way from the

jump start the van. This was done fairly easily with the van's manual four-speed; I'd just turn on the key, get it rolling four or five miles per hour in first or second gear with the clutch depressed...then, I'd pop the clutch and *Van Go* would spring to life. However, when there was no incline, I'd have to push the van by myself (in neutral), jump up into the driver's seat

(which was usually rocking around, remember), turn the key, push in the clutch, throw the gearshift up into gear, pop the clutch, and hope that the van had reached the minimum four miles per hour.

The only problem with this procedure was the shard of metal (on inside of the stripped down door) that used to be the door handle...inevitably the door would slam shut as I was jumping from the street into the driver's seat, and the

driver's seat on a cold winter night.

I finally gave in and bought a long piece of heater hose and several thick, pea-green moving blankets...the kind the movers throw between your furniture in the truck to keep it from banging against each other and getting scratched. I would wrap myself from head to knee in the heavy green blankets and run the heater hose from the rear up to the front and wedge it into the quilted folds. People often stared and pointed. I must have looked like an alien nun driving down Interstate 40.

To make matters worse, once the temperature dropped below 40 degrees, the van's starter wouldn't work. It would crank alright...it would crank and crank until the battery gave out. So, I got in the habit of parking on an incline, so I could

torn-off handle would tear into my pants and occasionally my leg. It's a wonder I didn't get Tetanus that winter. Plus, the pants would be ruined, but in an attempt to salvage them, I'd cut them off and convert them to shorts. For 20 years after that, every time I moved I'd find cut-off blue jeans, dress pants, and khakis with a ragged slit in the left leg.

Not long after I had bought the van, I found my first job in Nashville as an art director. Although I didn't really know what an art director was, the guy that hired me knew even less about what an art director was. Together, we somehow figured out how to publish a travel book about Nashville, and had he not run out of money, I'm sure it would have been a big success. One morning when I showed up for work, he told me he couldn't afford to



pay me any more. "How am I going to pay my rent?" I asked.

"Easy," he replied, "You move in with us and live rent-free."

"Us" was my boss, two rodeo cowboys (one who was real and the other who just wore the clothes) and a cowgirl, all under the roof of a sprawling, suburban house on a high hill in Brentwood, just south of Nashville. The house's steep driveway was perfect for push-starting Van Go. Perfect, that is, until New Year's Eve, when it snowed and iced over. If you've ever tried to push-start a car on a sheet of ice, you know that it won't work...when you pop the clutch, the tires just lock up and slide on the ice.

When I finally got Van Go started, I drove to my dad and stepmother's house in Lebanon (just east of Nashville on Interstate 40), parked it and spent the rest of that winter there. After being out on my own, it was humiliating to

have to move back in with my parents to cocoon for the winter, but it was better than freezing to death and making the front page of the *Nashville Banner*: "Alien Nun Found Frozen in Pseudo Hippie Van."

So, you can imagine my sheer joy when Spring came knocking on the door that March. Then, my friend Filmore called from Knoxville and said that he was going to have a *Spring Equinox* party the following weekend to welcome the season and to celebrate the demise of the long, cold winter. Back in those days—before he became a priest—Filmore used to have some outrageous parties, and this one promised to outrage the outrageous.

So, that following Saturday morning, I changed the oil in Van Go, and got it as road-worthy as I could. I then threw a bag of clean clothes and my old guitar in the back (with the lounge chairs) and headed down Interstate 40. When I arrived at Filmore's, the East Tennessee weather had started warming up and the preparations for the *Spring Thing* were in high gear. It was a gathering of the tribe, as it were, and folks were coming in from all over.

I had met Filmore in the first week of our Freshman year at Carson-Newman a half dozen years before. He was one of the founding members of our band, *Contents Under Pressure*, the name taken from the label of a can of shaving cream sold at the college bookstore to returning students as

part of a *Value Toiletry Pack*. The band had been the eye of the hurricane for the college's fringe rebels, many of which were returning for the celebration.

Filmore, however, had dropped out of Carson-Newman and later studied art, namely expressionist painting, at the University of Tennessee. As a manifestation of this interest, he had stretched a 20-foot canvas on the side of an old wooden garage and had set out brushes and paints for the guests attending the Spring Thing; the painting that we would collectively create was to be the Thing's big event...one that hopefully would survive as a piece of art beyond the Spring, 1977, and the 20th Century.

We were in the middle of a hotly-con-

**"Good grief, you're a picker,"
he said, "No wonder you're on foot."**

tested game of Frisbee football when Filmore called out from his front porch that my dad was calling long distance... never a good sign. Sure enough, my dad gave me the sad news that my grandmother had passed away. The funeral was going to be in a couple of days in the old hometown of Dover, in West Tennessee, and they wanted me and all the other grandsons to be pallbearers.

It was one of my first experiences of cascading lives, where past eras of my life—in this case, my childhood and my college days—collided and ground against each other like one of the earth's plates.

Here was my dilemma: I knew that Van Go would get me back to Lebanon (where I would ride down to Dover with my dad and my stepmother); but I was fairly sure that the old van would not make the return trip to East Tennessee and back again after the funeral. I had taken the entire week off, and I had been looking forward to seeing and playing music with some of my Gatlinburg friends that following weekend. The only solution was to leave Van Go in Filmore's back yard, hitchhike the 200 miles back to my dad's house in Lebanon, and, after the funeral, hitchhike back to Knoxville, pick up Van Go and continue my East Tennessee vacation. I'm not saying it was totally logical...but that's just the way we thought back in those days. Plus, just the year before, I had spent

three months on the road, hitching all up and down the West Coast. I wasn't that comfortable with it, because of the obvious danger and factor of the unknown, but I knew how to do it.

Filmore took me, my bag of clothes and my guitar to the Cedar Bluff Road entrance to Interstate 40/75, in west Knoxville, and before long, I got a ride. However, they were going to Atlanta, and they dropped me off where Interstate 40/75 splits, I-75 heading south to Chattanooga, and I-40 continuing west to Nashville. The problem was, it was the middle of nowhere. I had always been wary of hitchhikers standing in the middle of nowhere, far from the nearest exit, and now that mysterious hitchhiker was *me*.

While I was in the middle of pondering my predicament, a blurred brown flash screeched to a halt fifty yards or so ahead of me (it's hard to come to a standing stop

when you're doing 70 or 80 miles per hour). I ran the distance and half expected the old Chevy stationwagon to pull off when I was within a few yards...that was apparently some sort of mean-spirited sport back in those days. I approached on the passenger's side, opened the front door first (so I could jump in if they were thinking of driving off with my guitar and bag of clothes...another mean-spirited sport), and threw my guitar and clothes bag into the back seat and swung into the front seat.

The tired-eyed man behind the stationwagon's wheel looked like he was most likely in his late fifties. He was dressed in workclothes, and he wore a two-day stubble of beard on his chin. He sized me up as the stationwagon idled there at the side of the interstate.

"Do you have a current driver's license?" he finally asked.

I laughed and pointed at my guitar and said, "Sure, that's not my regular car."

He looked into the rearview mirror and spotted my guitar on the backseat. "Good grief," he said, "you're a picker...no wonder you're on foot. Where are you headed?"

"Lebanon," I said, and seeing his confused look, added, "It's just east of Nashville."

"Look," he said, "Here's the deal. I've been driving all night and I'm tired, and I've got a long way to go. I'll let you ride to this side of Nashville, but I'd appreciate

it if you'd drive and let me take a nap."

So, I went around to the driver's side as he slid across the seat, still watching carefully and wondering what I would do if he decided to drive off with my stuff when I was behind the car. Once inside, I felt a need to explain why I was hitching. "I do have my own car," I said as I pulled off the shoulder accelerating onto the interstate, "It's a vintage 1965 Volkswagen van."

"Again," he laughed, "No wonder you're on foot."

"Ouch!" I said.

"Oh, I'm just giving you a hard time," he grinned, "I used to be in the music business, myself," he explained.

"Doing what?"

"Well, I know it's hard to believe by looking at me now, but I used to be the conductor of an orchestra."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so. But that was quite a while ago. I got burnt out. I gave it all up, threw in my baton and moved to the mountains of Carolina where life is a lot simpler. I'm on my first vacation in a long time. I hadn't really needed one."

"I'm guessing there's not a lot of orchestras in the mountains."

"Like I said, I gave it all up...now I'm a short order cook."

I looked over at him to see if he was putting me on, but he was settling into the seat, leaning up against the passenger door and pulling his painter's cap down over his eyes.

"So what kind of music do you play on that thing?" he asked, thumbing in the direction of my guitar on the backseat.

"I don't know exactly what you'd call it. Country, I guess. I write my own songs."

"Country!" he laughed, sitting up and adjusting his cap. "I got a story for you."

"Back around '49 or '50, I was in a bar in Chicago one cold winter night, just drinking to try and keep warm. Outside, it was snowing to beat the band, and every time someone walked in from off the street, the Chicago wind would blow the snow and ice through the room like a Siberian tornado. So, we were all huddled around the bar like a bunch of stunned sheep. The door opened, for what seemed to be the hundredth time, only this time instead of one of the usual suspects, this tall thin hillbilly walks in, pretty as you

please, like he didn't have a care in the world. And if he did have a coat, it wasn't an overcoat or a heavy coat like the rest of us huddled around our drinks were wearing. And his clothes were unlike any clothes I'd ever seen before. To begin with, he was wearing a big ol' Stetson, which was not all that common in Chicago, and his shirt was all sparkly with



"He looked like a cowboy that had been dipped in shiny sprinkles."

glittering cactus plants and lassos. He looked like a cowboy that had been dipped in shiny sprinkles.

"And he walks up to the bar friendly enough, but friendly in a way like he owned the place, and he ordered a beer and a shot of Jack Daniels and ordered another round of both before he'd barely finished the first two. Now while the barmaid is pouring his second shot, the fellow that had been sitting next to me—a crusty ol' dock worker—slides over and sits on the barstool next to the hillbilly, all the while looking at the guy's feet. And we're all thinking, uh oh, here we go. And I'm thinking, man, it's just too cold for a fight. It's a real mess when blood freezes, and if one of 'em goes through the big plate

glass window, all that snow and ice out there is gonna be in here in a matter of seconds...like some giant, dimly lit, polar vacuum.

"But the hillbilly cowboy takes it all in stride. He smiles at the guy and raises his glass slightly in a casual sort of toast as the dock worker clears his throat and says, 'Hey Buddy, I was just admiring your boots.' And that's usually how it starts. People around the bar were starting to pay attention to the scene...the bar got all quiet except for the bar stools scraping as people jockeyed for position to get a better look at what they thought would be the oncoming fireworks.

"I mean it," the guy says, "I've never seen a pair of boots as beautiful as those." Of course, we were all still thinking that he was trying to start something, but then it slowly dawned on us that this old dock worker was serious!"

"So, were they?" I asked, as the East Tennessee landscape rushed by. I checked the old stationwagon's speedometer as a Tennessee Highway Patrolman came up quickly on my left side and watched with relief as he whizzed on past.

"Were they what?" asked my storyteller, still leaning comfortably against the passenger door.

"Beautiful. Were the country boy's boots beautiful?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, half grinning, half irritated, "I didn't get that good of a look at 'em. All I can remember is they went with his outfit. But this old dock worker thought they were special.

"So this glitter cowboy threw back a shot of Jack Daniels, set his glass down on the bar, leans back and pulls the boots off, one by one. Then he reaches down and picks both of 'em up and puts 'em down on a little table by the bar. Then he kind of tips his cowboy hat and he gives the old dock worker a crooked grin and says, 'Mister, here, they're yours.'

"Well, the old dock worker looks at him for a few seconds, like he can't believe his ears. I guess he thought the hillbilly was going to change his mind, 'cause he reaches over, grabs the boots and runs out of the bar without so much as a 'thank you,' 'kiss my foot' or nothing.

"Nobody in the bar said anything. There was just a kind of stunned silence.

"Oh he ain't exactly crazy,' she said,
'He's just a country singer."

Then, after a moment, it's like somebody plugged the plug back in or pushed the 'reset' button, and everybody went back to drinking and carrying on. Including the hillbilly. He turned back around to the bar and ordered another beer with a shot of J.D. And he finished 'em off just as quick. Then he slid a bill under his beer mug, tipped his hat and pulled open the big cold doors, and headed back out into the snow and ice. Barefoot. I told the barmaid that old dock worker could have at least left him his old workboots and she just laughed. I asked her, 'Has that cowboy fellow been in here before?'

"'Oh yeah,' she said.

"And I asked her what kind of crazy S.O.B. is he, anyway...giving up his shoes in this kind of weather?"

"'Oh he ain't exactly crazy,' she said, 'He's just a country singer.'

"'What country?' I asked.

"'Country,' she said, 'As in Country Western. His name's Hank Williams. They say he's famous down there in Tennessee.'

"So, I guess it would sound like I was bragging, or at least stretching the truth, to say he was a *friend* of mine, but I *can* at least say he was a drinking buddy. Of course, everybody else in that bar that snowy night has probably said the same kind of thing and told the same story their own way with their own slant."

Not too much later, we passed the sign announcing my parents' exit off Interstate 40. "This is where I'm getting off," I told him, "My parents' house is just a mile or two on up the road."

"You've gotten used to the wheel," he smiled, "You may as well go on and drive yourself all the way to the house. Unless you want to drive me all the way to Oklahoma."

"I can't miss my grandmother's funeral," I told him.

My grandmother's funeral was in Dover a few days later, and it was a carbon copy of so many others that I had attended

with my family, my aunts and uncles, and even with her. There was the standard Baptist preaching and singing, and then we buried her next to my grandfather in an old country cemetery that we passed without a second thought so many times on the way to picnics and family reunions at the lake.

At my Uncle Ray's house, back in town, we all fixed plates from the food that the neighbors and kinfolks had brought in. As I ate fried chicken and potato salad, I started thinking about the trip ahead; first back to Lebanon in the car with my dad and stepmother, and then hitch back to Knoxville to revive and retrieve Van Go (and hope the temperature stayed above 40 degrees).

"David Ray," my Uncle Ray interrupted my reverie, "did you bring your guitar?"

"It's in the car," I said.

"How about a song?" he asked.

I went outside and pulled my old guitar out of the trunk and brought it into the house.

"I've got a couple of new songs I've just written," I said, tuning the low E string.

"That's great," said Uncle Ray, "but I was thinking maybe you could play some Hank Williams."

I played a short bluegrass intro and started singing, "I wandered so aimless..." and one by one, everybody put their plates down and joined in.

dskinner@america.net

To hear the musical version of this story as an MP3 (5 MB) go to:
<http://www.SouthernReader.com/AnotherMan'sShoes.mp3>

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Crawdads Have Pinchers

by Joseph E. Schild

Childhood memories are something to treasure if you are fortunate enough to be reared in a family of memory makers. On that note, I must count myself truly blessed, for my parents and extended family of aunts, uncles and grandparents were just that, memory makers. Story telling was an art in our family and some of the stories told by my grandfather were often accompanied by hand, facial and body gestures along with sound effects in some cases. Remembering his tale about the giant pumpkin still brings laughter to me. When my father worked at the defense plant on second shift, mother would have my sister and me sitting beside her on the sleeper sofa and read wonderful stories from all sorts of books. My imagination would run wild with mental images of the characters' lives and happenings, particularly the stories about the Yukon gold rush days. From the time I was a lad of perhaps five or six, I clearly recall our family making the Sunday journey to see my paternal grandparents and Aunt Mary, grandma's spinster sister who lived with them. It was a wonderful time for this lad. Their house always seemed warm and inviting with the special fragrances of homemade breads, cakes and pies. Their stories of long ago carried the same warmth and rich flavor. You see, Grandpa was the family oral historian and I sensed early on that he not only enjoyed a good story, but also was compelled by history to tell us everything about the family. By the time I learned to write, or I should say print, my mother encouraged me to keep a journal to record the daily events and in particular the stories I heard. She and my father also encouraged my imagination and let me run wild with it, for those were hard times during the Second World War when so many things were rationed and toys were not high on the list. From those crude journals and memory, I have written many short stories in the third person about my childhood adventures and the following is just a sample of life in the Nineteen Forties. I was born in August and eight years old at the time long ago. I was a child of summer with my skin tanned a soft brown, my hair was sun bleached white, and my buddies called me Cotton. This is a Cotton tale.

It was mid July and the weather was hot, humid, and absolutely perfect as far as Cotton was concerned. His hair was already sun bleached white, which was the reason for the name his buddies gave him.

His skin was a soft brown tan from the long days spent in adventures around his hillside home and the wondrous woods. For the young lad, this was the most perfect existence one might have and he wished it would never end.

Most summer days were spent in his woods with his best buddy Roger and together, they made repairs to their fort and even added on to it. This would give them room to camp out, if their parents would allow it. The cool depths of the woods offered the boys some relief from the heat when most folks sought out a fan or a cold glass of lemon aid under the shade of a wide porch to cool off during the heat of the day.



The lads often lay on the soft bed of leaves and looked skyward through the tall canopy of trees, dreaming the dreams of

adventurous youths. Only the flying acrobatics of the gray squirrels or Midnight, Cotton's solid black cat, would break the reverie.

There were some days when the lads' fathers took them fishing on the creek bank below the Chickamauga Dam. Ever since Cotton caught his first fish, the lad was hooked and loved this adventure almost as much as any other in his list of best things he liked to do. It was also nice that the two men were good friends and worked together at the defense plant.

One Friday afternoon, Cotton's father told him to get up early the next morning, because they were going with Roger and Raymond, Roger's father, to seine minnows from a small branch. "What we catch will allow us to fish all weekend."

This news made Cotton so excited

about a new adventure, it took him longer than normal to go to sleep that night. Visions of a huge fish on the end of his line kept swimming through his dreams and the harder he pulled, the closer he slipped toward the water.

Saturday morning dawned already hot with hardly a whisper of a breeze. The window curtains did not even move and there were beads of perspiration on his mother's face as she fixed them breakfast. After quickly eating and completing his morning chores, Cotton was ready. At seven thirty, he heard a car pull into the drive. The lad bounded out the back door to greet Roger and Raymond.

"Hey Roger."

"Hi Cotton, you ready to go fishing?" the dark skinned lad asked.

"You betcha," Cotton replied and pantomimed holding his fishing pole with a big fish on the end of the line.

The two boys were ready for this trip and the fun they would have, because catching fish of any size was a perfect way to spend a summer day.

Father brought out four large buckets and placed them in the spacious trunk of Raymond's nineteen forty-one Chevrolet. The minnow seine and other equipment was already

stowed and as soon as everyone was in the car, Raymond told them to hold on, for they were off to Georgia. With those words said, they pulled out and headed off for adventure and great new fun together.

"What type minnows will we find?" father asked.

"Oh, probably shiners and some chubs," Raymond replied. "My brother and I seined from this branch a few weeks ago for his bait and tackle store."

Cotton and Roger sat on the back seat and looked at the new sights as they listened to their fathers talk. Both boys enjoyed the occasions they went on trips together and there was the usual good-natured joking and poking going on. They also learned from the men, because in those days, fathers were heroes.

"What about crawfish?" Father asked. "You know Bass and Sauger love to hit them."

"We'll let the boys catch them," Raymond replied with a big grin and a wink as if there was some sort of surprise in store for the lads.

The trip seemed to take forever for Cotton. When they drove over the Market Street Bridge, he looked down and saw their favorite picnic spot far below them. He also saw the boat dock where he caught his first fish several years ago. At the wharf, he saw a steamboat tied up and trails of black smoke coming from the two tall stacks. A tugboat struggled to push a string of barges upstream toward a port north of Chattanooga.

Raymond drove them right down Market Street between the tall buildings and shops, and then crossed over to Broad and took a left toward Lookout Mountain. When they passed the tannery, everyone held their noses, for the smell was terrible. A little further, they turned onto Saint Elmo Avenue that led them past the Incline Railway.

"What would happen if the cable broke?" Cotton asked as he looked up at the steep slope of the mountain.

"Oh, not much. The car has brakes on it that would stop it from crashing to the bot-

Cotton was reasonably satisfied with the answer, because he knew his father would not tell him a lie. His father, Sky King, and Sergeant Preston would never tell lies.

tom," Father answered.

Cotton was reasonably satisfied with the answer, because he knew his father would not tell him a lie. His father, Sky King, and Sergeant Preston would never tell lies.

Shortly, they crossed over into Georgia and after a brief distance down the road, they pulled off into a picnic area beside a branch. The boys darted from the car with eagerness. They stood along the branch to look for minnows, while their fathers removed the buckets and seine from the car trunk.

Cotton looked into the cold, clear water and saw flashes of silver minnows darting for cover. "Here's some," he called.

Roger spotted a school a little further down stream. "Oh wow, here is a bunch."

Both boys were excited with their discoveries and it was a miracle they did not fall into the water the first few minutes they were there.

"Come over here, boys," Father called.

Cotton and Roger walked along the bank of the branch to a spot where father

sat next to some large boulders at the base of the mountain. "Here is where the water comes from," he explained as he pointed to a yawning cave.

From that opening came a torrent of cold water and an equally cold breeze that made the nearby bushes rustle and shake. Even though the day was already hot, this blast of cold air made Cotton shiver, but it felt good.

"This is Blowing Springs as everyone knows it and later in the day, the area will be full of families enjoying the cool breeze, cold water and the shade under the huge trees," Raymond explained.

To the boys' delight, Raymond dropped a watermelon into the cold water for them to eat after the chores were finished.

"Well, it's time for some fun, boys," Raymond said as he and father spread the minnow seine and stepped into the branch about fifty feet downstream.

"Oh man, that is cold," father said as his feet sank to the bottom.

"You boys splash and make some noise to drive the minnows to the seine," Raymond told them.

Oh wow, this was so much fun for the lads and they could not have had a better chore. After all, cold

water in a branch and boys bare feet are a natural playground. Cotton and Roger lined up and started to thrash the water by jumping up and down with much fun and delight. The boys slowly herded the schools of flashing shiners toward the awaiting seine their fathers held.

"That's it. Keep it up," Father called to them.

With a wet swoop, the men lifted the seine up to reveal what appeared to be hundreds of flipping and flopping silvery minnows. Quickly, the men walked to the bank where the buckets had been left three-quarters full of cold spring water. As they held the seine out, Cotton and Roger used hand nets to scoop up the shiners and dump them into the buckets. Some of the minnows flipped around so much they were able to escape, but there were so many, a few escapees did not matter.

With one trip of the seine they caught enough shiners and a few chubs to supply loads of fishing for them over the next few days. Raymond and Father carried the buckets to a cool spot near the car and set-

tled down to enjoy the morning watching their sons play and just be boys.

“Hey boys, catch us some crawdads,” Father called out to them.

“Yeah, we might catch some large bass on them,” Raymond added.

Cotton had seen crawdads before, but had never caught them by hand. This was going to be something new and loads of fun, he thought.

“I’ll lift the rock and you catch the critter,” Roger said.

Cotton watched his best buddy lift a big flat stone in the water and suddenly, a crawdad swum out backwards, right into his hands. Cotton grabbed the critter with some giggling and laughter. The problem with crawdads is, they grab back. To Cotton’s total surprise and anguish, that old crawdad clamped down on a finger with a big claw.

Cotton let out a whoop and a holler, and danced up and down with that ugly critter dangling on his finger. It seemed the more the lad shook his hand up and down, the harder that beast clamped down, but nonetheless, the creature was at last sent flying back into the cold water with a splash.

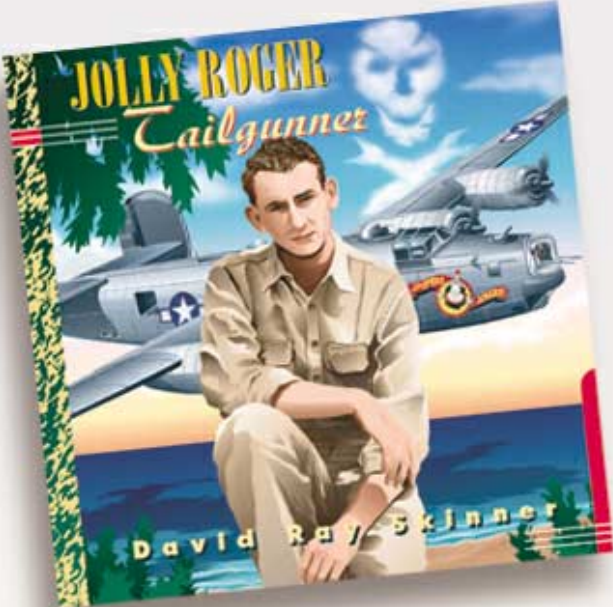
Father and Raymond hooted and laughed till their sides ached. Roger was laughing too, and then Cotton was caught up in laughter as he felt the pain go away. *I must have been a real funny sight as I jumped up and down hollering,* he thought. Cotton learned something from the experience other than how not to catch a crawdad. Sometimes, it’s great fun to laugh at one’s self, and just enjoy the moment.

It was no great surprise the boys laughed so hard they fell into the water with much splashing and wild kicking, which only made the moment more perfect, on a perfect summer day, in a superbly perfect month of July. Not even the cold slices of watermelon or a seed-spitting contest would make it any better.


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Joe is an older writer with a slightly twisted sense of humor who strives to be a soft curmudgeon. Joe loves writing about childhood adventures and many of his short stories are from that era.

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What is The South, Exactly?

by David Clark

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The question has been posed: “What is the South, exactly?” A good answer would be: “My Mama’s cornbread was perfect.” The question and proposed answer remind me of one of those Hindu riddles which sound ridiculous and incomprehensible to those who don’t understand them, but actually have great meaning for those who do.

I can no more explain what the South is, exactly, than I can explain why Mama’s cornbread was perfect. But, a Southern person would understand what I meant when I said Mama’s cornbread was perfect, whereas a person from outside the South might not have a clue.

A friend of mine from Minnesota had some interesting things to say about the South. He’s an engineer and had travelled to numerous countries throughout the world setting up his company’s machinery. He’d work side-by-side with locals in

Korea, Thailand, and all kinds of other places far from America. He’d eat the local food, drink the local beer, and in general, immerse himself in the local culture during his three-month stay in a given place. Then my friend from Minnesota got sent to Macon, Georgia—which is how I met him. He told me that the South was as much another country as any place he’d ever been.

My experiences as a touring musician provided me with the opportunity to see a lot of America. I’ve been to 41 states. My

main activity while travelling was striking up conversations with locals. Most of my 40-odd thousand miles of touring was spent seeing the backroads and small towns of America.

I learned several things during the course of several thousand conversations over coffee. One thing I learned was that most people have never ventured far from their home, and are fascinated with people from other places. Another thing is that most folks outside the South base their impressions of the South on Gomer Pyle, Andy Griffith, *Deliverance*, and images from civil-rights riots of the 60’s. Probably the most interesting thing I learned was how much alike people were everywhere I went.

There seems to be a special fascination with the South. In some way or another, almost everybody wants to be a redneck. I

heard country music playing in the most unexpected places—New Jersey, Maine, California. And if you think about it, what American music doesn't have Southern roots? All American music descends from some combination of the blues or mountain music, with those two musical styles merging and giving birth to a buck-tooth, cross-eyed baby named *Country*, a dapper youth with a string tie named *Bluegrass*, and a smoky pair of twins wearing sunglasses named *Jazz* and *Swing*. These children gave birth to further offspring, from the baby wearing leather diapers named *Rock and Roll* to the finger-popping child named *Soul*, all the way down to the present incarnations of this strange and beautiful family descended from mostly illiterate outcasts who found a way to express joy and pain with instruments and voice.

I saw as many "Confederate" flags flying in Central Illinois as I do in south Georgia. Many rear windows and bumpers of vehicles across the Northern and Midwestern parts of our country feature what are commonly called the *Stars-and-Bars*. I asked a couple of Illinois men why

they had a Rebel flag on their truck. "What, you got some problem with that?"

I laughed, and pointed to my Georgia license plate.

"Oh, then, I guess you understand."

"Well, yeah, I think I understand how I feel about it, but why do *YOU* have that flag on your truck?"

"Oh, for me, it's simple. It means I don't want the government bothering me. I want to be left alone."

Hmm. That sounds familiar—it sounds just like something a Georgia boy would say.

"So, in your mind, that flag has nothing to do with race?"

"Hell, no, it's got nothing to do with race."

That's funny, isn't it? A man in Illinois, home of the troops that burned their way across Georgia in 1864, far from "the South" and never having been there, understanding something about the South that "the Media" doesn't seem to get at all. Why is that? I don't know. All I know is that there wasn't a single restaurant in his town where I could get cornbread.

I was talking with a woman outside a diner on the street in a small

Massachusetts town. We had met at the counter, and had a good conversation over several cups of coffee. Outside the diner she said: "You know, it's really a shame how you people in the South treat the blacks."

I had been in this town for five days and hadn't seen the first black person. I asked the lady what she meant.

"Oh, everybody knows you hate the blacks down there and treat them badly."

"Have you ever been down South?"

"No, but everybody knows it."

"Oh, really? Who do you dislike in this town?"

She looked down the street, and there was a group of dark-skinned men walking towards us. "Those people right there—those damned Portuguese that come over here every year to dig cranberries. We hate those people. They're dirty and nasty, and they commit a lot of crime."

I asked a couple of Illinois men why they had a Rebel flag on their truck.

I didn't ask the lady anything else about the Portuguese and her intimate knowledge of the South. She had to go back to work. She crossed the street so she wouldn't have to walk past the Portuguese men. They walked past me, and smiled and spoke to me when I spoke to them.

I spent the afternoon in Poughkeepsie, New York, talking to a sixty-something year old black man from Georgia. He'd moved up there when he was a little boy with his parents. He was one of three black men in New York who told me the same basic anecdote: "Down south, a man running a restaurant will say, 'Get outta here nigger, we don't want you in here.' Up north, they'll say, 'come on in, sir,' and then they spill hot soup in your lap.' I'd rather have the man down south anyway -- I don't like what he says, but at least you know where you stand."

I've never heard anyone tell anyone to get out of a restaurant in the South, nor have I seen anyone spill soup in anyone's lap up North. Maybe those days are gone, and no one stops to think about them being gone.

Quite a few black folks have told me they thought the South was racist—until

they moved up North. Some of them came back South for that reason. There's a difference in the two cultures. In the South, whites and blacks have lived together for almost three hundred years, if not longer. In my own county, there are black and white families who've been living near each other, working together, and knowing each other for five generations. In the North, you've got people whose family hasn't even been in America but two generations, and they're "just not quite sure what to do with all these blacks" that keep coming around. Of course, now that expression is extending to Mexicans as well.

By the time most of us Southern boys were in the fourth grade, we could quote the books of the Bible, tell the story of how America was born, name most of the Generals from both sides of the Civil War, and tell all the stories of Jesus and Moses. We were steeped in a culture of myth and legend, filled

with characters of monumental proportion. All of us growing up in Middle Georgia knew someone whose Grandma still talked about "the War" as if it had just ended the month before—and they were talking about what is properly known as "The War Between the States," or, as many still call it, "The War of Northern Aggression." Some of the old, old folks still call it "The Recent Unpleasantness."

I don't know if being steeped in all these character-studies was good or bad, but we sure learned some history. And somehow or another, I think all of us Southerners share some common understanding about honor, glory, pain and suffering, about why Freedom matters and what it costs in human terms, and a wry sort of understanding about how a man named Sherman will never be forgiven.

A man in Illinois mentioned to me that "you people in the South still haven't gotten over the war yet." I asked what he meant. He said he was on his way to Florida and stopped to eat in Georgia. "I thought they were going to whip me before I got out of there. All I did was tell them I was from Illinois."

Ah, there's the mistake of the thing—

location, location, location. I asked him: “Tell me this, how would you feel if a bunch of Georgia boys had burned their way across Illinois, raped your Great-grandma, burnt her house down, stole her silver, and took her last hog?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I wouldn’t like Georgia people one bit if that had happened.”

“Have you ever heard of General Sherman?”

“Yeah, he was some guy from the Civil War, right?”

“Yessir, he and his boys burnt and raped and stole their way across Georgia. And you might want to remember, next time you go through Georgia, that the boys who were with him were mostly from Illinois. And the chances are pretty good you’ll meet someone everywhere you go in Georgia who’s descended from someone who got hurt personally by those boys.”

“I had no idea of that.”

I wanted to say, “uh, that’s obvious, sir,” but I didn’t.

He had no idea that some of Sherman’s boys did quite a bit of damage to the reputation of the Union Army while they visited our fair part of the land. I told this fellow about an older man I know who was raised in the same house with his Great-Grandma, who remembered being a little girl when Sherman’s men came through on their way to Savannah, and how her Mama had taken her and her brother and sister out in the swamp to hide.

Their neighbor decided to stay at home, figuring they’d cooperate with the Union soldiers. This little girl never forgot hearing their neighbors screaming, as the Union soldiers tied the neighbor lady and her children to the side of the barn and set it on fire. And then these soldiers “had the gall” to take the dying family’s cow. Needless to say, this older man’s sense of history is somewhat different than my friend from Illinois.

One will meet few natives of the deep South who don’t have some similar story in their background.

My own family, on my Mama’s side, entered America back in the late 1700’s. They probably came in at Charleston, as did many of the Scotch-Irish who came here either as indentured servants or as

free men left to scrape out a hard-scrabble existence in a land still filled with Indians and not much else. My great-great-Grandfather ended up venturing across South Carolina, apparently getting into a mishap with another man just shy of the state line. This prompted him to cross into Georgia at Elbert County, which was the only place to cross the Savannah River back in 1830. He married a gal in Elbert County and headed on over towards Jackson County, just east of what is now Atlanta.

James Jefferson Wilson never owned any slaves that I know of, being one of the majority of poor whites who scratched out a living with their hands and the help of a dozen children. Three or four of the boys

From what I understand, my cousins across the water are a breed of people who like to drink, dance, hug, fight, argue, and cry.

died in the Civil War, and the old man was injured and came home. After the war was over, he and a couple of the boys—along with a lot of the other people nearby—left their home east of Atlanta because of what are known as “carpetbaggers and scalawags.”

People don’t stop to think about the South having been an occupied country for about fifteen years or so after the Civil War, with many of the Northern politicians intent on punishing the Southern people. Small acts of vengeance, such as dispossessing men of property and any title or station, as well as removing them from duly elected office and replacing them with black men who couldn’t read or write, really went a long way towards helping the general “good feeling” of “reconstructed Southerners” towards their “brothers in the North.”

It’s obvious to all of us Southerners that Gomer Pyle really does represent a true character that we probably went to school with. We all know Goober, too, and Barney, and Aunt Bea, and all the rest of the gang in Mayberry. But possibly aside from the accent, doesn’t Gomer and the rest of the gang live in every county of this big, wide country? I’d say so, having met

a few representatives of this special breed in every place I’ve been.

Author Flannery O’Connor probably did a lot to circulate ideas of Southern mayhem and weirdness. All her characters were twisted in some way, it seems. One only has to pay slight attention to the daily news to see that these types of characters exist in every state of the Union, but for some reason, people love to hear about them from the South. Maybe it’s because humans love to kick someone around, and the South is one group of people who can still be kicked around in today’s politically correct world. You don’t see anyone standing up for Southerners when those outside the South make cracks about them, and the people down home either ignore the cracks or think they’re funny.

People don’t realize that most of the South is descended from the Scotch-Irish folks who were being kicked around for quite a while

before they came over here. Many of the newcomers to the Southern colonies—before they were known as colonies—were banished here by various leaders who wanted them gone. It was expected that they would die in the forests of the New World. Some of them did in fact die. The mean ones survived, and gave birth to the people who became our ancestry. This doesn’t mean that Southerners are meaner than other people, but simply to point out that anyone who survived coming to America two or three hundred years ago was a pretty tough old bird, and not likely to take kindly to being pushed around. This goes for Southerners and Northerners alike.

There’s probably something a little different about the Scotch-Irish breed, too. From what I understand, my cousins across the water are a breed of people who like to drink, dance, hug, fight, laugh, argue, and cry. They’re a tight-knit group of people in the old country who will fight each other until threatened from outside, at which point they will band together and fight the outsider. This description sounds just like some of the neighborhoods of America today.

Most people’s lack of travel leaves them to form their views of other folks by watching television. Before TV came along, their opinions were formed by what

their neighbors and preacher said. It's probably safe to say that most Americans have formed their opinion of anyone outside their town through having watched a half-dozen television shows. This means the ever-truthful Hollywood is responsible for the opinions of Americans about other people. Isn't this a comforting thought?

Back in 1991, I travelled to Japan. A buddy and I visited a mutual friend living in a small town of 30,000 situated northwest of Tokyo. While riding the train back to Tokyo at the end of the visit, some new-found friends from the small town rode with us. The train stopped at some point to pick up passengers, and these newly boarding passengers walked past us. Our small-town friends said something to each other in Japanese, and laughed. My buddy and I asked our Japanese-speaking American friend what they had said. "They said those people who just got on were hicks." We asked him to ask the Japanese friends why they thought that. "They said they could tell they were hicks because they talked funny."

I had a conversation with a Japanese woman I met near Atlanta. She was working at a Thai restaurant, and had lived in America for several years. I asked what she thought about it. "America is full of different people. It is amazing that everyone seems to get along." I asked her if she thought there was racism in American. "Nooo, no. Not near so much racism as in Japan. There is much dislike in Japan for those not like us."

A Nigerian man I met told me the same thing, even though everyone in his Nigerian hometown was pure African. He said they had intense racism in his village, but it was between Christian and Muslim.

And dadgum, all along I thought America was the ruler of racism in the world. The fact seems to be that nobody likes someone who isn't part of their group, and it seems that everyone will always be able to find someone to pick on, no matter what.

The South is full of good and decent people. So is the whole country, from what I saw. There are idiots everywhere one goes, of course. The main difference

in all of us is the way we talk. The people's native accent changes about every two counties in every direction. If you pay attention as you travel you can begin to hear it. I've been told there is a "movement" in colleges to teach "correct English," and that this "correctness" is based upon the sound of an NPR commentator. Obviously, the well-intentioned folks who got up this movement have never travelled across western Kentucky, or northern Alabama, or Central Missouri, or northern Minnesota, or talked to the old-time lobstermen in Maine, or the dairy farmers of western New York State, or ventured into the Tidewater areas of Virginia. Noah Adams does indeed have a great voice, but you won't find his sound-

**Turnips only have three legs,
you know, and even the slowest
redneck can usually run a few
down when he wants to.**

alike much of anywhere when talking to real Americans. His type only exists on the radio.

Southerners love a good story, and take any advantage given to tell one. The truth of the story doesn't really matter so much as whether or not it's told well. It's not unusual for any given story to convey some sort of truth that may or may not be readily discernible to the non-Southern listener. Southern stories often contain references to things non-Southerners might not be familiar with, like different foods, customs, Bible characters or verses, things a certain General did in 1862, or things that every Southerner's Mama taught him.

The South is indeed a world unto itself. We have, for all practical purposes, a language all our own, which can be thickened up to be almost unintelligible to a person from up North. I stopped in The Dixie Cafe somewhere in Wisconsin, sat down at the counter, and proceeded to plainly order turnip greens. The waitress asked me to repeat myself several times, finally became somewhat pale and wide-eyed, and said: "Hold on, yeah?"

The owner came out, looking sort of defensive. "What did you say to my girl here?" I told him I was trying to order turnip greens. He laughed, and said she'd thought I was making an off-color remark. I'm not sure what she thought I was say-

ing, but let this be a warning to you as you travel Northward. Be careful what you order in northern "Dixie" cafes. They might think you're cussing them out or making an indecent proposition. By the way, you won't find turnips anywhere up north. You might find them, but not at restaurants. They don't know what they are.

A diner in Canandaigua, New York, was filled by men and women talking about the opening day of deer season. Even the waitresses were talking about "the season" and "getting a deer." Finally, the waitress came to my table and asked for my order. I said: "Well, I'll take some turnips."

"What? Turnips? What's that? Where are you from?"

"Georgia."

"Oh. I've never heard of turnips. What's the season on those?"

"Well, we can hunt them most anytime, really, but usually the spring and fall are the best times."

"Oh—two seasons a year! What do you hunt them with?"

By this time, the whole place had become deadly quiet, as the locals were listening intently to the funny-talking guy taking their favorite waitress for a ride unbeknownst to herself.

"Well, some guys will use a shotgun, but that usually just makes too much of a mess. They're hard to hit with a bow and arrow. Most people just catch them by hand."

"By hand, wow! They must be sorta slow."

"Well, yeah, they're sort of slow. Turnips only have three legs, you know, and even the slowest redneck can usually run a few down when he wants to."

"Three legs? Wow, things are really weird down South, aren't they?"

Every man had his mouth covered with his hand trying to keep from laughing out loud.

One of the men at the counter finally said: "Damn, Julie." And the place busted out laughing. I don't know if she ever caught on.

It's a rule in the South that if a person asks a dumb question, one has complete

license to answer it in the most outlandish way, especially if there's an audience. It's almost considered a solemn obligation to do so, in fact.

A receptionist at a New York City friend's office asked me about pecans, because I'd brought them some. "These pecans—they grow on trees, right?" Her timing was perfect, because the whole office was gathered in the break room, drinking coffee, eating pecans and cookies. Everyone got real quiet when she asked her question. They all backed up so they could stand behind the receptionist, so she wouldn't see them laughing. Then, they all looked at me.

"Pecans? How do they grow? Well, they grow on short-growing vines, real close to the ground. Thousands of people have back problems in the South because of having to spend weeks bent over to harvest the pecans."

"Oh, things are so horrible down South."

The receptionist didn't know that all eight of her co-workers were standing behind her, doing their best to hold in their laughter. One woman had to leave the room because she was spitting Coke through her nose from laughing so hard.

"Well, that's not the worst of it. The really bad part is that every year quite a few people get taken over by the vines because they grow so fast. These people are smothered by the vines, and aren't found until the winter when the vines die back."

"Oh, working conditions have always been so horrible in the South."

About this time, everyone busted out laughing. The receptionist was taken aback. "What? What?" The receptionist then proceeded to get mad at me, of course, even though she had, by all rights, asked for the lesson. I soon left the office, and got on the elevator with a snazzily-dressed stockbroker lady from down the hall. As the elevator door was closing, here comes the receptionist, who put her hand in between the doors and stopped the elevator from moving. "Pecans DO grow on trees. I just looked it up on the Internet."

The fancy-dressed stockbroker lady looked at the receptionist, and then looked at me, raising an eyebrow. The receptionist turned to the stockbroker lady and said:

"He says pecans grow on vines. I say they grow on trees. What do you think?"

The stockbroker lady said, with a perfectly straight face: "Pecans grow on vines."

The receptionist gave up, letting the door close. I said to the stockbroker: "You ain't from here."

She looked at me and grinned: "Texas."

She knew about the code, and even though we had never met and hadn't had time to plan it out, we both participated in perpetuating a big, fat, harmless lie to this know-it-all loud-talking Northern gal who just couldn't help but walk into a big trap she set for herself. All we were doing was fulfilling our honest obligation to help her learn.

**"...I've lived here all my life
and never seen any swordfish
in the Hudson River."**

When I was leaving New York, I was standing outside the airport smoking a cigarette. I was leaning on my guitar case. A blond-haired New York gal was smoking a cigarette with a drawling brunette friend. Suddenly, the blond New Yorker said: "Hey, mister, is that a guitar case?"

I took a drag off my cigarette, looked down at my guitar case, and drawled out: "Well, yes, ma'am, it is."

Her dark-haired Southern friend started grinning when she heard my voice. The blonde then really set the trap: "So, mister, is that a guitar in that case?" The brunette took two steps back so her friend wouldn't see the two-foot grin on her face.

"Well, no, ma'am, it's a swordfish. It's the only way I could get him home. They won't just let you take a swordfish on a plane anymore."

"Where did you get a swordfish in New York?"

"Well, I caught him in the Hudson River this morning."

"The Hudson River? I've lived here all my life and never seen any swordfish in the Hudson River."

"Well, maybe you need to pay closer attention. We just went out there in a little johnboat, and you find a school of swordfish and ride alongside 'em, and pretty soon, one will just jump in the boat. You thump 'em between the eyes, and it

knocks 'em out, and you stick 'em in the guitar case before they wake up. He won't wake up good until I get back to Georgia."

The blonde-haired woman was amazed. Her friend was standing behind her, about to wet her pants. The blonde turned to tell her friend: "Did you hear that? He's carrying a swordfish in his guitar case? And he caught that damn fish in the Hudson River! What's so damn funny?"

Meanwhile, I had finished my cigarette and walked back inside. It was my honor to help this lady learn more about her native Hudson in general, and swordfish in particular.

A politically correct friend of mine told me I'm being cruel by playing these pranks. She doesn't think they're funny at all. So, I don't tell her stories anymore, preferring to simply

ignore her and her politically-correct pomposity.

All people all over the land love a good story. Rural people in particular seem to have a knack for telling stories, and they also seem to have a real love for perpetuating a good story upon a city-slicker, just for good measure. The good thing about this activity is that it creates more good stories to tell, as the perpetuated story is related over and over.

What I found as I travelled was that the rural people I met were all very similar, with the exception of accent. I met rural people in all the states I travelled in. All of them share certain qualities of storytelling, helping one another, taking time for conversation, knowing their neighbors, gossiping about their neighbors, being comfortable with guns, and not quite trusting outsiders or the government. City folks may share these same qualities, but you just don't see many city folks gathering and talking the way you do rural people. And this isn't to say rural folks are better than city folks, anymore than Southerners are better than Northerners. There are good and bad in all places.

Southerners are a peculiar lot. We know that, and are proud of it, thank you very much. We love to eat, and we love to cook. We fuss at one another, pick on those we love, and are silent to those we're mad at.

We can cover the vilest hatred with the most nauseating politeness you've ever seen, causing many outsiders to think all Southerners are liars. We're not. One older lady told me the reason Southerners cover up ill-feelings with politeness is because it's a shame to waste the perfectly good truth on a person we don't like anyway.

We love the Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Otis Redding, James Brown, Hank Williams, B. B. King, and any other great musician you can name, even if he or she ain't from the South.

We know and love Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox, and we know the stories about them aren't racist, no matter what some people who've never heard them might say.

Thinking Southerners know it was good we lost the war, but we nonetheless take pride in the fact that the Southern boys mostly whipped the Northern boys three years out of four even though they were outnumbered three to one.

Southerners who know their history

always find it somewhat comical that the Northern "abolitionists" wanted the slaves to be free but didn't want them to come North. It's taken as an odd twist of historical omission that nobody ever points out that the mills demanding Southern cotton

older find it appalling to hear a kid say "huh?" We usually believe pretty strongly in God, though the common Southerner isn't nearly as quick to claim knowledge of God's plan as some well-known Southern preachers and politicians are.

There's a reason Mama's cornbread was perfect, and if you understand what I mean, then you understand what the South is.

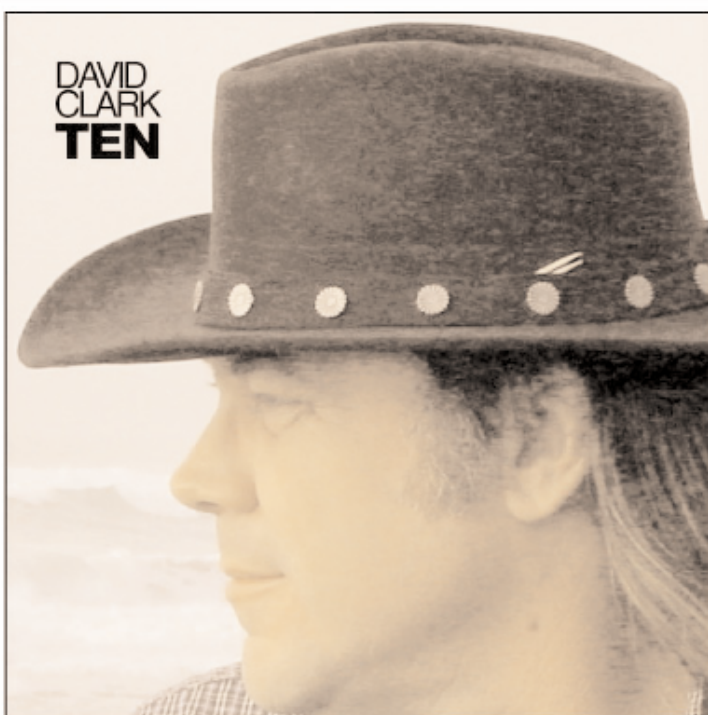
were located primarily in the North, or that the statue called "Liberty" sitting on top of our nation's Capitol was cast by slaves working in its shadow. Anyone questioning these simple things is immediately thought to be in favor of slavery, illustrating the violent complexity of an issue that no one is sorry to be shed of.

We love to laugh and are usually willing to cry. We can usually swear a pretty good streak when we have to, though we usually know better than to swear in front of women and children. We believe in good manners, and those of us who are

We understand there's a mystery to the thing, the mysterious thing being life itself. We see it in our families, in our history, in our love of nature, in our gardens, our flowers, and the curiosities of our neighbors and the odd behavior of any Yankees who stop in on their way to Florida (which some claim to be the most northernmost state of them all, the top 40 or 50 miles excepted).

There's a reason Mama's cornbread was perfect. If you understand what I mean, then you understand what the South is, exactly. And if you don't, then, well, it can't be helped.

David Clark's website is www.outofthesky.com. Feel free to write him at dclark@outofthesky.com, or at P.O. Box 148; Cochran, GA 31014.



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Colleen of County Kerry

A Fable For My Daughter

By Allen Joseph

Even though she is “all grown-up” now, I still find that there is a special magic in sharing a story with her just before bedtime. No parent-child ego state hinders the relationship at this special hour, we are just friends. Sometimes a story arrives full-formed and I can concentrate on making the connection with the listener, without expending the effort usually reserved for the creative process. This is such a story that occurred just recently.

Many years ago in Killorglin Ireland, there worked a cobbler. Now, I know that you are old enough to know that a cobbler makes shoes in order to earn his living.

The little old man made the finest shoes in County Kerry in a shop just off the cobblestone lane a short walk up the hill from the river Laune. The man seemed to grow smaller with each passing year. His occu-

pation had become easier as his once large hands were now more suited to his work and yet he had not lost any of his youthful strength or dexterity.

A young girl named Colleen fished for

salmon in the river there at the foot of the hill. The best single word to describe Colleen was delightful. She was kind, helpful and her smile was as bright as the few precious weeks during summer when Ireland is blest with full sunshine. Her skin was fair and her dark brown eyes were flecked with gold. She would wrap her fish in a damp cloth and carry them up

the hill in hopes a local innkeeper would give her a halfpenny for the prized catch. She provided fish to her neighbors as well; however, selling her fish in town provided the family with one of its few sources of real currency. It often confounded the local men that she seemed to catch the first fish that came up the river each year or that she would catch the most handsome fish of the day. They found it equally troubling that she would be the only person to catch a fish during a day when the large fish were not supposed to be present at all. Most troubling, were the days when the other men had a fish to sell and the merchants would gaze beyond them to see if

Colleen might be coming up the hill with a better fish than the one still gasping for breath before them in the doorway.

Colleen would always take the money back home because Mommy needed so many things for the family and her Father couldn't always provide in the lean years. After all, the rent went up each year and never decreased in years when the crops didn't make well. Colleen often went by the cobbler's shop and gazed at the shoes through the window, dreaming of a day when she could afford a set of the lovely shoes on display. And then early one summer her dream came true. During the year she turned fifteen, her father and mother allowed her to purchase any pair of shoes she desired from the cobbler's shop. She knew immediately the pair she wanted. They were deep brown with delicate gold-

en stitches across the front and around the top of the low-cut boot. The ancient man with the little hands had lined the boots expertly with the softest lambskin and Colleen could never remember experiencing such a luxury.

As she walked in them her chin was a little higher and it had nothing to do with the heel of the shoes. As she walked down the hill, her smile seemed to beam even brighter and it had nothing to do with the

waited until his eyes caught hers and she smiled broadly.

Then, shyly she approached and said, "I want you to know that your shoes are the finest things I've ever owned."

"Thank you," he replied modestly.

She then continued, "Father always says, 'Humility is close to Godliness,' but when I wear them, I'm sometimes embarrassed because they make me feel so proud."

"I know" he replied, "I've seen you wear them."

"And," she said, "When I wear them, I don't feel like a farmer's daughter or a fishmonger. I feel as if anything in the world is possible."

"I want you to know that your shoes are the finest things I've ever owned."

contrast between the dark brown leather and her fair complexion. As she walked she seemed to float lightly across the meadows like a fog and it had nothing to do with the soft lambskin lining in the shoes. Each time she wore the shoes—and she refused to wear them on two consecutive days—she could imagine that she was the princess-daughter of the king at the castle in Tara. Now, you don't know as much about Irish history as Colleen, but Tara was a city on a pleasant hill in the center of Ireland where the ancient Kings and Queens once lived.

One day she happened to meet the old cobbler in the market during the mid-day. It was a rare day in late August when it was bright and clear. She smiled at the old man but he forced himself to hold his gaze on the ground in front of himself. She

"I know," he replied, "I've seen you wear them."

"And what does it feel like to be a princess at the castle in Tara?" he then inquired.

Suddenly she blushed and felt herself short of breath, but managed, "And how did you know they make me feel like a princess at the castle in Tara?"

"Because," he paused, "I've seen you wear them."

With tears on my face, I tucked her into bed and said, "Now, what you don't realize is that this story is true. You are Colleen and I am the cobbler, the fish are the joy you bring to my heart and the shoes are my stories."



Watermelon: The Southern Comfort Food

by Ron Burch

Watermelon: A type of melon with a moist, sweet, usually red flesh. Best eaten by slicing a piece, picking it up and biting in.

Watermelon has a very high water content and can be used to quench thirst. A cold, refreshing watermelon is also a great summertime treat. Hot summer nights and watermelons just seem to go together. Short of a skinny dip in the pond, there's nothing that'll cool you off any better than a slice of icy-cold watermelon.

I'm told watermelons were native to Africa. Their seeds were brought to the U.S. by slaves who taught the land owners in the new world how to grow them. In former times, African-Americans were often depicted in racist caricatures as being inordinately fond of watermelon. But ask any southerner—black or white—and they'll tell you that down here, we all love watermelon.

I've heard there are over 500 varieties.

Approximately two hundred grow in the United States. All fall into one of four groups.

Icebox melons are round. They have either yellow or red flesh. They weigh between five and fifteen pounds. Yellow-fleshed melons are either oval or oblong with variegated stripes. They weigh in between ten and thirty pounds. Picnic melons are oval or circular in shape. They have yellow or red flesh. Some picnic varieties have stripes. Others don't. They can become quite large and weigh anywhere from fifteen to forty-five pounds. Last is the seedless category. Either round or oblong, they all have bold green stripes.

These watermelons range in weight



It's hard to be angry when you have watermelon juice running down your chin and dripping off your face.

between fifteen and twenty-five pounds.

Watermelons seem to grow best where the climate is warm and the days are long. Under such conditions, a vine will produce its first melons within sixty-days of planting. The crop is usually ready to begin harvesting within 90 days. A healthy vine will yield fruit several more times throughout a growing season.

In 2002, the US harvested 3,920 million pounds of watermelon. Georgia was fourth in the nation with 516 million pounds. The top fifteen producers in the

world produced 178,451 million pounds.

With so much watermelon available, I'm surprised that we still have wars and so many disagreements among people. I guess some folks aren't sharing. That's too bad. It's hard to be angry and take things too seriously when you have watermelon juice running down your chin and dripping off your face.

In the old neighborhood where I grew-up, a watermelon cutting brought family, friends and neighbors closer together. The watermelon was the centerpiece of summertime social activity. The first watermelon cutting of the season was a special event. One that required planning, foresight and someone with a knowledge of melons.

Sometimes they were available at the chain supermarkets even early in the season. Aside from being far too expensive,

these varieties were generally picked too green to be good. If you had mastered the art of thumping—my Dad was the only one in our family who had—you

might be safe buying one at the Georgia Farmers Market. However, before mid-July, even there he'd thump a lot of melons before he found just the right one.

By far, the best place to buy a watermelon during the month of June was at a roadside stand. Not the ones that were the forerunners of today's convenience stores. I'm talking about a wooden shed by the side of the road. One where the farmer himself sold corn, okra, peppers, tomatoes—and watermelon. A handwritten sign would say, "What you buy this afternoon

was growing in the field this morning.” Why this gentleman would be insulted if you dared thump one of his melons. They were that good.

Dad would chat a little and barter a lot. When the price was right, he’d load a couple of prize melons into the trunk of his old Ford and head for home. On the way, he’d stop for a bag or two of chipped ice from the neighborhood icehouse. Once home, we’d ice ‘em down real good.

For me, the hardest part was yet to come. The waiting. It could take five or six hours or more to chill down those big boys. While we waited—some more patiently than others—Mom would be on the phone, inviting nearby family and a few friends to share the experience.

I’m not sure why we never ate watermelon during the daytime. But we didn’t. Once the sun had gone down and the lighting bugs were flying about, Dad would say, “Ready?”

Mom would grab a hand full of utensils, the salt, a stack of paper napkins and we’d all go outside. She’d cover the picnic table with an old newspaper, then light cit-

ronella candles to keep the bugs away. Everyone would gather around the big zinc tub filled with ice.

My dad would reach into the cold water, and come-out with the biggest, greenest, prettiest watermelon I’d ever seen. On a humid night in Georgia, once it was out of the tub, it would quickly frost over.

He’d find the big carving knife hidden in the kitchen drawer—the one saved for holidays and special occasions. The slic-

Maybe an old fashioned, southern-style watermelon cutting would help the Shittes, the Sunis, Baathist and Kurds get along, too.

ing of the melon was almost ceremonial. The first cut sliced the melon in half, revealing a bright red inside speckled with dark brown or black seeds. “Ahh,” everyone said. Their mouths were watering.

The first bite was crunchy cold, sweet and wonderful. So was the last.

Watermelon is refreshing but not filling. It’s healthy. It hydrates and cleanses the body and soul. It makes you feel good all over. It helps you sleep—well, at least

until you have to pee. In that regard, watermelon could be called the passion fruit—perhaps the reason many southerners have so many kids. You know, you wake up and have to go to the bathroom...you’re wide-awake and so is she. The rest is history...named Bobbie-Sue, Billy-Joe, Mary-Beth and Sally-Jean.

Now a few Yankee friends of mine have compared eating watermelon to eating cold, wet Styrofoam with seeds. Can you imagine? Regardless, watermelon nurtures love, family values and good will among men.

It’s too bad it doesn’t grow in the Middle East. Maybe if Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon had shared a big slice, hostilities between

Israel and Palestine might have ceased. Maybe an old fashioned, southern-style watermelon cutting would help the Shiites, the Sunis, Baathist and Kurds get along too.

I know George Bush likes watermelon. Last year, Texas produced 770 million pounds. I’ll wager old George had his share.

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