

Issue Number Twenty-Three | Summer 2020

# Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

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## Uncle Ray

By David Ray Skinner

W

hen I was born—smack dab in the middle of the Korean War—my mother's little brother, Ray, was stationed on a ship in the Sea of Japan.

He still somehow managed to get leave and make it back to Tennessee that hot Summer. It only seemed fitting that I be named after him. Not my first name, mind you—that was reserved for a biblical name. However, it fit well between my first and last name in a sort of lyrical Southern kind of way. That being said, that “full” version of my name was mostly used back in my early years by my mother to forewarn me of impending discipline for some sort of childhood indiscretion. It was only years later that I would embrace it in acknowledgement of my Southern roots.

Uncle Ray was our youngest uncle, and he was a swinging bachelor—well, as swinging as you could get in small town Tennessee. After the war, he came home to Dover, a tiny hamlet on the Cumberland River known primarily for its “Surrender House,” where General U.S. Grant secured his first major victory at nearby Fort Donelson in February of 1862. The victory made Grant a hero and set the course for his plan to cut off the Confederacy from its supply lines.

Uncle Ray got a job at the post office there in down-

**Above: Uncle Ray's  
1975 Christmas present...the  
painting, not the car.**









**Above: Not Uncle Ray, but rather, a recent “Mac” portrait drawn for this issue’s cover. It’s a man closer to my age...someone who was probably in college at the time of the original painting.**

town Dover, right down the street from the old Surrender House. He eventually became Dover’s post master, and then, was elected mayor of the town, but that was after he had “settled down” and gotten married—well into his 30’s.

Uncle Ray made Christmas special for me and my sister, Jann (who proofs *SouthernReader* for me!). Every year, he’d drive up from Dover for our family’s Christmas Eve party, celebrated at our Aunt Lola’s downtown Nashville mansion, which was built back in the 1800’s. Aunt Lola always had some surprise waiting—one year it was a magician who pulled a rabbit out of top hat, which had been placed upside down on my eight-year-old head.

After Aunt Lola’s party, Uncle Ray would ride home with us to spend the night in the suburbs. On Christmas morning, we’d see what kind of presents Uncle Ray got us. It was always wonderful. One year he got me a portable tape recorder; that’s not such a big deal now, but it was pretty spectacular in the 1950’s.

Once I was an adult, I wanted to repay Uncle Ray for those gifts. After I got out of college, I didn’t have a lot of money, so my alternative to fancy presents was to paint watercolor paintings.

So, for Christmas, 1975, I painted an antique car for Uncle Ray (that’s the original scan on page 4; the license plate reads: “RS 12-75,” as in “Ray Sexton, December 1975.”

Uncle Ray didn’t make it to the last Christmas; he passed away right before Thanksgiving. Last summer, when I saw him at our annual family reunion in West Tennessee, he gave me the framed painting. I teasingly said, “So...I guess you finally got tired of it!” He was in ill health, but I didn’t really expect it to be a harbinger of what was to come the following fall.

I only thought it fitting to “re-touch” the painting, add a town and an iPad with a watermelon and use it for this issue’s cover...in honor of Uncle Ray. And no, that’s not a portrait of Uncle Ray that I “painted” on my Mac when I revised the art for the cover; Uncle Ray was way too modest and would have been embarrassed to be a “cover boy.”



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## Travels With Harley (Where There's a Will...)

By Lisa Love

Based on actual events...only the names  
and facts have been changed...

**I**t all began when I got a call from the coroner in a South Georgia town—we'll call it Smallville—informing me that my Great Uncle Harley had passed away three days before.

This call was as odd as it was unexpected. The coroner informed me that after purchasing about \$197 worth of Gladware disposable containers, my uncle had died of an apparent heart attack in the bathroom of the Dollar General. Um-m-m-m. After dropping that nugget of information on me, he asks if he can put me on hold while he takes another call, and as I wait, my mind harkens back in time.

Ah, Harley Shelnutt—as is the tradition of all things Southern, there is quite a tale to tell here. Harley, though three years her junior, was my mama's uncle—my great grandmother's "late in life" baby, as they called him. Great Grandmother Shelnutt was 55 years old when he was born, so the raising and disciplining of Harley frequently fell to his older sister, my grandmother. Because of their closeness in ages, my mama and Harley were reared as pseudo-siblings; sharing toys, vacations, and the family's affections. From the time he was just a little tyke, Harley yearned for the best life had to offer, and since he was born during the Great Depression, he was

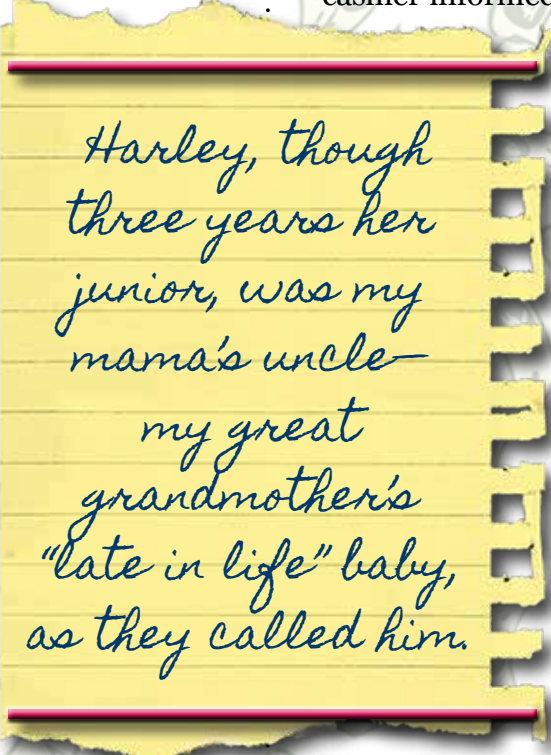
perpetually disappointed. He was strikingly handsome, and he possessed a lovely singing voice—once even appearing on “*Stars of Tomorrow*” with Dinah Shore. That one brief appearance became his only claim to fame. However, since his penchant for song was taking him nowhere, my uncle joined the Army. When the Korean War ended, so did Harley’s army career. He was now free to indulge his love of travel, taking to the open road. He once told me that his life’s goal was to visit every state in the continental United States at least twice before he died.

We saw him sporadically until I was in first grade or so—then his visits just ceased. I was left to wonder if some kind of a falling out within the family had occurred. I never knew for sure, as his name was only uttered in harsh whispers that coincidentally ceased whenever I entered a room. I probably thought that his penchant for traveling kept him too busy to visit us, however, Harley loved to write, routinely sending letters, postcards and pictures documenting his treks. I returned the favor, (*I love words, ya know!*) sending cards and letters to the P.O. Box number my uncle provided, keeping our tenuous bond intact through the years.

The coroner returned to the line, his voice startling me from my trance into yesteryear. He inquired as to what I would like to do with the body of my uncle. Huh? I told him that my uncle had no immediate family and, as the out-of-town great niece, I was out of my depth here. He advised me that cremation would be most appropriate in this case, and that I could pick up his *cremains*—yes, that is the official term—in two days. Okay. I asked him if I could give him my credit card number to expedite

matters (*yes, I really talk like that*), and when we were done with the transaction, he wanted to know if I had any questions for him.

After a slight pause, it occurred to me that I couldn’t fathom how he knew to contact me for the notification. He gave me a quick explanation—well, the *Reader’s Digest* condensed version of it anyway. Seems that after Harley died in the bathroom of Dollar General, he was taken to the county hospital to be pronounced DOA. After the pronouncement, the coroner went back to the store to ask the employees some questions and go over the scene. The cashier informed him that they assumed my



Harley, though  
three years her  
junior, was my  
mama's uncle—  
my great  
grandmother's  
“late in life” baby,  
as they called him.

uncle was a homeless man or was down on his luck as he was dressed rather tatteredly, appeared to have no teeth, and perhaps, lived out of his car. *Oh no, I thought, not my gorgeous Uncle Harley!* She, Pattie the cashier, did remember him buying a crazy amount of disposable containers and a bottle of aspirin. He proceeded to pay in cash, and then carried his sacks out to his car, placing them in the trunk. She saw him get in his car and sit in the driver’s seat for a few minutes before coming

back in and heading for the bathroom. When he didn’t come out for quite a while, they knocked and received no answer. Opening the door, they saw him slumped in the floor and called 911.

After hearing her story, the coroner and the store manager went through my uncle’s car and discovered basically every letter and card I had ever sent to Uncle Harley—all filed in a laundry basket in the passenger front seat. They noted my return address, Googled me and got my number. I offered a silent thank you to Al Gore for inventing the Internet—*otherwise I would never have gotten such a*



*timely notice of my uncle's death!* One thing I took note of as the coroner spoke; he seemed almost—how shall I say this—*mildly excited*.

He was a little breathless, and his words tumbled out, one over the other, like a waterfall of words. Well, maybe that's just his style, or maybe they don't get many people keeling over dead in the Dollar General bathroom, I pondered to myself. His final words just confused me more: "Ms. Love, I can't wait for you to get here. You are never going to believe everything I have to show you. Never in my life have I ever seen anything like this,"

he said, "*Heck, I've never seen anything like this in a movie either, come to think of it.*" Huh? He tells me to be there Saturday and to be prepared to pick up not only my uncle's remains, but also his car.

I immediately hung up the phone and telephoned Diane—my best friend, quasi-sister and partner in crime for over 40 years. When she answered, I yelled into the receiver, "Road Trip!" Without missing a beat, she replied "Heck, yeah." I'm sure there was mild disappointment when she found out we weren't headed to Hilton Head or Vegas, but instead, we were going to pick up my dead uncle, but hey, she's nothing if not a good sport!

She and I started our four-hour pilgrimage to south Georgia at about 6:00 A.M. on a beautiful Saturday morning. The air was crisp, this would have felt like a *Thelma and Louise* adventure (minus careening into the Grand Canyon, of course) if we weren't bringing home the cremated remains of my long-lost great uncle.

We reminisced, as much as we were able to, about my great uncle. Since my last visit with him was when I was six, it made for rather

slim pickings on this walk down memory lane. But I DO remember a few things—he was absolutely breathtakingly handsome, when he sang—if you closed your eyes—you would swear it was Frank Sinatra, and most importantly, he didn't treat me as if I was invisible. You know what I mean. Typically, adults have a way of looking past a child in the room for someone more worthy, more interesting to talk to. Not Uncle Harley. He would sit beside me on the sofa, throw his arm around my shoulder and actually *CHAT* for hours! He was so warm and funny with me. I adored

him. We would talk about such inconsequential silly things really, but it was delightful to a little girl. Once he looked at me, very seriously, and whispered conspiratorially, "Lisa, how do you manage to get your finger up your nose to pick it?" I have always had the tiniest of noses, and he picked (ha, ha) right up on my life-long dilemma. I scooted up close, proudly proclaiming, "I have to twist my finger up my nose like a corkscrew, Uncle Harley." I then demonstrated my technique to

him and he laughed until he cried. Gross, perhaps, but he had endeared himself to me—oh, and the chocolate-covered cherries he brought with each visit never failed to delight a little girl. And to think that sweet, dapper man had died alone in a Dollar Store bathroom. Sigh.

We hit Macon—Diane's turn to drive—and I brought out my manila envelope chock full of the old photos Uncle Harley use to send us from his cross-country adventures. There were snapshots of the Golden Gate Bridge, the St. Louis Arch, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Grand Canyon, the beaches of Florida—shot after shot. As they never failed to do,

*"Ms. Love, I can't wait for you to get here. You are never going to believe everything I have to show you. Never in my life have I ever seen anything like this."*



Harley's pictures brought a smile to my face once again. Through my growing years, these pictures had fueled my own wanderlust—I dreamed of a day when I would hitchhike cross-country and experience all the beauty my country had to offer.

As we slowed down to find a gas station, I flipped through each photo again, one by one. As I intently studied the pictures, something struck me. How had I failed to notice this all these years? I looked, and I looked again. As we pulled into a Chevron station, I spread the pictures out on my lap and asked Diane to take a look. "Notice anything odd about these?"

She perused them a while and shook her head, "They look like ordinary vacation shots."

I laughed, "Not exactly. Look again. Not one of these pictures—and *there were SO MANY*—was taken outside of the car. *EVERY* shot was from the inside of Uncle Harley's car. You could see a side mirror here, a rear view mirror there. Oh look, a steering wheel in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. WOW!" It occurred to me that Uncle Harley may

have spent his life traveling the country, but it would seem he never set foot out of his car. Seeing America kinda like a drive-by shooting, I guess. It reminded me of what the coroner said about it looking like my uncle lived in his car. Maybe he did. Can you say eccentric? No, on second thought, if you are quirky AND rich, then you get to be eccentric. If you are a regular Joe and quirky, you merely rank "odd." Odd, indeed.

We eventually arrived at the "Smallville Mortuary." The parking lot was deserted, so we parked right next to the entrance.

As we exited the car, the front door swung open, and I heard, "Are you Lisa? Glad to

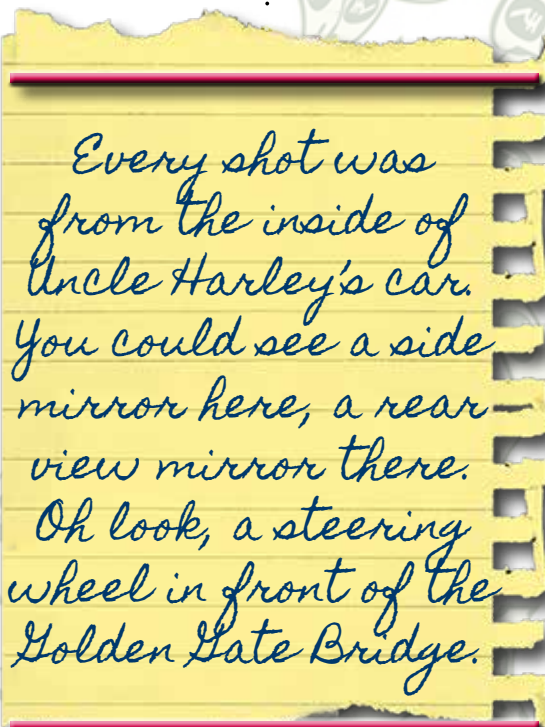
meetcha—I'm David." I was taken aback; I don't know what I expected. Jack Klugman as Quincy, I presume. This boy—excuse me—this man—had to be twenty years my junior and was decked out in full University of Georgia regalia—Bulldog cap and sweat shirt. He would have made Vince Dooley proud—*Go Dawgs!*

With an offer of coffee or bottled water, he ushered us into the inner sanctum of the funeral home, his office. As he sat down, he broke into the biggest "*cat that ate the canary*" grin I had ever seen. He leaned forward and whispered, "I have been dying to talk to you!" Wow, *bad choice of words from a coroner*. I furtively glanced at Diane. We both leaned back in our chairs, teetering away from him, very wary.

He smiled bigger and continued, "Ms. Love, today is your lucky day." Considering that we were having this conversation in a funeral home, I could have begged to differ, but he went on. "Your life will never be the same." Dave the Coroner nearly leapt across the table as he burst out, "I

couldn't wait to get you here today! I almost called you and spilled the beans, but I didn't think you would believe me without the proof. When we were trying to get an I.D. on your uncle, the store manager and I went through his jacket's pockets. Ms. Love, in those pockets were papers, lots of papers. There was paperwork, documenting your uncle's ownership of over \$10 million worth of CD's in about 50 different banks throughout the Southeast. Your Uncle Harley was loaded. God rest his soul, and no disrespect intended, of course."

"What?" I stammered, "I thought you told me he looked like a homeless man, raggedy, no teeth. Lived out of his car? I don't understand



Every shot was  
from the inside of  
Uncle Harley's car.  
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mirror here, a rear-  
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Golden Gate Bridge.



any of this."

Dave the coroner deftly pulled out a calculator, spread the bank documents in front of me and set out to do some calculatin.' Page after page, he punched in the numbers with the skill of an accountant and an expression that was pert near jubilant. This must have been the most exciting thing to happen in this town since—well I don't know of anything exciting that ever happened in Smallville. But I digress...after twenty minutes of adding the reams of papers, he slid the calculator across the table to show me the total: \$12.3 million dollars. I was flabbergasted. He winked at me and whispered, "Lisa, you just won the lottery."

Aside from noticing that I was "Lisa" now, I noticed something else as well. Right before my eyes, *Dave the Coroner transformed into Dave the Estate Planner.*

"You know, Lisa, your life is going to change after today," he said, "First, I'd keep this to myself, if I was you. Fewer people that know, the better. Don't want 'em coming out of the woodwork, trying to part you with this money. Now, I'm pretty sure a guy with all that money would have a will put away somewhere. And you seem to be the relative with the most contact with him, through your letters and such. I would bet dollars to donuts that you are his heir. But, worst case scenario, and you can't find a will, you'd just divide it with any living heirs. Now, you said he didn't have any wife, children or living parents, but you'll need to contact any of your kinfolks related to Harley. First, go home and get you a good lawyer. *You are gonna need one, girl.*"

Wow, he had said all that with barely taking a breath. As I crammed the bank files in my purse and headed for the exit door—shell-

shocked—I heard his voice call out, "Don't forget your uncle." Dang it, *I forgot Uncle Harley.*

Dave gingerly placed a plain white cardboard box in my hands. *Wow, Uncle Harley was heavier than I thought he'd be.* I patted the box and offered a silent goodbye to my uncle as Dave guided me out the side door of the funeral home to my uncle's white Taurus. To get his car home, Diane and I had previously decided that I would drive Harley's vehicle, and she would follow in mine. But, as David walked me to the car and opened the passenger side door, I saw (and smelled) immediately why he assumed that my uncle might have lived out of this car. With the exception of an index-card sized empty spot on the driver's side seat, the car looked like a prop from an episode of "Hoarders."

And the smell! *What can I say about the fragrance?* Imagine a cat litter box that no one had ever bothered to clean. *Well, I wished the car smelled that good.* And, that wasn't the only issue; in addition to the smell, there were piles and piles of *STUFF* from the floorboard to the roof of the car. In the front and back seats were bags of groceries and baskets of clothes, and boxes of books and papers were crammed into every available space. Diane and I popped the trunk only to find more of the same, *PLUS* Uncle Harley's last purchase at Dollar General—bags of Gladware containers.

Now, back to that odor—where was that smell coming from? I was (and this was very unusual for me) at a loss for words. It had been a long, eventful day. I was tired, couldn't think straight, and wouldn't even know how to begin to put the pieces of this puzzle together.

*"You know, Lisa, your life is going to change after today," he said, "First, I'd keep this to myself, if I was you. Fewer people that know, the better."*



As I shoved into the driver's seat, I contemplated the long drive home, just as Dave crouched by the driver's window and handed me a zippered leather satchel containing all of Harley's personal effects. I hastily flipped through the contents—rings, watch, wallet and a motel key. A receipt from the Dew Drop Inn, a motel in town, fell out of my uncle's wallet. It looked like he rented a room—Room 222—six days before. Hmmm.

Dave took it from my grasp, looked it over, and told me that this place rented rooms by the week and was only about four blocks from the funeral home; he thought I should go there and see if there were any more important papers in Harley's room. I knew he was trying to hint that I should begin hunting for the will among Uncle Harley's possessions, but I was exhausted. I tried to formulate some kind of a plan. I thought that perhaps Diane and I should just stay there for the night, do some looking around, and start back home to Atlanta fresh in the morning. Plus, I would have given anything for a hot bath and a comfy bed right about then.

When I mentioned this to Coroner Dave, he looked horrified. "I don't think you'll be wanting to stay overnight there. Promise me, *PROMISE ME* you won't stay the night," he warned ominously.

Okay, 'nuff said. He gave me quick directions to the motel, as well as his cell number in case I ran into trouble. *Another ominous warning?* I thanked him profusely for taking the time to find me. He truly had gone above and beyond the call of duty, even to the point of advising on my next steps in this Uncle Harley saga. I believed this coroner was one of the last of the *Good Guys*. I put the car in

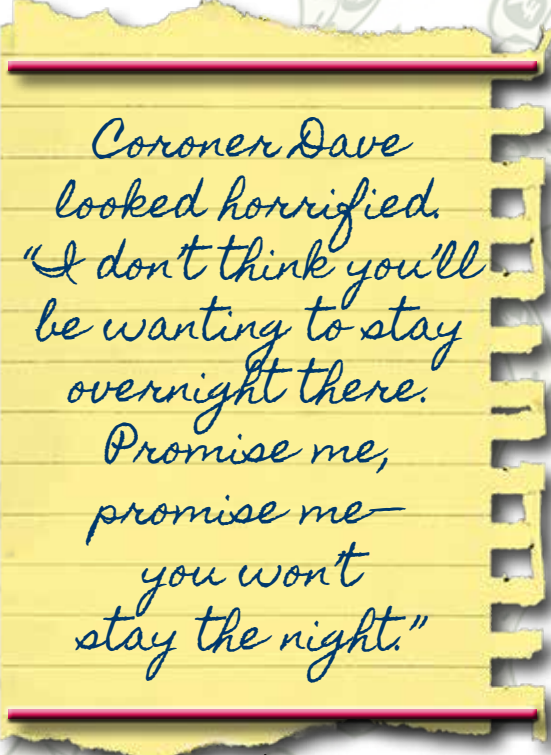
drive, threw him a smile filled with gratitude and told him, "Dave the Coroner, if there's ever anything I can do for you..." As I pulled out of the parking lot, I spied him waving his Bulldog cap in the air as he yelled, "*Season passes to the Georgia games, PLEEEASE!*"

As I tried to maneuver the unwieldy Taurus (which we affectionately dubbed "*The Tenement on Wheels*") out of the parking lot, I glanced at my side mirror (the only mirror I can see through) to make sure Diane was right behind me. Catching a glimpse of my uncle's *cremains* box teetering on top of all my letters

to him in the old laundry basket in the back seat, a thought hit me and I abruptly slammed on the brakes. I was *NOT* going to carry my beloved Uncle Harley around in what basically amounted to a white cardboard cake box. It was absolutely undignified and did nothing to honor his memory—besides, in just the short walk to the car, I found the box heavy, cumbersome, and difficult to carry. I got out of the car and headed back to Diane. She shrugged a silent "*huh?*" and I

motioned her to roll down the window. "Hand me our insulated lunch cooler sacky thingy," I told her. (It was actually a red retro Roy Rogers insulated vinyl lunch tote.) She said if I wanted a water, *couldn't I have just waited two minutes until we got to the motel?* I just smiled at her and proceeded to unload the water bottles into the front seat of my car as I told her, "I want Uncle Harley to go in here. That box he's in is depressing and flimsy. Let me go try this out."

She gave me that look that I know so well after all these years. It was her "*Fine, here we go again with me playing Ethel to your Lucy*" look. I walked back to Uncle Harley's



Coroner Dave  
looked horrified.  
"I don't think you'll  
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overnight there.  
Promise me,  
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car with the red insulated vinyl lunchbox in hand. Picking up the pitiful white cremains cake box with both hands, I squeezed and maneuvered it into the bag. He just barely fit, but he did fit, by golly!

On the short drive to the Dew Drop Inn, I found myself building castles in the sky...I dared to dream that Coroner Dave might be right. It appeared that Uncle Harley was a *MILLIONAIRE!* Wow! *AND* he did keep every letter I had ever written him beside him on the front seat of his car. That had to mean something, right? What in the world would I do—*could I do*—with all that money? I mean I was no financial expert, and I'm sure a lot would have to go to cover estate taxes, but even so, I would still have more money than I could have ever dreamed about having. I could build a girls' school in Africa with my name emblazoned across the front of it and then have the media take pics of me in front of it to let the world know what a selfless, humble philanthropist I was. *No—Oprah beat me to that.* Well, I *COULD* donate to all the worthy causes I already supported, and do even more for them. I could pay off mortgages for members of my family, help out dear friends, buy a new car and maybe take a cruise or two to somewhere exotic, *AND* still have enough left over to be financially secure for the rest of my life. I could hear my mama's voice in the back of my head telling me not to count my chickens before they hatched; heck, I wasn't only counting them, *I was building them a fancy four-door chicken coop*—well, technically, four doors would make it a sedan, but that's neither here nor there. Point is, *I WASTHISCLOSE* to being a Southern Belle Socialite.

*I could hear my mama telling me not to count my chickens before they hatched; heck, I wasn't only counting them, I was building them a fancy four-door chicken coop.*

Four minutes later, with Diane right behind me, this Southern Belle Socialite wannabe pulled into a place that would have made the Bates Motel merit a substantial upgrade. Decrepit wouldn't begin to do it justice. I made my way to his room, put the key in the lock, and pushed the door open.

OMG! The smell knocked us both back a foot; it was almost like running into a wall built purely of landfill stench. It smelled like rotting milk left out in the sun on a summer day surrounded by dirty diapers, with a hint of mildew and mustiness thrown in just for fun. Dear reader, I wish I had "*scratch and sniff*" technology available here just to share. Anyway, as I walked in, a roach scurried over my feet and I shrieked. Looking around, I couldn't tell if the place had been ransacked, or if this is just how Harley left it. Half-eaten food on the dresser had become a banquet for ants and roaches. Clothes were strewn everywhere; papers were on every horizontal surface. So much for a hot bath and a comfy bed—Coroner Dave's warnings were now fully

understood. Would we find anything of importance in this disaster zone? Yes, that's what it looked and smelled like. A disaster zone! And I couldn't forget that I still had to search through the contents of Uncle Harley's car, as well. Where to start, where to start?

After a quick look around the room, I then took my time to really examine the surroundings and many things hit me at once—a half-eaten cup of Ramen Noodles and saltine crackers on his nightstand sat by a tepid cup of water in a Styrofoam cup. Behind his last supper, propped up by the phone, was a banged-up picture frame with a photograph of me and my mama—I believe I sent this to him

three Christmases ago. Tears stung my eyes, and for a minute, the room was but a blur. I wiped at my eyes with the hem of my shirt—the only clean thing in Room 222. I crouched down by the side of the bed—still not wanting to sit on anything in the room—and looked at papers strewn across the unmade bed. Pamphlets, flyers and brochures covered the sheets. Before I picked up one to read, Diane returned from my car with handfuls of latex gloves, plastic garbage bags and liquid hand sanitizer—I never go anywhere unprepared—my *Girl Scout training*, I guess.

I spread a garbage bag on the bed like a tarp, put on the gloves, then reached for one of the pamphlets. It was a shiny, glossy ad for a *Lifestyle Lift*. A face-lift at 78 years of age? The second brochure (with prices handwritten all over it) was for dental implants. Another brochure was for the *Hair Club for Men*. Well, it looked like Uncle Harley had some plans to *renovate*, so to speak. Then I noticed interspersed with the brochures were maps—California, New Mexico, Florida—about 20 to 25 state maps. And then I saw the pictures—more photos of landmarks, all taken from the confines of his car. My heart broke. Was he too ashamed of his appearance to get out and socialize? Had he become a hermit (albeit, an isolated hermit that loved to travel)? I studied his bed with all the evidence of the new life he planned. New teeth, new hair, new face, more traveling—and yet he lived in filth, existing on Ramen noodles and water? Surrounded by all this misery, I started crying again. When Coroner Dave told me about the money Uncle Harley left behind, I was already planning cruises and LASIK and lipo (oh, did I fail to mention those in my ear-

lier dream sequence?), yet my uncle, with all his apparent wealth had chosen to live as a pauper. I felt dirty and greedy and tremendously sad. I needed to get out of that room. *IMMEDIATELY!*

“Diane, let’s just grab everything and shove it into the garbage bags and stuff them in my car. We’ll go through everything when we get home.”

We stuffed my car to the gills—trunk, front seat, back seat. It now bore a familial resemblance to Uncle Harley’s car. As Diane started my car, I went back into Room 222

for the last time. With one final glance around the room, I whispered, “I’m sorry”—to whom or for what, I’m not exactly sure. I laid his motel key on the nightstand, quickly scooped up the photo of Mama and me, and rushed back to the awaiting Taurus to begin our convoy back to Atlanta. While adjusting my seat belt, my cellphone rang. It was Diane. I glanced in my side mirror to see if she was all right. “We brought the stink with us,” she screamed. She told me that the smell

from the motel room was now permeating my car and she was going to throw up.

I racked my brain for a solution. “You know, it’s 6:00, and we haven’t had a bite to eat since dawn.” I told her, “Why don’t we stop someplace, eat dinner and take a minute to regroup in a place that doesn’t reek of dead animals on the side of the road...” She readily agreed, and when I spotted an IHOP a half mile up the road, I turned into the parking lot, grabbed Uncle Harley and we headed in to eat. Diane wondered aloud if the stink had possibly attached itself to us, so we first headed for the rest room and washed our hands with scalding water and as much hand soap

While adjusting my seat belt, my cellphone rang. It was Diane. I glanced in my side mirror to see if she was all right. “We brought the stink with us,” she screamed.



as we could pump.

We ordered coffee and pancakes and started to talk strategy and make lists. We are notorious list-makers—*if it's not written down, it ain't gonna happen*. Diane knew a lawyer I might want to use, so I then called him and left a voicemail, giving a cursory explanation of what I had encountered in Smallville and asked him to call me. *Okay, one down*. The waitress brought our meals, refilled our coffee and noticed my insulated cooler on the bench beside me. “Oh, you brought your own bag for leftovers. How smart of you!” Hmm. So I smiled and said, “No, that’s my uncle and he didn’t get out to restaurants much, so I thought I would bring him to IHOP as a treat!” She went white—yeah, I thought, I’d better leave her a really good tip. I then went on to explain our situation, and finished with how we really just stopped in to breathe some fresh air **AWAY FROM THE CARS!!!**

She excused herself for a minute, then came back and said, “My manager said why don’t you girls drive around back to the dumpster and pick through the cars here. It’s still light enough to see, and if you’re there much later, the streetlight is right by the dump. That way, at least you can get the trash part thrown away and not have to take it all home with you.” *God bless small towns and their residents!* You forget how great people can really be when they see a need. We thanked her and took her up on her offer. After leaving a very generous tip, Diane, Harley and I headed to the cars and pulled them both around back. We put on the gloves and decided to start with Harley’s car first—it seemed to smell the worst.

One by one, we lugged out boxes and

laundry baskets, methodically going through everything, piece by piece. The papers had mildew on them as if perhaps rain had found its way into the Taurus—they seemed to be the source of the moldy, musty smell. I started to sneeze, and my eyes watered. Wishing I had brought Benadryl with me, we decided to file the important papers in the cleanest of the boxes we could find. There were bags of garbage in the back seat—real garbage—that looked like it had been there for weeks. What was clearly trash was thrown into the dumpster, papers were studied before they were filed. Slowly, the piles got smaller and smaller.

After about 45 minutes of our search and rescue mission, we found a white garbage bag loaded with full Gladware containers. These weren’t the new ones he had just bought that were in his trunk—*these were clearly full of something*. It seemed that the odor in the car might be emanating from this sack and these containers. Maybe he had food in them that had spoiled. I carefully popped the lid to one, to peer inside. **BIG MISTAKE!** The sealed

Gladware container, and yes—all of the other Gladware containers—held Uncle Harley’s soiled underwear.

My pancakes and coffee nearly made a re-appearance in the Smallville, Georgia IHOP parking lot right then and there. *Uncle Harley, WHY???* I am reassessing that “eccentric” label once again.

Diane started chucking all the sacks with the dirty underwear containers into the dumpster. We then started a flinging frenzy. If it was paper, we put it in the file box; everything else was dumped. We then went through my car with all Harley’s possessions that were in Room 222. It was now past dark,

*The Gladware containers weren't the new ones he had just bought that were in his trunk—these were clearly full of something.*

and we huddled under the streetlight that illuminated the parking lot. In the paperwork from his motel room, we found title deeds to land he used to own, starting as far back as 1951, and the bills of sale to the same lands when he sold them. It appeared that he had owned property in McDonough and Decatur, Georgia, as well as quite a bit of property in Florida. These papers explained much. I knew traveling the country didn't pay well, so turns out Uncle Harley had invested in real estate. I was proud of him—though admittedly still thrown by the fact that he saved his nasty underwear in Gladware. *Sheesh.*

It was way past 10:00 P.M., and after going through every paper with the upmost care and attention, we still had found no will. Knowing we still had a four-hour drive home, we called it a night and put the three boxes with the papers we wanted to keep back in Harley's trunk—alongside all that new Gladware he had bought right before he passed. I shudder to think about the plans he had had for those containers. Anyway, before we left IHOP, Diane and I popped back in for a quick thank-you to our waitress and her manager for the use of their dumpster. They handed us coffees in to-go cups and told us to drive safely. *Sweet!*

After a day I will never forget, we finally headed home—Harley and me in the lead, and Diane behind us, listening to the oldies station all the way home. It was peaceful, the drive back home with my uncle sitting beside me in the red retro Roy Rogers insulated vinyl lunch tote. He was resting on letters I had written him when I was just a little girl, and he was my singing, dashing uncle who brought me chocolates and conversation.

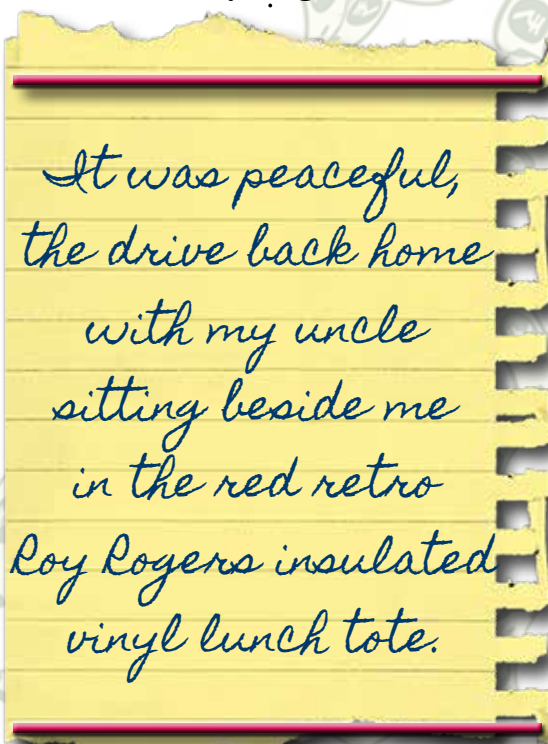
That night, we were where he loved to be the most—in his car, traveling the open road. It occurred to me that, for the first time ever, I was traveling with my Harley.

On Monday, the attorney, Mr. Thompson returned my call, and we agreed to meet the next afternoon. He instructed me to bring all the paperwork that I found in the car, the motel room and at the coroner's (I also took Harley with me, just to make it official). When I met him, I liked him immediately. Mr. Thompson inquired about known living relatives, and I gave him the list of the two cousins in North

Carolina—they too, were both a great niece and great nephew to Uncle Harley. Mr. Thompson said that his assistant would notify them of Harley's passing, and of my intent to retain him as counsel in this Estate matter. He went on to say that after he received the official death certificate, he would seek to be appointed Administrator of the Estate. This would give him the power to have all of Uncle Harley's banks opened, and any and all safe deposit boxes he might have rented

from them to possibly find the will. But he told me if there is no will found, my uncle will have died "Intestate"—without a will, and the laws of Georgia would govern how the money would be divided. Because he had no immediate family, we—the *nephews and nieces*—would divide the estate equally.

Mr. Thompson's paralegal, Amanda, took tons of notes during our meeting, then looked at me and smiled. "We have never dealt with a case as interesting as this one. This is quite a unique situation you have found yourself in, isn't it?" If she only knew—as in all Southern families, we don't air our dirty laundry in public (although, it would appear, some of us





like to store it in Gladware for safe keeping). Obviously, I had not shared the more, shall we say, *CRAZY* aspects of Uncle Harley's life with the attorney. I had chosen to tell them the wonderful things I remembered about my uncle and just to gloss over the rest. As our hour came to an end, I signed the retainer papers and turned over all of Harley's documents to Amanda. Mr. Thompson came from around his desk, put his arm around me and told me, "Your life is never going to be the same, young lady." Wow, I thought, he's been talking to Coroner Dave.

It was a long four months of waiting—and *waiting some more*—for news from the attorney's office. Weeks and weeks of searching all the banks for safe deposit boxes—in hopes of finding a will—seem to prove fruitless, and Mr. Thompson prepared me to be ready to have the Estate divided three ways. Well, I thought, *I may not get \$12.3 million, but can happily live with a third of that.* I would just downsize my dreams.

I went about life as normal—work, church, and outings with family and friends. No one knew what was going on just under the surface—I had kept *Project "Uncle Harley's Estate"* close to the vest; any info about it was on a strict, *need-to-know* basis. Diane knew, of course, because she had been in the trenches with me, and I trusted her with my life—always have, always will. I had already decided that she would definitely be going on that cruise to Alaska with me. (*Oh, didn't I mention that earlier?*) I had gone ahead and booked the cruise, because it was less expensive if you got the tickets early. Uncle Harley would have been proud (*I am such a bargain hunter!*). I decided that even when I became a million-

aire, I would continue to cut coupons, shop at discount stores, and use my Kroger card to save my ten cents on gas. I was determined to be the same me that I have always been, just a more financially secure me.

Six months after this whole journey began, I got a phone call from Mr. Thompson's office. Great news! **THE WILL HAD BEEN LOCATED!!!** It was in a safe deposit box in a small bank in St. Augustine, Florida. "It was several years old," Amanda said breathlessly over the phone, "And it's yellowed and wrinkled, but it's legal." The will would remain sealed, she told me, until they received it, notified the next of kin (me and my cousins) and filed it with the court. Amanda went on to say that it would take about a week to get all this done, so we scheduled a date and time to gather at Mr. Thompson's office for the reading of the will. She sounded so excited, she could barely contain herself. I sat down to catch my breath. I reminded myself that Uncle Harley could have still requested that his Estate be divided amongst us all. And that

*I decided that even when I became a millionaire, I would continue to cut coupons, shop at discount stores, and use my Kroger card to save my ten cents on gas.*

was okay. \$12.3 million, split three ways, after taxes was still nothing to sneeze at. No matter what, it would be *a win-win situation!*

My cousins called me to get the scoop. We decided that they would stay at my house the night before the will was to be opened and after the reading we would go to Ruth's Chris Steak House to—I don't know the right word here—*celebrate*? For the next few days, I went to bed dreaming of all the new opportunities that this money would afford me—would afford all of us, really. Coroner Dave was right. Mr. Thompson was right. My life would never be the same.

Finally, the big day arrived—the reading

of the will. The cousins and I gathered into Mr. Thompson's office, each one jockeying for position around the conference table, as if sitting closer to the attorney might translate into a bigger share of Uncle Harley's estate. CRAZY, huh? The atmosphere in the room was a weird combination of Mardi Gras merriment and Memorial Service somberness. The dichotomy of emotions played across all our faces. On one hand, the money would make such a big difference in our lives. But, on the other hand, we realized this gift comes to us only through the death of an uncle who refused to let any of us close enough to really know or love him in his latter years; one who appeared to have postponed all his dreams until that elusive "someday" came along. Well, time ran out, leaving us, his distant relatives, as the beneficiaries of a life not lived, and dreams never fulfilled. So with emotions churning, we sat before the lawyer—merrily somber.

Mr. Thompson thanked us for our patience, while he searched through his files and proceeded to lay the official-looking documents out before him. I was truly dizzy with expectation—I had to remind myself how to breathe. *Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.* As he started to read, a wave of pride and love washed over me as I glanced around the table. My cousins and I have handled this whole matter with as much dignity and grace as we could muster—no fighting or backbiting. We were in it, all for one and one for all. Uncle Harley would have been so proud of us all.

"So now that we have all of the formalities out of the way," Mr. Thompson said soberly, "I must inform all of you that Mr. Harley Shelnutt's estate will not be divided in any way, but, as per his wishes, **will go in**

**totality to one beneficiary."**

*I couldn't believe my luck!* After all, I was his favorite. *It's all mine!!!* I tried so very hard not to glance at my cousins for fear that they would see the "Sorry, Suckas" look in my eyes!!! YES!!! YES!!! No, no, oh Lisa, try to be a good sport, please. But visions of the Girls' school in Africa with my name emblazoned across it and my beach house in the Hamptons flashed before my eyes once again! *Stop it, Lisa. Listen to the lawyer.* I attempted to gather my senses and rein in my inner child.

Taking a cleansing breath and offering up a silent thank-you to both God and Uncle Harley, I leaned forward in my seat with a grateful smile beginning to form on my lips and listened as Mr. Thompson carried on. "I, Harley Shelnutt, being of sound mind and body do hereby bequeath my estate in its entirety to my life partner, *Ray Fernández Pueblo.*" Clipped to the will was a faded picture of a handsome young cabana boy with a hotel nametag that read, in broken sans serif letters, "Ray."

After the reading, we said our polite goodbyes and I slumped off to the parking lot and crawled into my car. I then realized that a quick reassessment of the situation was in order. First, it appeared that Uncle Harley DID get out of that car on occasion. Perhaps that was an understatement. And above all, a twist on another old adage came to mind and seemed to fit to a tee: *Where there's a will, there's a Ray...*



**Lisa Love** is a talented and insightful writer with a skewed sense of humor; she looks for—and often finds—the absurd masquerading as the mundane.





S · K · I · N · N · E · R

# The Quiet Man

By Heather Reed

**I** was five years old, and it had been two years since we had seen my dad. Dad had left Fort Gordon, Georgia for Okinawa in November of 1949.

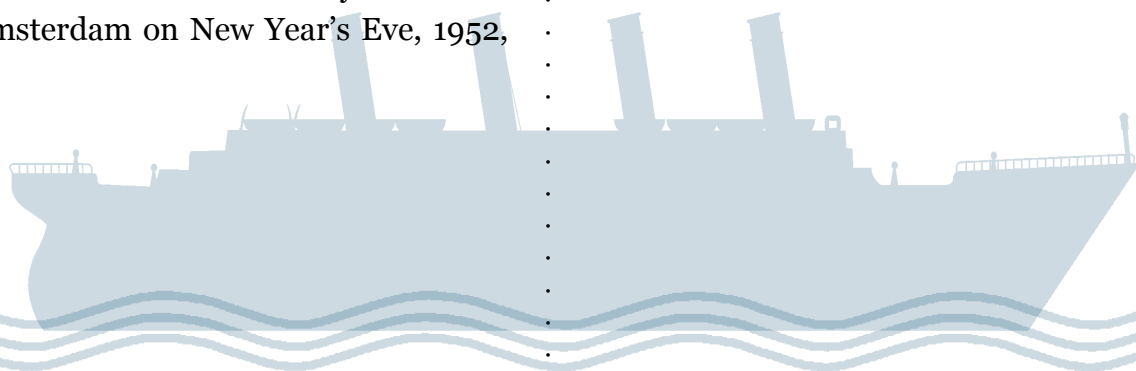
That following December, a few days after Christmas, my mother and I boarded the S. S. Queen Elizabeth, sailed to Southampton and returned by train to Scotland, to stay with my grandmother. It was tight quarters in Granny's tenement apartment there in Scotland, and my widowed Aunt Isabel and her two sons, Tommy and Frankie, were also living there.

We were scheduled to return home a few months later, but in the summer of 1950, Frankie caught polio, and our orders to return to the United States were rescinded; because of our exposure to polio, the government had imposed a one-year quarantine on us, preventing us from re-entering the United States until a vaccine had been developed.

Consequently, my father was commissioned and sent directly to Korea from Japan for a period of one year: 3 November 1950—30 December 1951. It would be two years before we would see him again.

We spent that last year in Scotland and were anxious to see him again and be reunited as a family when we boarded the S.S. New Amsterdam on New Year's Eve, 1952, bound for New York.

*It was a calm  
and routine  
journey in  
the belly  
of the boat.  
And in the cabin  
next to ours,  
dwelt a quiet man.*





It was a calm and routine journey in the belly of the boat. And in the cabin next to ours, dwelt a quiet man. Our cabin was small; inside was a bed, two bedside tables, a fold-out table and stool, an armchair in the corner and a small bathroom. There were no windows, and the door to the cabin had a number on it and led into a long hallway, with doors on either side, and stairs that led up to the dining room. In the afternoon, I was allowed to play in the hallway outside our cabin while my mother was getting dressed for dinner.

One late afternoon in early February, a porter caught my attention as he wandered down the hall with a tray held high in his right hand. The porter peered first at the numbers on each door, and then at the paper he held in his left hand and stopped to knock on the door directly next to ours. The door opened, and I peered out from behind the porter's legs to get a glimpse of the mysterious passenger. The tall,

slender man smiled warmly and indicated to the porter to place the tray on the small table next to the corner armchair and then he winked at me. I interpreted the wink to be an invitation into his room and since I had become completely bored with my own dancing, singing, rhyming, hopscotch and counting games, I gladly accepted.

The porter sat the tray down on the small

table that folded out from the wall, and the quiet man sat down on the small stool beside it. This brought the quiet man down

to my level, and I stood facing the tray as the porter removed the lid off the plate.

There beneath the cover sat a perfectly fine lettuce-and-

tomato sandwich

with mayonnaise

and large bits

of bacon stick-

ing out from underneath the bread. It was

accompanied by a large dill pickle and a few

crispy potato chips. My mouth was watering,

and I was focused on the

sandwich, and the quiet

man was focused on me.

I asked him if he would

like me to say grace for

him and, once again, he

winked at me and nod-

ded. I closed my eyes,

and pointed my index

finger at my forehead,

saying, "In the name of

the Father," and then at

my heart, "and the Son,"

and then as I tapped my

right and left shoulders

concluded, "and the Holy

Ghost..." I then folded my

hands together and pro-

nounced a long and drawn out, "Amen!"

Once again, with twinkling eyes and a

warm smile, my new friend acknowledged my

prayer with a nod, just as my mother franti-

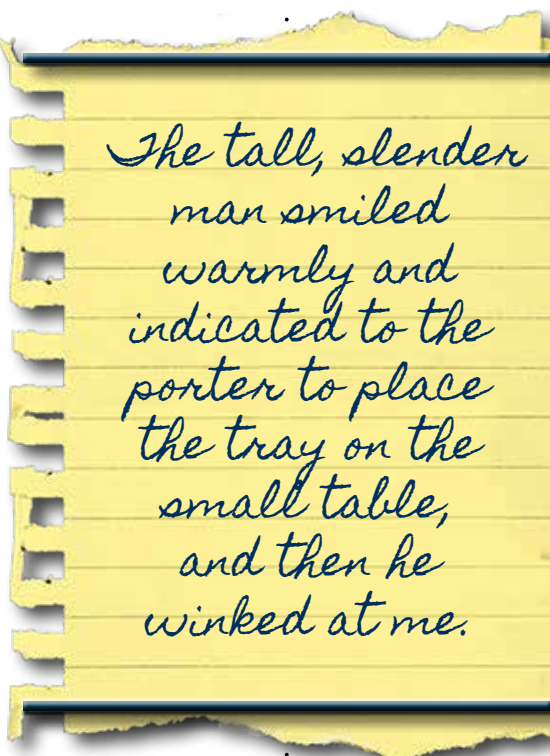
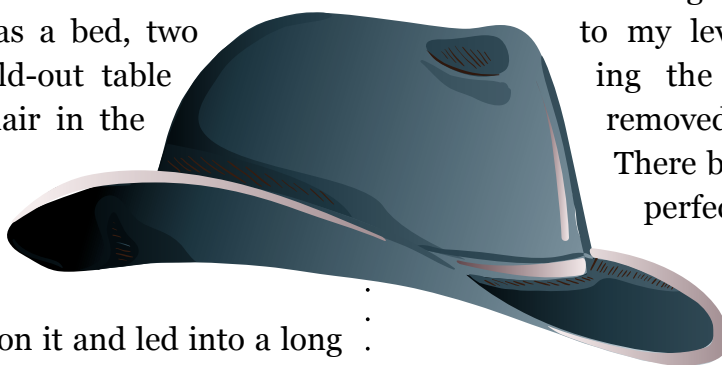
cally rushed in, sweeping me off my feet and

stammering awkward but copious apologies

to the bemused man. She carried me back to

the cabin next door—where I belonged—and

dressed me in a pretty new blue dress and



*The tall, slender  
man smiled  
warmly and  
indicated to the  
porter to place  
the tray on the  
small table,  
and then he  
winked at me.*

shiny black shoes, to join the crew and guests for dinner in the big dining room.

It was the *Captain's Dinner* that night. We were approaching the harbor of New York and the captain had invited all the passengers to join him in the *First Class Ballroom*, from which you could see the glorious New York skyline.

The passengers were dressed in their most impressive finery, and they mingled around the various tables, choosing the most appealing appetizers and entrees, while downing cocktails, eating, smoking cigarettes, dancing and chatting endlessly. I wasn't impressed;

I couldn't help but wonder if I would ever see my new friend—the quiet man—again.

The boat docked in the morning, we disembarked, and were waiting with our luggage on the south end of the dock for my dad to pick us up. After a while, my mother became increasingly anxious, thinking that he might have forgotten us. Her nervousness was noticed by a passing young Irish sailor, who asked if he could help.

Back in those days, people were kind, and the fine Irish sailor offered us a place to stay for the night in New York. I was thinking that I was about to make another new friend, but just then, Dad pulled up in a brand-new Buick convertible.

He looked splendid in his dress uniform, and he excitedly stepped out of the car, which had the top down—bloody cold for February

in New York. Dad hastily threw our luggage in the trunk, and picked me up and lifted me over the driver's door to place me in the back seat.

After a tender kiss on my cheek, he opened the door for my mother, but paused to hold her close and kiss her on the lips. He then offered a goodbye salute to the Irish sailor boy, jumped back into the car and drove down to lower Manhattan to meet the Staten Island Ferry. He pulled the car onto the ferry and, after disembarking on Staten Island, drove to Grandma and Pop's house to meet the rest of the family in Tottenville

at the family's old farm house on the south end of the island.

I never saw the sailor or the quiet man again, but that night, I overheard my mother as she told the whole family about the film being shot in Ireland, and about the quiet man we had met on the boat.

Daddy picked me up and squeezed my cheek and asked me if I knew that I had prayed for the tallest and most

handsome cowboy in America—Mr. John Wayne. I was happy to see that he was pleased, but I was even happier to be reunited with my father and to be held in his arms.

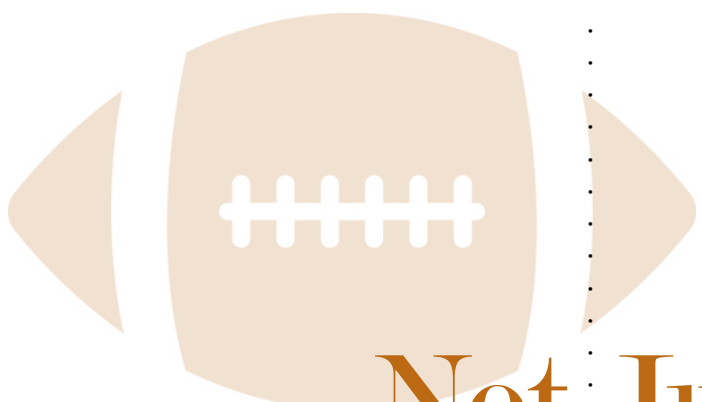
**Heather Reed** is a writer based out of Hull, Georgia.



The passengers  
were dressed  
in their most  
impressive finery.  
I wasn't impressed;  
I couldn't help  
but wonder if I  
would ever see my  
new friend—the  
quiet man—again.







## Not Just For Kicks

By Dan Schlafer

I became a football junkie at age two. My big brother gave me a helmet, shoulder pads, and a bright red jersey for Christmas that year, and I was hopelessly hooked.

My brother was my first coach. It didn't take me long to conclude that teaching others the game I loved the way he taught me was my dream job—my *destiny*.

With my playing days over after college graduation, my high school coaching career began. For five years, I was an assistant, knowing deep in my heart that I could steer the ship, if given the chance.

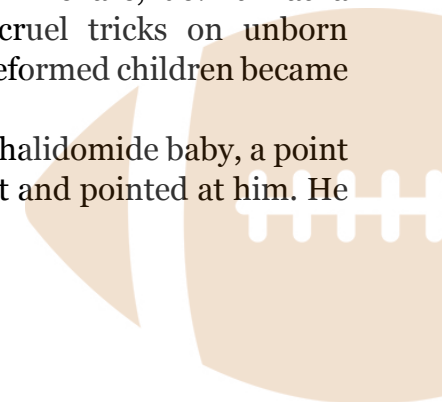
That chance dropped into my lap when the head man unexpectedly retired. The moment I had planned for more than 20 years was at hand. What a rush! *I would make Vince Lombardi look like a neophyte*. After all, I had forgotten more football than most folks will ever know. *I would make an immediate difference*.

I put try-out signs all over campus. *Are you big enough? Are you tough enough? Are you strong enough? Are you quick enough?* If you've got what it takes to play a *man's game*, meet me in the locker room after school on Friday!

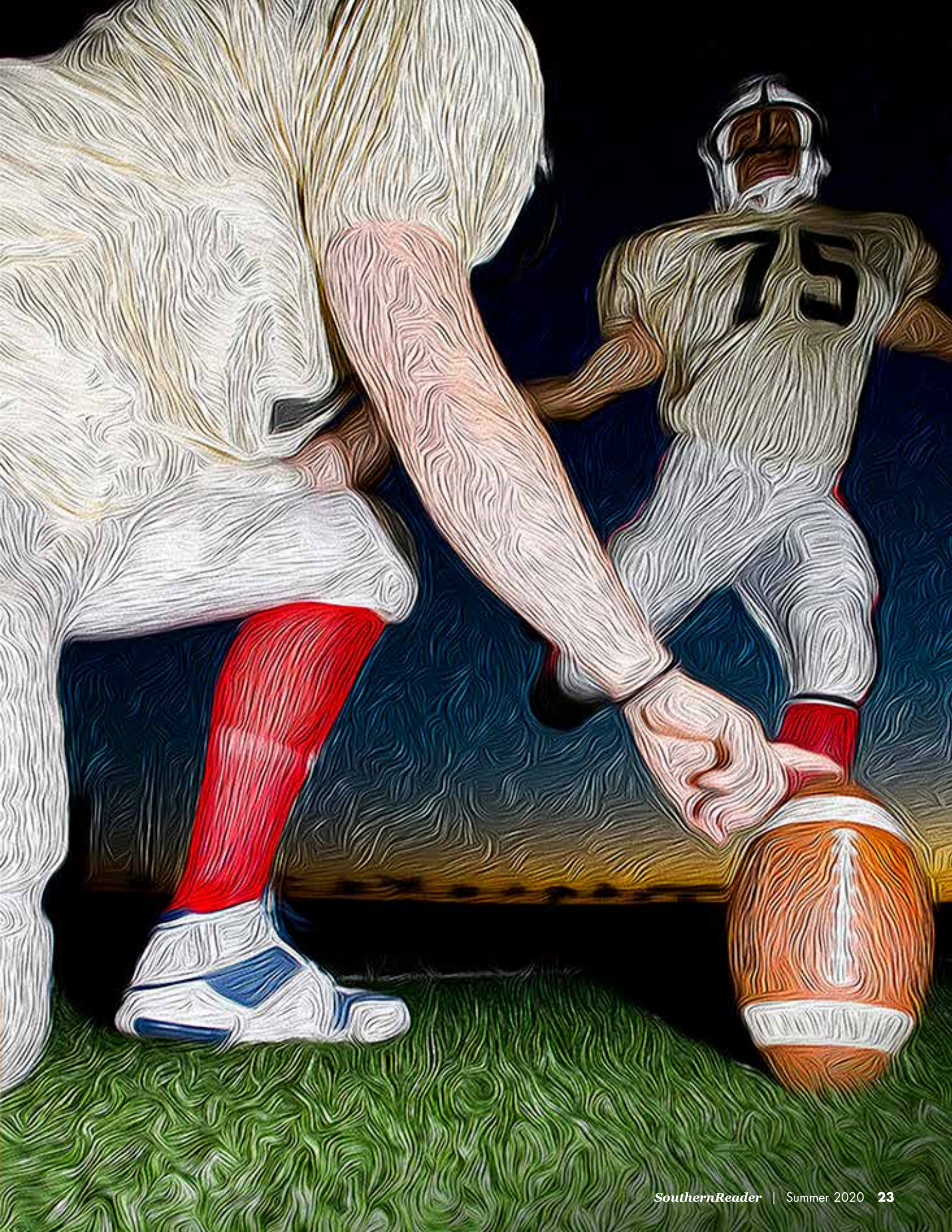
He was a thalidomide baby—this freshman I'd seen on campus. Those who aren't old and gray like me won't remember thalidomide. Those of you who are, do. It was a morning sickness drug that played cruel tricks on unborn babies back in the 1960s. Grotesquely deformed children became its calling card.

There was no question that he was a thalidomide baby, a point never argued by those who talked about and pointed at him. He

He was a  
thalidomide  
baby—this  
freshman  
I'd seen  
on campus.









was deaf, had no external ears, and one leg was significantly longer than the other. He walked with a pronounced limp. Watching him try to run was too painful for words.

He also had no forearms. Attached at his elbow were four tiny fingers, no thumbs.

It was time for the after-school meeting. The thalidomide baby showed up first. What's more, he walked up to me and in his unique voice said, "Coach, I want to play football!"

I stood in stunned silence. Clearly, this wasn't in his best interest or mine. I considered the liability issues.

I'd be held responsible for that single, well-placed blow that certainly would render him more handicapped than he already was.

Quick thinker that I was, I bounced it right back at him: "You know what? I need a good manager! How about it?"

"NO COACH! I WANT TO PLAY!" was his retort.

I'd had a psychology course in college. "*What a waste of my time. I'll never use this in real life,*" was my rationale as I went through the motions to earn the credit. Suddenly, I realized *I could use that stuff*. I could make him see this was a bad idea and even couch it in such a way that he'd think the decision to abandon the bad idea was his. *After all, I was a college graduate.* He was a mere ninth grader.

"What position do you want to play?" I asked. "Quarterback?" (He had no forearms or hands.) "Linebacker?" (He was small and weak.) "Running back?" (He couldn't run.)

I wasn't prepared for the response. "*No, Coach! Not quarterback! Not linebacker. Not running back...I can kick!!!*"

Guess what? He could. Remember that "one leg longer than the other" thing? That's

what made him so good. He planted the short leg and used physics on the long one. When his foot hit the ball, it sounded like a shotgun blast.

You could hear it a mile away. *He* couldn't.

He still holds the school records for most consecutive extra points and longest field goal.

When he graduated, he had two words after his name that I could only fantasize about as a player—*All-American*.

Who was taught the lesson? Who was it that made a difference?

The story doesn't end there. After all, others needed to be taught a lesson, too.

He got a job. Not just any job, mind you, but as a draftsman.

Go ahead, read it twice. *He drew for a living*. Putting his pencil between the two withered fingers on his right hand, he was an architectural wizard.

Next time you feel sorry for yourself or think

you've got it rough, consider that thalidomide baby. You'll feel better instantly.



**Dan Schlafer** has been a professional educator, coach and administrator. During his coaching career, Dan earned Coach of the Year honors thirteen times and while at Tennessee School for the Deaf, he coached two deaf national champion runner-up teams. As a high school principal, Dan was named Principal of the Year in (2002-2003) by The Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association. He was enshrined in the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) Hall of Fame in April 2013.

*When he graduated,  
he had two words  
after his name  
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All-American.*



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# A Visit to My Dad's War

By Steve Petty

M

y dad still jumped into foxholes well into his seventies. These were not the ones where he slept for 511 nights during WWII. These were in the space on the bedroom floor between his bed and desk.

While he rarely spoke of the foxholes in Europe, they lived vividly for decades in his dreams. Fortunately, he was not injured while diving into the many in Europe nor the ones in Nashville.

Like so many veterans, Dad made only passing references to his army days during most of his years. Unfortunately, that—along with the day-to-day business of life and the chaos of family gatherings—kept me from collecting his war stories, for which I eventually began to yearn. Sometime between his diagnosis with dementia and his death, I added researching his war experiences to the top of my retirement bucket list. I hoped it would culminate in a visit to some of the places where he fought.

I knew that Dad had fought with 45th Infantry Division of the United States Army—the famed “*Thunderbirds*”—but that was about the extent of my knowledge of his service. Then, in late 2017, I cleaned out a box I brought from my parents’ house when

I knew that  
Dad had  
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Division—  
the famed  
*Thunderbirds*.







we sold it in 2010. To my surprise, there was a small book which, for the first time, identified for me Dad's route through Europe. I could finally put it on a map and visualize his path from North Africa through Sicily, Italy, France and finally, to Nürnberg, Dachau, and Munich. This energized me in ways I had not imagined. In turn, that inspired eight months of intensive research and two weeks in Europe during 2019, visiting the places that had most captured my imagination. These included three countries, two of his four amphibious landing sites, numerous battlefields, two American military cemeteries, several of the towns captured by the Thunderbirds, and Dachau concentration camp. Since a full rendering of that trip is well beyond the scope of this article, I will recount four of my many meaningful moments.

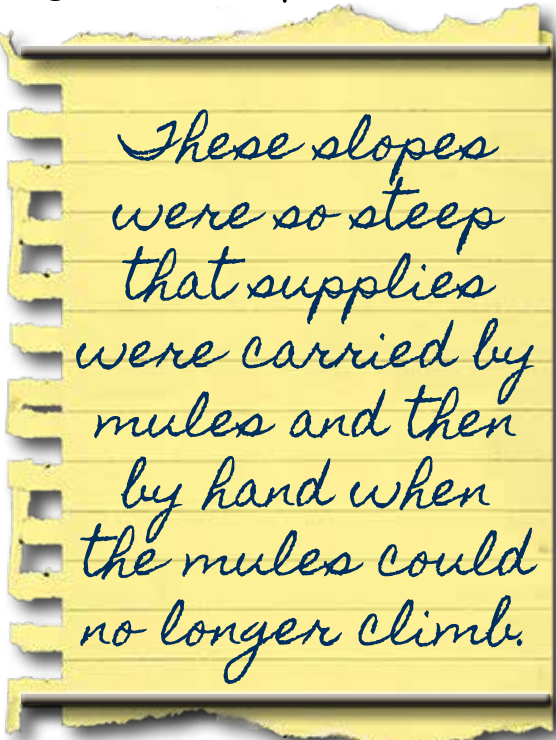
In the Apennine Mountains of Italy lies a small town named Venafrò, which was the end point of Dad's first campaign in Italy. I had been intrigued by the accounts of fighting a war on mountain slopes during a winter with endless rain, mud, and snow. These slopes were so steep that supplies were carried by mules and then by hand when the mules could no longer climb. While in Venafrò, we spent nine hours with Luciano Bucci, a WWII historian I had found during my research. The day was full of spots I had read about and spots where Dad had been. It was surreal to finally stand on pieces of ground where he had

fought, camped, and crossed swollen rivers after bridges were bombed by the Germans. In all such places, I pondered how he survived the horrors that occurred there, and yet he remained one of the most kind, gentle and sane men I have ever known. Such thoughts

were always followed by considering whether I could have done the same. The single most overwhelming moment that day came while hiking up 4,000-foot Mt. Corno with Luciano. At one spot near the top, we could see the Volturno River Valley, surrounded by mountains with the town of Venafrò at Mt. Corno's base down below us. I could see the entire battle scene from this vantage point—the two

spots where Dad's artillery battalion was positioned in the valley below, while firing at the Germans who occupied the top of the mountain behind me. I could also see the steep slopes on either side of me, where the infantry soldiers and special forces climbed in full view of the Germans in order to run them off the opposite side of the mountain. I was so grateful to finally have this perspective; I was reduced to silence while I stood there taking it all in.

During my research, I learned about the numerous American military cemeteries throughout western Europe where our soldiers were buried. We visited one in Anzio, Italy and one in Epinal, France, in part because they are located on ground that was liberated by the Thunderbirds. They are also



*These slopes  
were so steep  
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no longer climb.*

beautifully designed and maintained memorials to those who lost their lives nearby, thus fitting places to ponder matters of war. At the cemetery in Epinal, we were in conversation with the superintendent, when two French women walked into the cemetery with bouquets of flowers. He pointed them out and told us that in the last four years they had recruited local volunteers to adopt about 2,000 of the graves there. When I asked what these volunteers say about their motivation for such a task, he said most of them believe it's the least they can do for men who left their own country to fight for France's freedom and now are buried so far from their homes.

I later walked over to one of those ladies to see if she spoke English, but she did not. I pointed to my chest and said, "American." Then I pointed to her bouquet and said, "Merci, merci." As she began pouring her heart out in French, not one word of which I understood, I was sure she was expressing gratitude. With tear-filled eyes, I knew that I had never in my life been as proud to be an American as I was at that moment.

Throughout the war in Europe, the troops had their sights set on crossing the Rhine River into Germany. The closer they got, the more they longed to make that crossing which would symbolize entering the final chapter of the war. It was only 95 miles from Epinal, France to the spot where the Thunderbirds would enter Germany for the second and

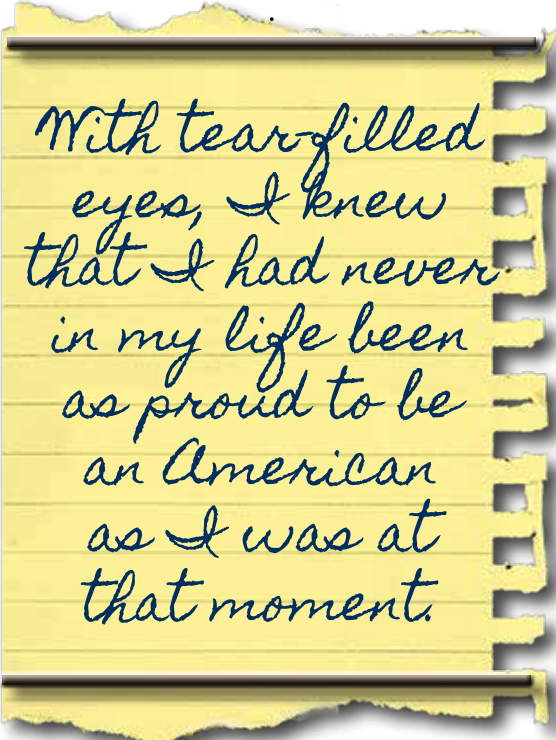
final time, but it took six and a half months to cover that ground, because of the intensity with which the Germans fought to keep the Allies out. When they did cross, they had to build temporary bridges once again, because the one there had been blown by the

Germans. My heart and imagination compelled me to the spot where they crossed the Rhine at Worms, Germany.

I spent an hour alone in the middle of the bridge looking up the Rhine in the direction they crossed. I pondered the logistics of getting 14,000 troops and all their vehicles and supplies across the river on makeshift bridges, rafts, and pontoon ferries. I then pondered the joy

that the men must have felt to have reached this milestone, standing on German soil with the Germans in retreat. Though they didn't know it at the time, I knew that they only had two serious battles left before the end of the war. When I turned to leave, I felt as if I were walking away from my dad, because I knew how little of our trip was left. I went back to the center of the bridge to say goodbye and talked to Dad for 15 more minutes, thanking him for enduring the horrors of this war and returning home to be a good father and stellar example to me. My words cannot capture how moved I was at that moment.

On our next to last day, we spent over six hours at Dachau concentration camp where my dad was a participant in its liberation. Although for years we have read stories of



*With tear-filled eyes, I knew that I had never in my life been as proud to be an American as I was at that moment.*



the camps, seen video clips and pictures, and read numerous books with accounts of what transpired there, nothing could have prepared us for the feeling of standing on that ground. There are stories of the battle-hardened Thunderbirds

throwing up and crying when they came across the now iconic thirty-nine train cars full of dead bodies, sometimes stacked like cord wood. Even more than normal, I wondered how Dad made peace with that sight. Did he throw up or cry? Did he simply offer up a wordless prayer because no words could have been found at that moment? How on earth did this young man raised on a farm in rural Kentucky, surrounded by a loving family and community, make sense of such unspeakable evil that he had not even known existed until that moment? In the words of Flint Whitlock, author of *"The Rock of Anzio,"* "If ever the American soldier needed confirmation of the reasons why he was in uniform,



why he was at war, why he was required to put his life on the line day after day, enduring all the hardships and discomfort and danger, it was contained in these thirty-nine railroad cars. Here was the very embodiment

of the evil Nazi regime that he had sworn to vanquish."

We rarely think of having life-changing events in our seventies. It's more often a time of reflection on the life that we have lived and making peace with that life and all its glorious moments as well as our mistakes and deeds left undone. However, I can say with confidence that this visit back to my Dad's war was life-changing for me in

more ways than I can write here. My former respect for him and his generation, profound as it was, has increased tenfold.

**Steve Petty** earned a Bachelor's in Sociology and a Master's in Clinical Social Work. His youthful idealism led to a career in social work which he came to consider his life's calling.

*Even more  
than normal,  
I wondered  
how Dad  
made peace  
with that sight.*





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# Matters of the Heart

By Bruce Brandon

I

t was a hot and humid Tuesday in August, and I was working outside. It turned out to *not* be a routine afternoon in the yard.

I had suffered a heart attack, and it was intense. I had no way of knowing it at the time, but one artery had become completely blocked.

I didn't have the stereotypical chest pain that one hears about with an attack such as this; *the pain was actually coming from my heart.*

I stopped working—but not immediately—and went inside and took a brief shower. I don't know if I thought that would help, but it didn't.

By then, I was feeling pretty bad, but I made it over to the bed. I didn't bother to dry off.

"Maybe if I just rest, I'll be OK," I thought. I did have a towel handy and dried myself somewhat. That cooled me off, but I was still sweating profusely. Cold sweats.

I knew it was time to pray. "*Help me,*" I said out loud. That's all I could even think of praying.

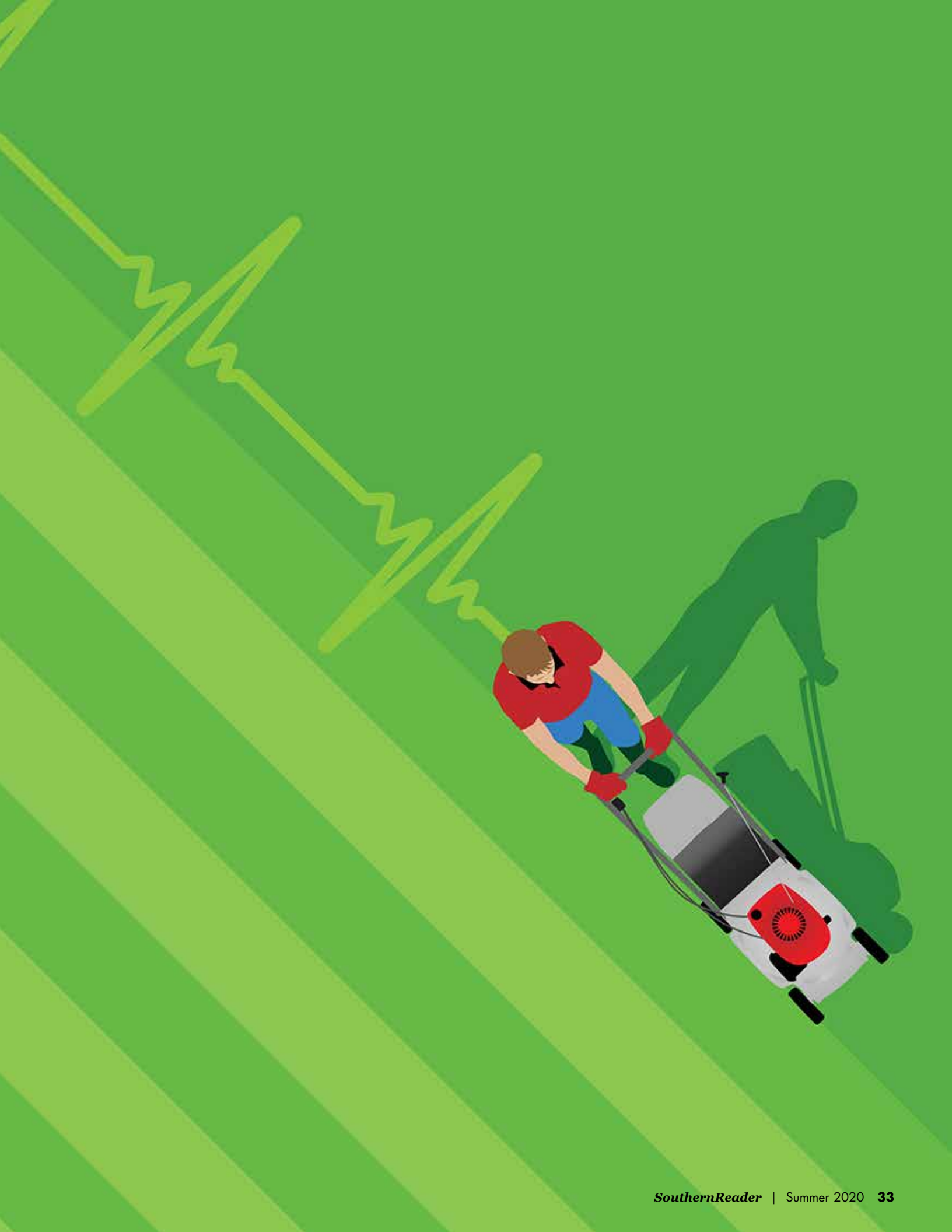
Right away, the pain abated for about five minutes. Looking back, I now realize that was my answer—and also, the brief window of opportunity to get dressed and call 911.

But, instead, I waited.

"*Maybe it's passed,*" I thought, "*Maybe it was just a brief spell of some sort.*"

No such luck. When the pain and discomfort came back, it was not just where it left off five minutes before; it had a five-minute increase in pain with its return.

*I had no way of knowing it at the time, but one artery had become completely blocked.*





"I don't want to die this way." I thought. My wife, Denise was out shopping, and the last thing I wanted was for her to come home and find me dead on our bed.

Then, I thought about my widowed mother who lives with us. I realized it would be just as bad if she found me.

The pain increased. I got up and got dressed, and I had the presence of mind to Google "heart attack symptoms."

Sure enough, there it was—cold sweats. I called 911. We had unplugged our land line phone years ago, so I went for my cell phone—it felt like it weighed five pounds. I pressed the three numbers with tremendous effort and could barely hold it to my ear and speak.

*I was going down fast and my brain was not working properly. Oxygen and glucose were not getting through.*

Somehow I managed to get into the living room and tell my mother I had just called for an ambulance. When she asked what was wrong, I just pointed to my heart and slumped in a chair. Denise came home with shopping bags and did not immediately grasp the situation. "He's sick," Mom said, anxiously. She then rushed to her phone, and the prayer requests went out fast.

I looked over at Denise and handed her my phone—the 911 person was still on the line.

The next thing I remember is the EMT kneeling beside me asking, "Who is the president?"

"Donald Trump," I answered. *Was this an election year?* I was annoyed by the question, but even more annoying, I was losing con-

sciousness. The EMT put baby aspirin under my tongue. Then, three or four people lifted my *dead-weight* 200 pounds onto the gurney and rolled me up the driveway.

The ride was wild, but the EMT sat beside me, bouncing along with the ambulance and working and talking to me. I was glad the driver was speeding, but I made a mental note to advise them that they might want to check that ambulance suspension.

The next half hour was a blur. I finally realized I was in an operating room. "Is that an old shirt?" someone asked.

"It doesn't matter," I replied, "Cut it off." Next, I became aware of the music that was being piped into the operator room. It was Cyndi

Lauper, and she was singing "*Girls Just Want to Have Fun*." Even though my brain function was impaired, I thought, "Oh, that's good. Don't know if it's appropriate, but it's good." I fully enjoyed that brief distraction, even in the peak of agony.

Soon, oxygen and glucose relief began to flow. I was delirious, but awake during the procedure, and this first step of recovery felt wonderful! Life itself was coming back into my dying body, but I wondered if part of my heart had died.

In an ICU room, the Beatles' "*Yesterday*" came to mind—*when all my troubles seemed so far away, but now they seemed though they were here to stay*. I knew I had made it through the emergency stage, but I had not yet heard my prognosis report and the possibility of serious permanent damage with major limitations was real. I cried, but did not

*I made a mental note to advise them that they might want to check that ambulance suspension.*

try to dry my face, since I could not bend my arms at the elbows. Intravenous needles were taped at each high forearm, which threatened to puncture me deeper.

My phone dinged with a notification. My Bible app with the daily verse displayed: “*He shall wipe away every tear...*” – Rev 21:4.

“Hmmm,” I thought, “*Probably just a coincidence...*”

Just then, Patient Advocate Nurse Mary Alice came in to visit, and I’m sure that it was apparent that I had been crying—two or three annoying little tears ran down into the outer trough of my ear—and I asked her to wipe away the little puddle. She graciously did so, and held my hand a few minutes. It was very soothing.

I was very thirsty. Back at the house, when I first came in after working outside, I started to drink a glass of water, but I felt that it would make me sick. This was my only occurrence of nausea.

The IVs were replenishing my depleted fluid level after so much perspiration, but my mouth was very dry. Once in the ICU room, I pleaded for water. *The two plastic spoonfuls of ice chips were wonderful!* That’s when I began to slow down and appreciate the progress. I had to wait for each small step of relief. There were several steps before hearing the best one: “*You have been released to go home.*”

At midnight, it was time for the femoral artery sheath to be removed, followed by direct pressure to stop the bleeding. Twice, the strong male nurse pressed his thumb on

the point of entry with both hands applying heavy, direct pressure for twenty minutes. My thinned blood did not want to stop flowing, but this also was a big step of progress, once the increased discomfort faded. In the morning, I got to stand up after remaining on my back all night, then I moved to a regular room, and the IVs were removed.

I got dressed and was ready to go home after two and a half days.

I sent a text message to a good friend: “Yesterday, I had a heart attack. 911. Ambulance. Stent. ICU. I feel okay and had a good day after. No damage report yet. I think I will recover well. It was intense. Life is short on Earth.”

When he called me, I apologized for being

so abrupt, but he replied. “No, it was very *Brucilian.*”

*So, what did I learn from this episode?* Actually, I came away with some major life lessons.

- Make the necessary adjustments
- Have some fun
- Prepare to meet your Maker



**Bruce Brandon** is still making necessary adjustments, but is recovering well in Knoxville, Tennessee. For fun, he has recently joined a band as their bass player.

*I had not yet heard my prognosis report and the possibility of serious permanent damage was real.*



## Not in Kansas Anymore

By Norma Dodds

I

was born in Washington, Kansas, a small town in the green rolling hills of the north central part of the state, where farming was the primary occupation.

Unlike its namesake back east, our Washington was not a metropolis, but rather that place where everyone knew each other (and each other's business, as well).

The tracks of the old Burlington Railroad went through our town, however, I never saw a train on them. I didn't think much about that—I was not a kid who dreamed of “far away places.” Most of the people I knew, including my parents, had been born and raised in the place they chose to live in for the rest of their lives.

My dream was to marry, have children and live very much the way my parents had. As a kid, I had several big journeys that took me beyond Kansas; when I was in 7th grade, my parents took me on a trip by car to Washington State, and then, when I was in high school, we drove to Pennsylvania to see my married sister. Those trips were a big deal to a small town girl like me. Little did I know that even though I married “*the boy next door*,” his 22 years in the Air Force would take us to undreamed-of places.

In fact, I found that I actually loved moving around. I ended up living in Nebraska, California, Utah, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, Wisconsin and Georgia, and overseas in England and Russia. My mother once remarked, “*How did I manage to raise such a vagabond?!*”

I have great memories of my childhood in Kansas. I still keep

*My mother  
once remarked,  
“How did  
I manage  
to raise such  
a vagabond?!”*





in touch with childhood friends who stayed in our hometown. But, I am grateful that I have been able to see much of this amazing world we live in.

I have been to all 50 states and have set foot in 50 different countries around the world (I use that term because I count places like Switzerland and Japan where I have only been in the airport long enough to change planes and Guam, where my plane landed in an emergency).

I stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon at sunset and rode the *Maid of the Mist* to the foot of Niagara Falls.

At the Statue of Liberty I wondered how many of my ancestors had set foot in America; and at *Plymouth Rock*, I gave thanks for their pioneer spirit.

I have been to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, I've marveled at the sculptures of our Presidents carved from the mountain in South Dakota, and I've marched across the Civil War battlefields in the East. I have seen the *Changing of the Guard* at Buckingham Palace, and I've sat in a church service in St. George's Chapel—just a few pews behind the Queen and her family.

I have checked the time on *Big Ben* and walked across London Bridge. I have thrilled at the sound of glorious majesty of "*Messiah*" in *Albert Hall* and have experienced the Opera at LaScalla in Italy. I have kissed the *Blarney Stone* in Ireland, and I've stood in awe in the Sistine Chapel.

I've visited Vatican City, I've seen Michelangelo's "*David*" and the impressive *Statue of Moses* in Florence, Italy. I went

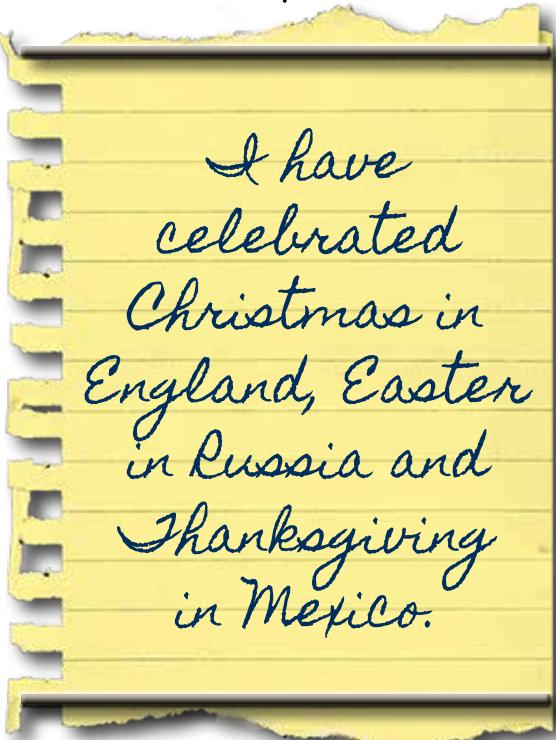
through the Louvre and smiled back at "*Mona Lisa*" and "*Winged Victory*," the elegant marble Hellenistic sculpture of Nike.

I took the elevator to the top of the *Eiffel Tower*, and I've climbed the many steps to Montmartre to enjoy delicious crepes from the sidewalk vendors in Paris. This was especially meaningful to me, because just the month before this trip to Paris and the many steps I took to the top of the tower, I had been diagnosed with COPD and told that I should not be able to climb a flight of stairs.

I have seen the tulip fields of Holland in all their glory. I have walked the narrow sidewalks of beautiful *Santorini Island* and enjoyed delicious Greek food at sidewalk cafes in Athens. I have been on Mars Hill where the Apostle Paul once stood and thought about his commitment to telling the world about Jesus. It prompted me to examine my own faith, and I gave thanks for all those who have brought God's Word all the way into my world today.

I have floated in the *Dead Sea*, I have viewed the empty tomb in Jerusalem, the "*Dome of the Rock*" and the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem.

I have celebrated Christmas in England, Easter in Russia and Thanksgiving in Mexico. I lived for three years in Russia among people who were just learning what life could be like after Communism. I have seen Lenin's tomb and Red Square in Moscow. I rode the *TransSiberian Railroad* from Moscow to Beijing. I have walked on the *Great Wall of China* and I have seen the *Terra Cotta*



I have  
celebrated  
Christmas in  
England, Easter  
in Russia and  
Thanksgiving  
in Mexico.

*Warriors*, considered by some to be the *Eighth Wonder of the World*. Those life size clay figures of men, horses and chariots were made in Abraham's time!

I laughed at the idea that I ate both Peking Duck and Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing.

I have sailed the Fiords of Sweden and Norway. I have marveled at the *Taj Majal* in India. I saw the *Rock of Gibraltar*, covered by huge monkeys (so that you would not want to get out of the car).

I took the ferry from Spain to Morocco. I have visited *Iguazu Falls* in South America and I've ridden the *Finnicula* up the mountain to gaze up at the amazing "*Christ The Redeemer Statue*" in Brazil.

I was surprised when this turned into a *Spiritual Experience* for me. I stood there and cried and prayed that the whole world would see Jesus as He is portrayed there with His arms outstretched and welcoming to all who come to Him for salvation.

I weathered a storm with 60-foot waves aboard a ship in the North Atlantic and thought about how daring and brave those Vikings would have been. I have seen the barren terrain of Iceland and the Glaciers of Alaska. I took the train from Sydney to Perth and then from Adelaide to Alice Springs to view Ayers Rock.

I have seen the Light House on the northern tip of New Zealand and watched the penguins come in from the ocean to make their nests on the southern tip.

I ate pineapple pizza in Fiji and fresh pineapple from the field in Hawaii. I have walked

through the beautiful *Buchardt Gardens* in Victoria, Canada and sailed the great St. Lawrence Seaway into the Atlantic Ocean then down the coast to Nova Scotia. I have enjoyed fresh lobster on the coast of Maine and fresh shrimp right out of the ocean in Galveston.

As I mentioned, right before my trip to Paris, a doctor diagnosed me with COPD and informed me that I soon may not be able to climb a flight of stairs. He also

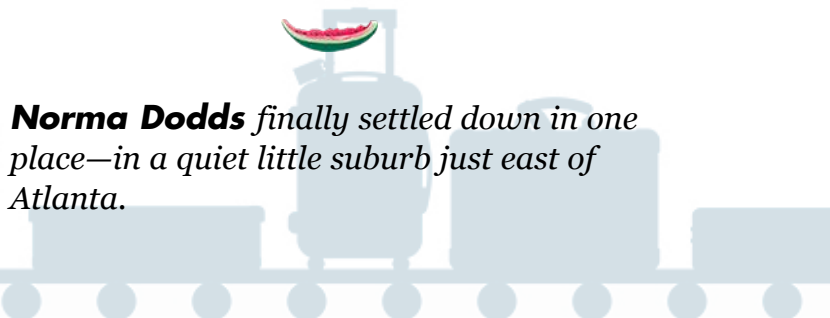
went on to warn me that I might have only five more active years.

The diagnosis was discouraging to hear, but fortunately, that was 46 years ago, and really before my travels around the world even began.

I am so very grateful now—at age 86—that although my traveling days may indeed be over, *I am still able to climb stairs*.

My travel these days is just back and forth to church, where I teach a Sunday School class of 40 women from the ages of 60 to 95. These Southern women have taken me into their hearts and lives and together, we are learning how to walk closely with God as we approach *Heaven's Door*. In fact, I believe that will be the grandest trip and most exciting and spectacular adventure of all!

**Norma Dodds** finally settled down in one place—in a quiet little suburb just east of Atlanta.





## Yellow Butterflies:

# Family, Forgiveness, Love and Miracles

By Amy Connah Hudson

*I'm always on the lookout for small miracles which some may perceive as coincidences. I choose to believe there are no coincidences. This true story weaves together a series of events which occurred the last few weeks of my father, Whit Connah's life and the days following his death.*

I

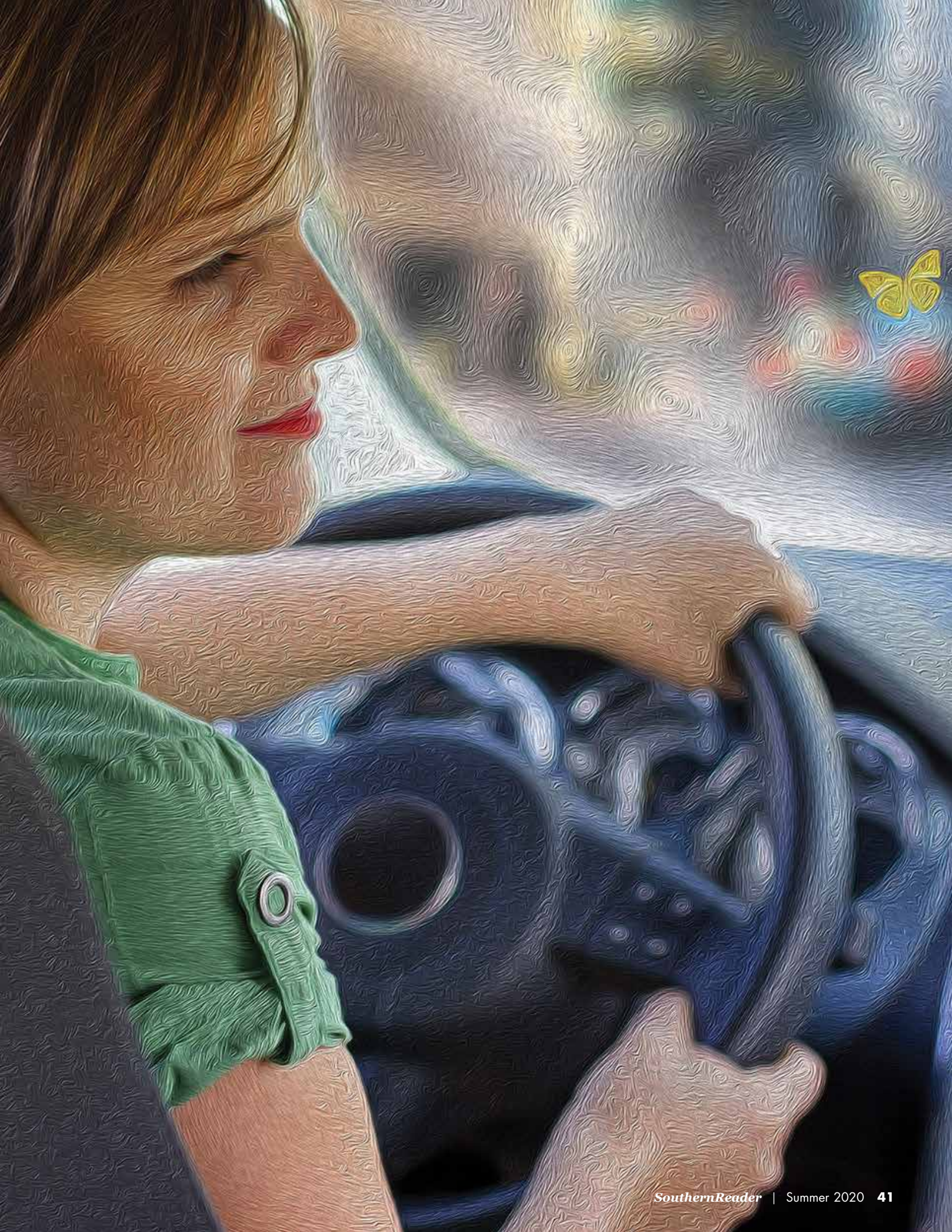
was gathering my things for work when Barbara's name popped up on the phone. "Whit thinks he might be dying," she said. "Please come quickly."

On the way to Dad and Barbara's, I tried to wrap my head around the concept that this could be his last day. A voice inside was telling me he'd be okay for the time being. Either I was in denial, or my instincts were right. Thirty minutes later I pulled into the driveway, relieved to see no ambulance—no signs of an emergency. I opened the front door and tiptoed into the parlor where Dad was sleeping; I put my hand on his chest and watched as it rose and fell. Barbara came up behind me. "It's alright," she whispered. "The hospice nurse came and gave him emergency meds. He settled right down."

The sense of urgency was gone, and there was a calmness in the air. Still, I felt it would be best to stick around. He slept for several hours before he woke up, eager to eat. Steroids kept him in a continual state of hunger, so he was enthusiastic about his meal rituals. But today the meds made him drowsy, and he kept dozing off every time he tried to bring the fork to his mouth.

*On the way to  
Dad and  
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I tried to wrap  
my head around  
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this could be  
his last day.*







“Hey, Dad, I think we better try again later,” I said as I reached for his plate. “Oh, no you don’t!” he asserted. But as soon as he scooped up the next bite, he was already fighting to stay awake. I had to turn it into a game to make sure he didn’t choke. “Dad, stay awake! You have to chew and swallow!” As I coached him through each step of his meal, he seemed amused—even a little pleased with himself.

Later that afternoon, I sat on the front porch and called Mom. Inside, one of the nursing assistants, Mary, was helping Barbara bathe Dad. Cancer left him paralyzed from the chest down when it entered his spine in April, and he’d humbled himself to the new normal of having a stranger wash him. But his nursing assistants didn’t remain strangers for long. They took to him and he to them with ease. One of the things they picked up on was the role music played in the household. It was a constant companion for Dad, Barbara, and the steady stream of family and friends who dropped by. On any given day or night, people gathered around with their instruments, and he’d play along on his harmonica.

This day was quiet compared to most, but that didn’t stop Mary from singing with Dad and Barbara as she worked. I could hear them in the room next to me singing Hank Williams’ “*I Saw the Light*.” Dad’s voice faded in and out as he attempted to stay awake long

enough to join them in Hank’s song. They moved on to an old, familiar hymn.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost but now I’m found  
Was blind but now I see...*

“Mom, can you hear that? I’m bringing the phone inside so you can listen.” Dad was sitting up in bed, still a bit groggy, but singing along. As the song ended, something told me to hand him the phone. “I’ve got someone here I think you’d like to talk to.” Within a moment, he was fully awake.

“Hey, Jeanette, how are you?”

I stayed in the room and witnessed what unfolded. We could only hear his part of the conversation. “I’m getting along alright...Thank you for the card you sent... Amy and Jenny have been wonderful. You did such a good job raising our girls...I hear you’ve been doing a lot of paintings...Oh, yeah? Well, I’m just really glad you got back to your art.” He was

still and listened for some time. “Jeanette, that means a lot. It’s good you found someone to love, too.” He listened again and paused. “Okay...bye-bye.” They both knew it would be the last time they would speak. He handed me the phone, and I walked back outside to the porch swing.

“Thank you, Amy,” Mom said through her tears. She expressed how years of hurt and anger had been transformed into something beautiful in a matter of minutes.

*Dad's nursing assistants didn't remain strangers for long. They took to him and he to them with ease.*

---

Dad died on a Sunday night in August. Moments after he drew his last breath, I scanned the room. People were hugging each other, crying. I watched as my youngest nieces sobbed and laid their bodies across his.

Five days later, my own tears had remained stubborn; the well in my heart appeared to be dry. Dad's songs, however, were determined to pitch camp inside my head. Seems every time I got in the car and drove, one of them would begin playing over and over in my mind. On this particular morning, I knew I'd be in the car all day. I had errands to run—which seemed entirely inappropriate in the face of death—except for the fact that all the items on my list had to do with his death. Find a dress for the service, stop by the church, go by the print shop and the funeral home. We'd been there the day before.

Barbara and I had waffled about whether to see Dad one last time. The night he died, it felt surreal to watch him being rolled out of their house. I wasn't sure if it would be too painful to go where that hearse had taken him. Our eyes locked and we knew we'd made our decision. We hurried out the door before it was too late.

A small group of family showed up at the same time, all of us a little surprised to see each other pull into the parking lot. The undertaker greeted us, and we followed him through the back entrance to a room strangely

reminiscent of the restaurant kitchen where I'd worked during college. The same terra cotta tile floors and similar steel appliances. But these appliances weren't made for preparing meals, and there was no lively banter between cooks and wait staff. Just us, our guide, and my father's body.

Dad was still wearing the Ryman Auditorium t-shirt he wore the night he died—a gift from

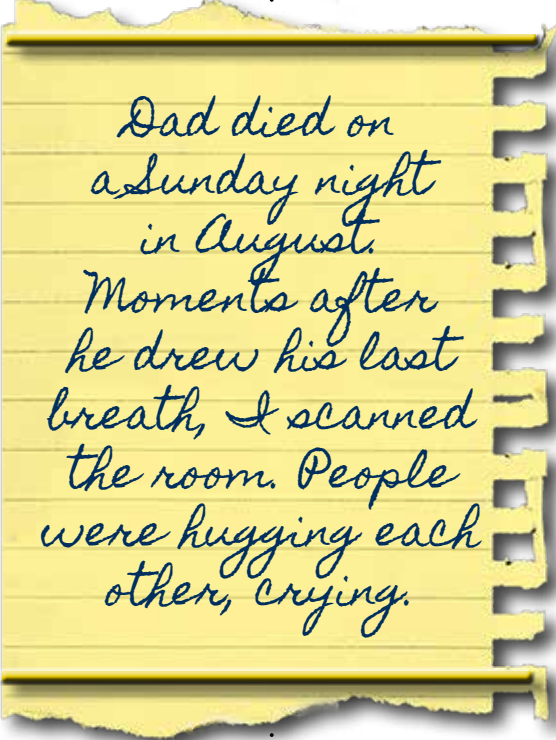
my ex-husband, Warren. The puffiness in his face from the steroids had lessened, and he was cold to the touch. It was an odd sensation to feel no warmth coming from this body that just last week had been so vibrant, even as he was passing away. This body that would soon be going into the fire. But I knew Dad's soul was long gone and wouldn't be taking the journey into the incinerator. I was assured from

the many ways God had been present during my father's illness, he was now experiencing a realm of loving kindness we can only imagine.

---

As I started the car and began my second journey to the funeral home, the tune to Dad's song "Ponce de Leon Avenue" kicked in. I hummed and ran through it a few times before I could remember the lyrics.

*My tears stretched down that long white line  
Out on that sad highway  
The woman that I left behind  
Asked me to go away...*



*Dad died on  
a Sunday night  
in August.  
Moments after  
he drew his last  
breath, I scanned  
the room. People  
were hugging each  
other, crying.*



I thought about Mom. Was the song autobiographical? Was she the woman who asked him to go away? She'd been the one to initiate their separation in 1975, and he'd written the song in the 70s. One thing I did know. It had been hard for her to be so disconnected to Dad's death and everything leading up to it. We'd shared so many of the stories of the past four months with her—stories about sorrow and hardship, but also immense joy and gifts of community—a community she wasn't part of. We encouraged her to join us for the memorial service, but she decided it would be best not to come.

As redemptive as their last conversation had been, I knew it must have intensified Mom's grief when Dad died. This was a man she loved very much in an earlier season of her life. This was the man she raised her daughters with so many years ago. This was the man with whom she'd shared mutual forgiveness just a few weeks earlier.

I came to a stoplight and spoke into my phone. "Call Mom." She picked up right away. It was comforting to hear her voice, and we talked for a long time. Things got interesting towards the end of the conversation when she remembered something she'd almost forgotten to tell me. "Unni died just a few days before your dad," she said. "Oh Mom, I'm so sorry!" Unni had been one of Mom's dearest friends for decades.

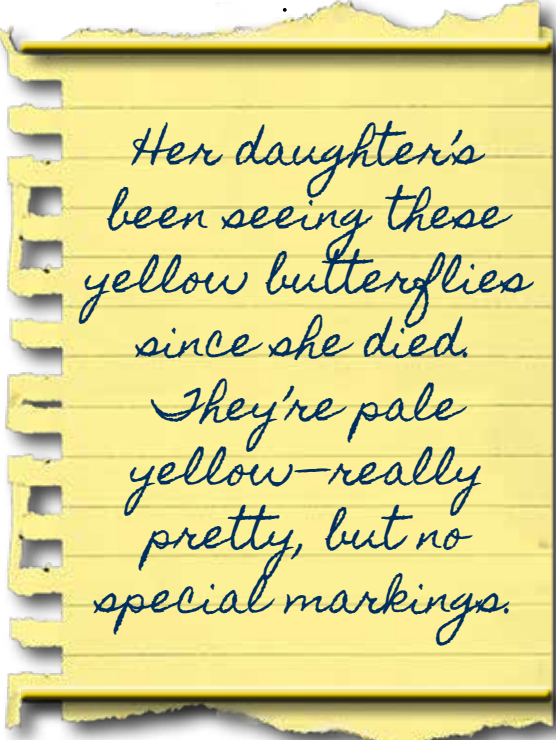
Mom continued. "I know, I can't believe it.

But she lived a long, remarkable life. And she raised a wonderful family. You want to know something? Her daughter's been seeing these yellow butterflies since she died. They're pale yellow—really pretty, but no special markings. The first time, there was just one in the garden by the pool outside Unni's bedroom. It hung out there for a long time. Since then, more have been popping up, always at significant times and places. She's so sure it's some kind of sign Unni's soul is at peace that she's been telling everyone to be on the lookout. Friends and family have been seeing them all over the place. One was even spotted in the California redwoods!"

"Wow, I believe she's right. There's something to that," I said as I pulled into the parking lot. "It gives me a sense of hope." We wrapped up

our conversation, and I sat in the car for a few minutes to ponder the story.

When I rang the bell at the front entrance, the same undertaker we'd met the day before welcomed me into the main foyer. The décor was as gaudy as it gets, but he was genuine and kind. It occurred to me he seemed to be more in the business of life than death. He led me down the hallway to a waiting room. When he returned and handed over the bag containing the box of ashes, I was surprised by two things. First, it looked like one of those reusable grocery bags, only black and brand-



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ed with the funeral home's name. Second, it was heavy. I couldn't quite grasp the stark truth the contents inside were the dust of my father's body.

Less than a week ago, he'd been playing his harmonica and celebrating his brother's birthday with barbecue and caramel cake. I put the bag in the back of the car and went on with the rest of my day. When I returned to Dad and Barbara's that evening, it was already dark, but the house was lit up with activity. I opened the door and was greeted by the cappella harmonies of *The Divas*, a group of women Barbara had been singing with for years. As she and her friends wrapped up, I remembered Dad's ashes and asked my sister Jenny to walk to the car with me to get them. She grabbed one handle of the bag and I grabbed the other. When we returned, there were

just a few women standing on the front porch. Melisa, one of Dad's musical godchildren, was telling a story about a photo shoot at a festival in New Orleans. She described the colorful setting of people drumming, dancing...and how—as she was trying to capture photos of a beautiful altar—something kept getting in the way.

"I looked closer, and it's this big, beautiful, brown butterfly," said Melisa. "I think it was dancing in front of the altar on purpose. It was really trying to call my attention! So, I just started photographing the butterfly. As this was happening, the music and dancing got bigger. This one little kid was hitting on

the drum, and there was this image I took of him really being into the beat, and something about that beat just filled me. My gosh, it was just so intense and beautiful! Then, I glanced down at my phone and noticed a string of texts. That's when I learned Whit had transitioned." She paused. "And they're still drumming. Everything's moving, and it's alive. I was surrounded by magic, and I have the images

to prove it." As Melisa's story unfolded, my ears were perking up. Here she was telling us about a moment in time that was so full of life, as my father was slipping away. And one of the central characters was a butterfly. My mother had told me the yellow butterfly story just that morning.

The conversation shifted as I mentioned I'd been shopping for something to wear to Dad's memorial. I'm not wear-

ing all black, I said. I found two dresses, and both of them have some color. Everyone nodded in agreement. We all knew how much the man loved color. Melisa piped in, "Yeah, I'm definitely not wearing black. I was at a stop sign on Moreland earlier today and asked myself, 'What color would Whit want me to wear?'" I waited to hear what she would say. "She's going to say aqua or purple or anything but yellow," I thought to myself. "And she's certainly not going to say something about another butterfly."

Melisa leaned in with a smile and lowered her voice to a whisper. "All of a sudden, this yellow butterfly lands on my windshield, flaps

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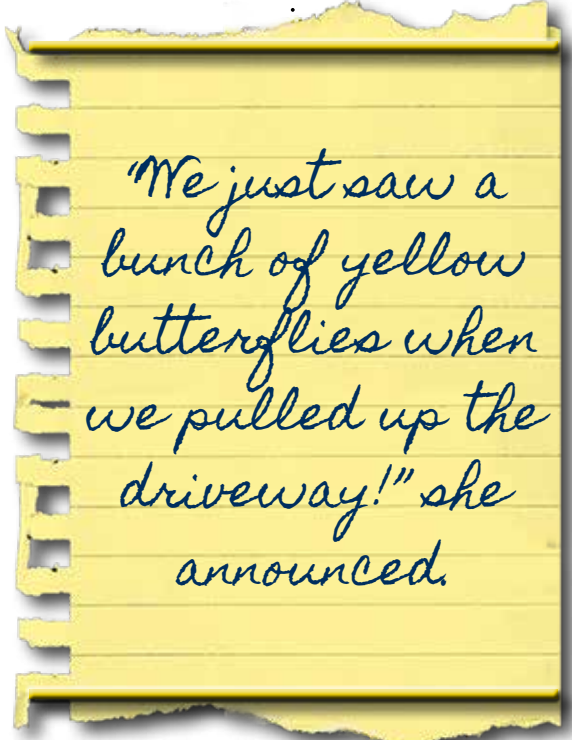
around and keeps going. I was like, ‘Okay, yellow it is, then. That is very clear. Thanks, Whit! I see you I hear you!’” My jaw dropped. “Y’all aren’t going to believe this,” I said. And I told them the story Mom had shared with me earlier that day about Unni and the yellow butterflies. We all stood there on the porch—*stunned*—Jenny and I each still holding our handle of the bag containing Dad’s ashes.

When I got home, I called Mom to fill her in on the miraculous Part II of the butterfly story. The next morning, I told a handful of people, including Warren and my sister-in-law, Audrey. That afternoon, Melisa stopped by the house. “You’ve got to walk me through the details again,” I said. “I want to be sure I didn’t dream it up!” We went on the back porch and shared a beer as she described how the butterfly darted onto her windshield and was gone as quickly as it landed. About that time, Audrey returned from her trip to the store and joined us on the porch. “We just saw a bunch of yellow butterflies when we pulled up the driveway!” she announced. More friends and family began arriving that night, and I shared the story with anyone who would listen.

As we entered the memorial service on Saturday, Warren walked up to me with an astounded look on his face. “I counted 22 yellow butterflies on my way here,” he said. Barbara later told me she’d seen several

on her drive to the church. I guess I was so wrapped up in the miracle of the story I wasn’t even thinking to look for the butterflies. I had yet to see one.

The service was beautiful in every way we could have hoped it would be. Dad’s art graced the entrance to the sanctuary and the stage. The scene behind the pulpit was majestic: floor-to-ceiling glass windows displaying a lush, green forest outside. Every pew was filled with family, friends and loved ones. Musicians Dad had played with through the years performed his songs. *The Divas* sang with Barbara. And there were the precious stories shared about our beloved “Neill, Whitlock, Whit, Dad, G-Daddy, Grampa.” No one wanted it to end.



We just saw a bunch of yellow butterflies when we pulled up the driveway!” she announced.

When we finally left the church, I took my time walking to the car and stood still for several minutes before opening the door. It was a glorious afternoon, and I felt immense peace as the sun’s rays warmed me. I stopped and looked up. “Dad,” I said. “It would be nice if I could see a yellow butterfly.” I drove away from the church, forgetting my request almost as soon as I’d made it. My mind kept revisiting all the wonderful ways people had honored my father, and I looked forward to the celebration that would continue at the house. I was about halfway there when I saw it.

A yellow butterfly. My heart skipped a beat, and another flash of yellow caught my eye.

“Wait,” I whispered. “Is that a second one? Yes!” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. There, high in a tree to the right, a third. Then a fourth and a fifth. I stopped counting, and the butterflies just kept coming, one followed by another about every 20 feet or so. Like Unni’s daughter, I hadn’t recalled ever seeing this particular kind before. They were a beautiful color—yellow with just the slightest hint of light green—and the way they dipped and darted across the road was quite playful.

I stopped at a busy intersection and noticed two fluttering together above the stoplight. I tilted my head to watch their dance. I turned left at the light and continued to marvel as the yellow butterflies guided me all the way home. When I parked, there were several on a bush by the house. I was able to get close up and notice all the details of one that had landed on a flower for a drink. My tears had yet to flow, but I was in awe. In the midst of such incredible loss, I was receiving something so whimsical. I’d only asked for one butterfly, and my request was granted beyond my wildest imagination.

When I stepped inside, the party was already underway. Much like the butterflies, our guests just kept showing up until it seemed the full community of people who had come and gone during my father’s illness were all together at the same time. Folks meandered

from room to room and parked for a while in different places. After sundown, the most popular spot was the back porch where we’d set up the slideshow our friends had created for the service. It ran on repeat—a beautiful backdrop to the music, songs and stories we shared deep into the night.

One day flowed into the next over the long Labor Day weekend, and the party continued. The yellow butterflies were our constant companions, putting on quite a show from dawn till dusk. By mid-week, the last few guests had said their farewells. In the stillness and quiet, the butterflies remained.

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**Amy Connah Hudson** is creator and producer of **“The Honky Tonk Papa Podcast,”** a journey into the life

and legacy of her father, **Whit Connah**. “My dad was a powerhouse singer and musician. When he wasn’t making art in his studio, he loved nothing better than making music with his friends. He’s touched lives from Atlanta to Appalachia, New Orleans to New York—and beyond,” says Amy. “Those who love roots, old-time country, and blues will enjoy the music—and the stories are priceless.” You can find the show on Apple podcasts or your favorite podcast app. Visit **[honkytonkpapa.com](http://honkytonkpapa.com)** for photos, videos and extra features.



## Arkansas Boundaries

By Anthony L. Holt

I

n the final days I spent with my grandfather before his death in August of 2014, he reminded me once more, questioning, “You *do* know where the pipe is, don’t you?”

Though this may sound enigmatic, I understood the significance, as I had heard the story several times in my 46 years. Over half a century before, two men had set their property boundaries and community argument with a steel pump point—the part with a screen that is driven down into the sands of an aquifer.

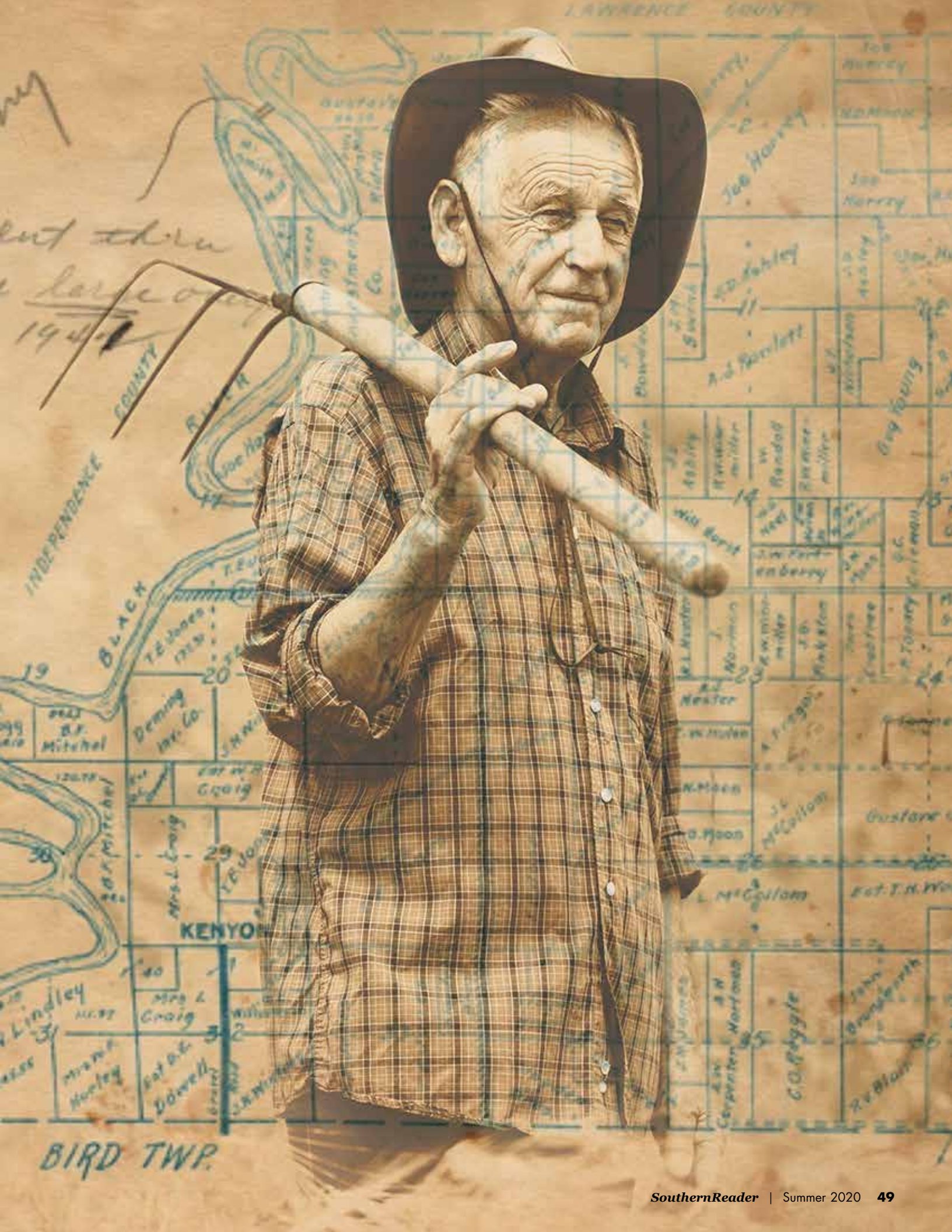
I replied that I knew where it was *supposed* to be and that the cedar posts were still there, too, along with the old web wire. Property boundaries are important things; any surveyor will likely tell you that; historical landowners, even more. Robert Frost said, “Good fences make good neighbors.” For certain, humans need boundaries and a good fence provides just that. Property boundaries are funny things, too.

I can only imagine the exhilaration of arriving at a place and knowing that your family, for the first time, was the “owner” of that place. I also can but imagine a time when there were so few people that something as large as a continent was not “owned” by anyone. Not that any of us “own” much of anything, as “*This world is not my home, I’m just a-passin’ through*” applies to us all. For example, those that called my “home” their “home” once upon a time, left behind bits of rocks that they had carefully crafted for their very survival. These artifacts come to the surface occasionally, as soil is moved this way or that, as witnesses to our transient existence here. Life is but a vapor, a flower, a tale that is told, and those who study history remind us of this repeatedly when we talk of anything as being permanent. But for a brief moment in time, to own a place that you call “home” is grand!

We have seen the movies depicting the “land rush” in Oklahoma and, knowing humans, it was likely a combination of “good and bad.” The wars between the ranchers and the farmers continued for some time, as “land barons” eventually gave way to “settlers”

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BIRD TWP.



and “homesteaders.” Imagine driving that stick into the ground and saying, *“This is my new home!”*

Here in the Arkansas Delta, we affectionately still recall the names of families—*now long gone*—that once lived and thrived in the New Home Community of Northwest Jackson County. I hope I can accurately pass these names on in my writings and to my grandchildren—and so on—and perhaps bear out their histories correctly.

Scenes from “Walton’s Mountain” perhaps come to mind when boundaries were once declared something like, *“our property runs from the bank of the Rock Creek at the deep pool, up the hill to the big white oak...”*

With such descriptions, the perimeter of the parcel would be described, and they were understood by those involved. With farming and ranching came conflict. Imagine cattle farming in the eastern U.S.—or worse yet, raising hogs—without fences. Then, imagine the progress or improvement that fences offered, once they were erected.

Eventually, parcels of 40 acres (what we called “40s”) 80 acres, 160 acres or more were metered off and fenced. The late Grady Nutt would describe his home scene in west Texas where there were *“miles and miles of nothing and people put up fences around their nothing to keep your something off their nothing.”*

Where *“the corner was at”* would often be the subject of *“discussion and debate.”* Okay, *“discussion and debate”* would often lead to feuding, until someone was called in to settle the dispute.

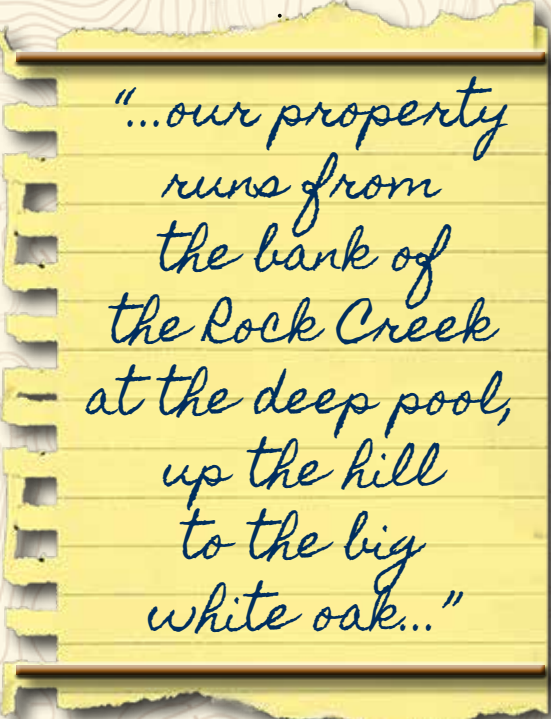
During the great “*clear up*” of our part of the Delta in the second half of the 20th Century, I saw nearly all of the “40s” disappear, as the great oaks with web and barbed wire adornments that had once kept their perimeters were pushed into piles and burned. Continuous farmland now stretches for miles and sometimes just about as far as the eye can see.

I often romanticize about the days of “big timber”—the cutting down of the trees here in the Delta—but it is probably best that I did not witness it. Now that we are planting back what we might not should have cleared, to have

seen the loss of those beautiful trees, I fear, would have been more than I could bear. (Over his lifetime, my grandfather observed and participated in both the clearing of old-growth timber for farming and then the replanting of native species. I believe he was just as excited to see the new seedlings as he was to see his first soybean crop.) With the great “clear-up,” boundaries that had taken decades to establish and settle “once and

for all” would be gone. Within two decades of my early years, most of the old fence rows that I would sneak along—in attempts to kill snow geese in the winter—would cease to exist.

One of the Holt Family stories from the 1950s that my grandfather often told me involved the significance of a property boundary in very northwestern Jackson County, Arkansas. This one point on Earth, at the corner of Sections 9, 10, 15 & 16 of Township 14 North, Range 2 West in Bird Township, was the matter of significant community impor-



*“...our property runs from the bank of the Rock Creek at the deep pool, up the hill to the big white oak...”*



tance with heated passion at one time. Until recently, it had remained a mystery just how the misunderstanding could have taken place.

On the 1925 map, immediately to the west of our property—the Holt Farm—was land owned by L.D. Pierce (mostly “Bay Lake” and its island, about half a section) and then land owned by Joe Harvey along the Black River. To the north of the house of John Henry Holt (my great-great grandfather), D.A. Rowlett owned a considerable block and just to the west of that was about 120 acres (three 40s lying side by side, reaching the Black River) belonging to the estate of L.E. Willis.

North of the Willis land, beginning at the river, was a block belonging to the Denning Investment Company (a timber company, as I recall) and then, a 40 owned by J.H. Taylor that also bordered the Rowlett Farm.

In time, the Tunstall and Campbell families would own the aforementioned parcels of Harvey, Denning and Taylor land, along with the western-most 80 acres of the Rowlett land. The Biggers Family would own the remainder of D.A. Rowlett’s land. Both early settling families to our community would have sizeable land holdings, relative to that time. During the days of my dad, Bobby’s youth and then mine, the Campbell and Biggers families were our neighbors to the north and northwest.

During the first half of the 20th Century, much of our part of the state remained in hardwood timber and cypress/tupelo swamp. That all changed mid-century, though, and large fields of soybeans and then rice would

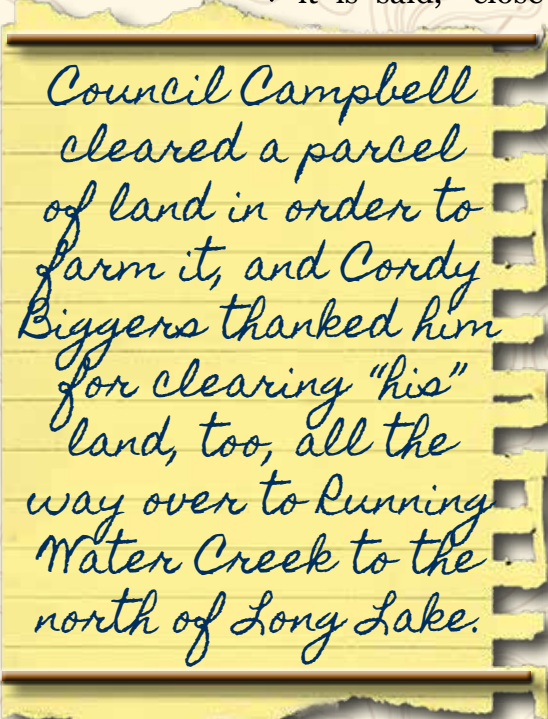
take the place of oaks and cypress.

One must understand that the original means of surveying land was often rudimentary, unlike now with satellite imagery and GPS. *Imagine dragging instruments and chains or ropes through briar patches and swamps, and attempting to align a compass correctly in order to find the corner of a 40!*

Many of the old maps were “close,” but, as it is said, “close” only works “in horseshoes and hand grenades.” Remember, too, good aerial maps did not come along until well into the 20th Century, often after people, and their presumed boundaries, were established. It might be a perfectly honest mistake to think that you owned something when in fact, you didn’t.

*And, that is the property boundary dispute story that I had often been told.*

Council Campbell cleared a parcel of land in order to farm it, and “Cordy” Biggers thanked him for clearing “his” land, too, all the way over to Running Water Creek to the north of Long Lake (later known as Strait Lake). One will never know exactly how the property had been explained in the conveyances by which they each had purchased their farms. However, they both were certain about the ownership of the particular parcels in question and where the boundary and corners were at. *The problem was that they both couldn’t own the same parcel.* The surveyor was called in, and using more modern maps and found section markers, the dispute was settled. From south of the Blackroll Creek, my great grandfather, Council Holt (how two



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men in the same community could both have the unusual name of *Council* is yet another mystery), his son, Hurshel (my grandfather), and grandson, Bobby (my father) were called in as witnesses to settle the matter of the corner and North/Sound boundary line once and for all.

The interesting thing is *both Mr. Campbell and Mr. Biggers were correct in their presumption of ownership*. Recently considered map-related evidence exonerates both men—*though posthumously*—of their heated passion at that time.

Arkansas is currently divided into 75 counties, named after people from presidents to governors and such, and large counties were sub-divided as the population grew. Our county—*Jackson*—would be named for our seventh president, Andrew Jackson, in 1829.

Counties are then divided into townships, which are also named for “people, places and things,” and designated as being North or South. Each township is then divided into ranges, either east or west, each

containing 36 sections of 640 acres. Each section is divided into quarters of 160 acres and then each quarter is quartered again into 40s.

Each township includes unincorporated areas; some may have incorporated cities or towns within part of their boundaries. In fact, the U.S. Census lists Arkansas population based on townships. They are also sometimes referred to as “county subdivisions” or “minor civil divisions.”

Once most of the trees were cut down (in the afore-mentioned *clear up*)—the terrain

became more visible. Boundary lines that were presumed to have matched up (given guesstimates), in actuality, *didn’t* match up. They were actually “this way or that way,” and in some instances *not even close*. Aerial maps from the ’30s, and later, satellite maps, solved all sorts of boundary disputes and 40-acre tracts could be lined up for miles.

The parcel in question here was part of Bird Township. It seems the 1925 map of the township (recently discovered in an old box belonging to another local family, the Moon Family) was based upon the original “survey” of Arkansas from the early 1800s. The

boundary lines were, again, “close,” given the surveying instruments and practices of the time.

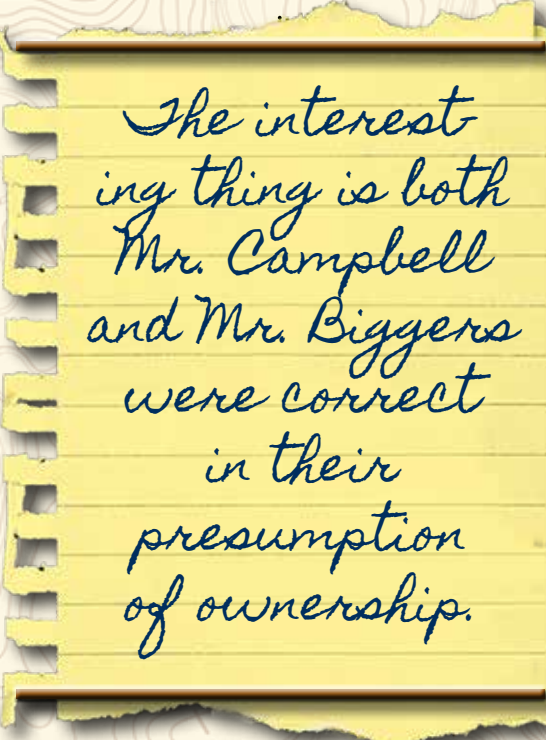
As always, timing is often the key in history. For example, just to our north (today) is a small cypress, a scar lake (a geological feature formed by the remnants of a meandering water channel) known as “Hollandhead.”

Given that a “Robert Hollingshead” received a land grant back on September 1, 1856 to a

40 in T14N R2W S15, it’s only logical that the lake became known by the owner’s name (<http://files.usgwarchives.net/ar/jackson/land/jackson.txt>).

This had been a mystery to me for some time, since the lake is not in today’s section 15, where our farm is located. However, the recent discovery of a General Land Office map of early Arkansas (where boundaries were drawn by primitive measures) revealed that Hollandhead was in section 15.

So to the west, Mr. Campbell’s claim, based



The interesting thing is both Mr. Campbell and Mr. Biggers were correct in their presumption of ownership.



upon the old maps with crudely drawn geographical boundaries (e.g., rivers, lakes, and creeks), did indeed seem to be supported. That was because he had bought the westernmost 80 acres from Mr. Rowlett, as had been assigned back in his day.

On the other hand, Mr. Biggers' claim that was based upon more modern "found" section markers was correct, in the legal sense. Aerial and eventually satellite images confirmed this, too, of course. Oftentimes a particular tree was selected as the "witness" for a corner (there are no "stackable" rocks where I am from). But, as I mentioned, those "witness trees" are just about all gone now and had been cleared by Mr. Campbell at that time. If you look hard enough today, you may still be able to find a cotton picker spindle or a piece of wire, though, deep inside some old silent red oak witnessing some transient owner.

On that particular day, when the dispute was settled, something more "permanent" and "man-made" seemed best. Council Campbell and Cordy Biggers met at their corners, along with the Holts as witnesses at their corner, to watch them drive a pump point where the survey marker had been placed. Dad recalled, Mr. Biggers stomped the ground in victory and said, standing on his side of the line, "This is my land!," after the sledge drove the point into the soil of the Black River alluvial bottoms. He had won the argument. It would be forever settled amongst the then-residents of the community. Mr. Campbell had indeed cleared a parcel of land for Mr. Biggers, but by an honest mistake. It's unclear (but rather

doubtful) whether Mr. Campbell was paid by Mr. Bigger for that clearing of the land. So, poor Mr. Campbell not only lost a piece of land that he thought he owned, but also the time it took to clear it!

Many of the parcels back home have changed hands several times since those days. Recently, the Campbell land has changed ownership twice. For the moment, there seems to be no discussion of witness trees

and such, as a handful of people now own or farm many parcels formerly owned by many families. Modern GPS technology will find the imaginary corners, to the inch. It often takes my breath when I ponder all those that have come and gone in New Home.

As the images of old house sites, gardens and barns fade in my memory, I can almost see and hear the sledge as it strikes the pump pipe

and agreement is reached among neighbors as the sound rings across the waters of Strait (Long) Lake. I can visualize Council Campbell heading back to his home to the northwest, and Mr. Biggers back north while Council, Hurshel and Bobby retreat to the creek bank, crossing the creek on a foot log, and heading back home. I suspect that after "*we are (all) just a passin' through*" we won't mind such things too much. Pump pipes won't be necessary in our next home.



**Anthony L. Holt** is a biology instructor at the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton in Morrilton, Arkansas and a part-time preacher.

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# The Long and Winding Interstate

By David Ray Skinner

T

hat Saturday morning had started with such promise. Clay had used the last of his money for a hot meal and a place to stay the night before, but he was used to being totally broke, and the day had begun with hope and a cool-but-sunny day for hitchhiking.

He had found a motel just off the main drag of the town, where his last ride of the day had dropped him off. It was a no-frills, mom-and-pop place, but it was clean and inexpensive. Plus, there was a hometown diner between the motel and the interstate, and he was able to eat a big breakfast before he hit the road. He knew that it might be a while before his next meal, so he ordered the biggest omelette on the menu with all the trimmings and asked for extra biscuits.

As he finished his last cup of coffee, he dumped the last basket of biscuits into some paper napkins, along with some packets of grape jelly, and carefully placed them down into a pocket inside his duffel bag. *That may be lunch, dinner and tomorrow's breakfast*, he thought. As he paid his bill, he noticed the picture of the local Little League team the diner sponsored on the wall behind the cash register. There was a shelf below the picture with a couple of trophies. *That was me not so long ago*, he thought. *Funny how everything changes*.

As Clay exited the diner, he pulled on his heavy Army jacket, and he noticed that the smell of the restaurant had clung to his clothes and followed him outside. He had dressed warmly for the day—a khaki shirt over a charcoal grey t-shirt, tucked into his faded jeans, along with waterproof hiking boots—and checking out his reflection in the diner's window, he brushed his straw-blond hair out of his eyes and adjusted his sunglasses. *Crap*, he thought, *I look like a sniper*. The observation made him flash back to an incident that had happened during his military days. The memory made him inadvertently shiver, but he shook it off

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and folded his sunglasses and put them into the pocket of his khaki shirt. He figured the drivers of potential rides would feel more comfortable if they could see his eyes. At least he would look a little less like an assassin.

By the time he got to the interstate ramp, the sun was high and the morning had warmed up, so he took off his jacket and stuffed it into his duffel bag as he put out his thumb. Back at the diner, he had spent the last of his change on a pack of Wrigley's, so as he waited on the interstate ramp, he patted the left pocket of his khaki shirt and fidgeted briefly with unbuttoning the flap. He pulled out the pack and extracted a foil-wrapped stick of gum, and as he replaced it, he tucked the flap into the pocket to give him easier access. *How lazy can I get?* he thought, laughing at himself, *I don't even want to bother with buttoning and unbuttoning my shirt pocket. Gotta have that immediate access to chewing gum!*

As he scanned the highway which crossed the interstate, he could see an approaching copper-colored SUV. Inside was an old hippie, and he pulled over on the ramp just beyond where Clay stood and motioned for him to hurry up and get in. Because of the man's wrinkles and grey-white hair pulled back into a long ponytail, Clay guessed that he was most likely about the same age as his own father back in Illinois.

"You military?" he asked Clay once the SUV started rolling down the ramp to merge in

with the sparse, southbound interstate traffic.

"Ex-military," Clay told him.

"Thas cool. Thought so. You got that look. Ain't the same military now as it was in my time."

"Oh, where'd you serve?"

"Me? No. No way, man. I did my best to stay out of the military! I had no desire to get my head blown off in Vietnam."

*Because of the man's wrinkles and grey-white hair pulled back into a long ponytail, Clay guessed that he was most likely about the same age as his own father back in Illinois.*

*Wow, that sounds a little too familiar...how many times have I heard that?* Clay thought, but he listened politely. "Spent my 20s in Canada," the man continued, "But that wudn't exactly a picnic, either. Canada's too cold for me, man. Alls I'm sayin' is that it's a lot hipper to be military now than it was then."

"Yeah, that's me in a nutshell. I'm all about hip," Clay replied. "But don't sell yourself short,

dude—there's a lot to be said about chillin' on a comfy couch, versus the prospect of getting your head blown off crouching down in a crappy foxhole." Clay realized he probably should have filtered his response, because he saw the man's face tighten, and a few exits later, he pulled up off the interstate and let him out.

"Here's my exit, man. Good luck to ya," he said.

"Yeah, thanks. Thanks for the lift," Clay said, climbing out with his duffel bag. He then watched the SUV cross the highway and pull back down onto the interstate entrance ramp. Clay sighed and crossed the highway himself

and stuck his thumb out on the same ramp. He could see the copper SUV disappearing over the horizon, gleaming in the sun.

"It figures," Clay said out loud, "One of these days, I'm gonna learn how to keep my stupid mouth shut."

Fifteen minutes later, a big golden Buick eased over to the side of the ramp with the passenger window rolled down.

"Where you goin,' partner?" asked the man behind the wheel, leaning over the seat to call out from the passenger-side window.

"South," Clay said.

"That makes sense," the man laughed, "Nice to know you can read the signs! Get yourself in, partner. Make yourself at home!"

The man, although older than Clay, appeared to be a bit younger than the old hippie that had dropped him off at the exit. He was bald with a salt-and-pepper mustache.

"Glad to meecha. Hank Thoreau. I'm a plastics rep."

"Hank Thoreau as in Henry Thoreau?" Clay asked, as he climbed in with his duffle bag.

"Yeah, like 'the' Henry Thoreau," Hank said, "My old man always claimed he was kin, although neither one of us got any poem-writing smarts from that side of the family. Well, any side of the family, that is. Sure, the name caused me maybe a little bit of grief in my younger days—back in school. The good news was that the kids that were tough enough to effectively bully me about it didn't know squat

about Henry the poet, and the geeky ones who always had their heads in a book—the ones that *did* know who the original Henry Thoreau was, they wouldn't dare say anything. Well, one of 'em did, back in seventh or eighth grade, but I made an example out of him. He said something like, 'Hey Thoreau, what about Walden?' What a tool. We were in P.E. Ain't no teachers or coaches in P.E.

Well, at least in our boys' P.E., back then, that is. The coaches were probably monitoring the girls' P.E. Haw, haw, haw! Anyway, there wasn't anyone to help little Mr. Smarty Britches when he gave me the business about Walden. I picked him up—with one hand, mind you—by the back waistband of his underwear, and held him up for everone in the P.E. to see just what happens to smartypants. All the

other geeks just stood around horrified, so I finally said, 'My mistake...I thought he said, "What about wallopin'!"' So, that nipped it in the bud!"

Clay smiled. "Interesting conflict resolution," he said.

"Yessiree. By the way, I can take you a few hours on down the road," Hank said.

"That's great. I appreciate it."

A few hours and several hundred miles later, the man nosed the big Buick down an exit ramp to get some gas. "So, partner," he said to Clay, "You're more than welcome to continue down the interstate with me, but I got to tell you—all exits down this a-ways ain't

*"Yeah, like 'the' Henry Thoreau," Hank said, "My old man always claimed he was kin, although neither one of us got any poem-writing smarts from that side of the family."*



created equal. Look around. There's an Arbys, a Motel 6, this gas station and a Starbucks. Now, admittedly, it ain't Grand Central, but it's lot busier than the next few exits, especially the one I need to get off at. This is a four-lane federal highway here, so there's a fair share of traffic getting on the interstate. The exit I'm getting off at is like 'Nowheresville,' population negative one-hunderd. Like I said, you're welcome to get off there. Actually, you can go with me all the way to the plant, if you want. You any good at selling plastics? I can get you fixed up with the company..."

"Nah, sorry. I know nothing about plastics... maybe a little about plastic explosives, but that's from the military."

"Well, these I'm sellin' don't go boom. Well—allegedly."

"In that case, I guess I'll get out when you get off the interstate. I'm enjoying our conversation."

"Me, too. I just thought it would be fair to warn you that there's not a lot of traffic on that entrance, and the state troopers wouldn't take too kindly to you hitchin' down on the shoulder of the interstate."

"I got it, but I prefer the bird in the hand. Well, the Buick in the hand," Clay told him, "So, if it's alright with you, I'll take my chances."

"Okay. Last chance to get off here. You're missing out on an Arby's. And a Motel 6. And a Starbucks."

"I had a big breakfast. And, I sure ain't

sleepy, and the coffee would just keep me awake."

"Hmm. You're a walking paradox, aren't you?" Hank said.

"That's the point. I don't have to walk, long as I can ride in your fine Buick, here."

"Suit yourself," Hank said, "And, it's nice to meet a man that appreciates the finer automobiles. Yessir, I am a Buick man. This

is my eighth one, actually. And, boy what a deal I got on it. Yessir. But before I forget, consider yourself warned. I'm down through here every month, and there's never anybody at that exit. So, I'd be remiss if I didn't at least give you the facts on that exit. Don't say I didn't warn you! As much as I'm enjoying our conversin', I don't want you to feel that I led you on and then let you out!"

"Got it. It's all good,

man. Drive on!"

"Splendid! That's what I was hopin' you'd say. Even though that works to my advantage—I don't often have a travelin' partner that I can converse with! By the way, there's some cheese and crackers in the glove box. Help yourself."

"Thanks."

Hank pulled the Buick up to one of the pumps in front of an old convenience store. It was freshly painted, but there were burglar bars in the window which had a bunny rabbit logo. Clay laughed to himself. *Looks like the bunny is in jail*, he thought, *wonder what he did?*

*The store was freshly painted, but there were burglar bars in the window which had a bunny rabbit logo. Clay laughed to himself. "Looks like the bunny is in jail."*

After Hank finished filling the Buick and paying, he jumped back in and directed the big car back onto the interstate. They drove a hundred miles or so down the road, and though the conversation was pleasant enough, the scenery became more and more boring and nondescript. When Hank finally nosed the Buick down the exit off the interstate, it really was the middle of nowhere, and he guiltily shoved a ten-dollar bill in Clay's hand as he climbed out of the car with his duffle bag. Clay gave the door a quick shove to shut it, and Hank rolled the window down.

"Take it easy, partner," he said, "If you're still here when I come back through, I'll give you a ride."

"Sounds fair. When you comin' back through?"

"Next week sometime," Hank said, and the two of them laughed. Hank hesitated for a moment and then continued, "Uh, something I need to tell you."

"Okay?" Clay said, leaning over into the window to hear.

"I was kinda stretching the truth about how I handled the kid that gave me a hard time about that Walden thingy."

"Okay."

"Yeah, I didn't really grab him by the back of his underwear and hold him up with one hand."

"Okay."

"I did report him to the principal and he got a stern talkin' to, so he never did it again."

"That's all that really counts, ain't it?"

"Yeah. Sure. Now that you put it that way. Well, thanks."

"Sure. Thanks to you for the ride."

"Oh. Yeah, my pleasure. Hope you're here next week when I come back

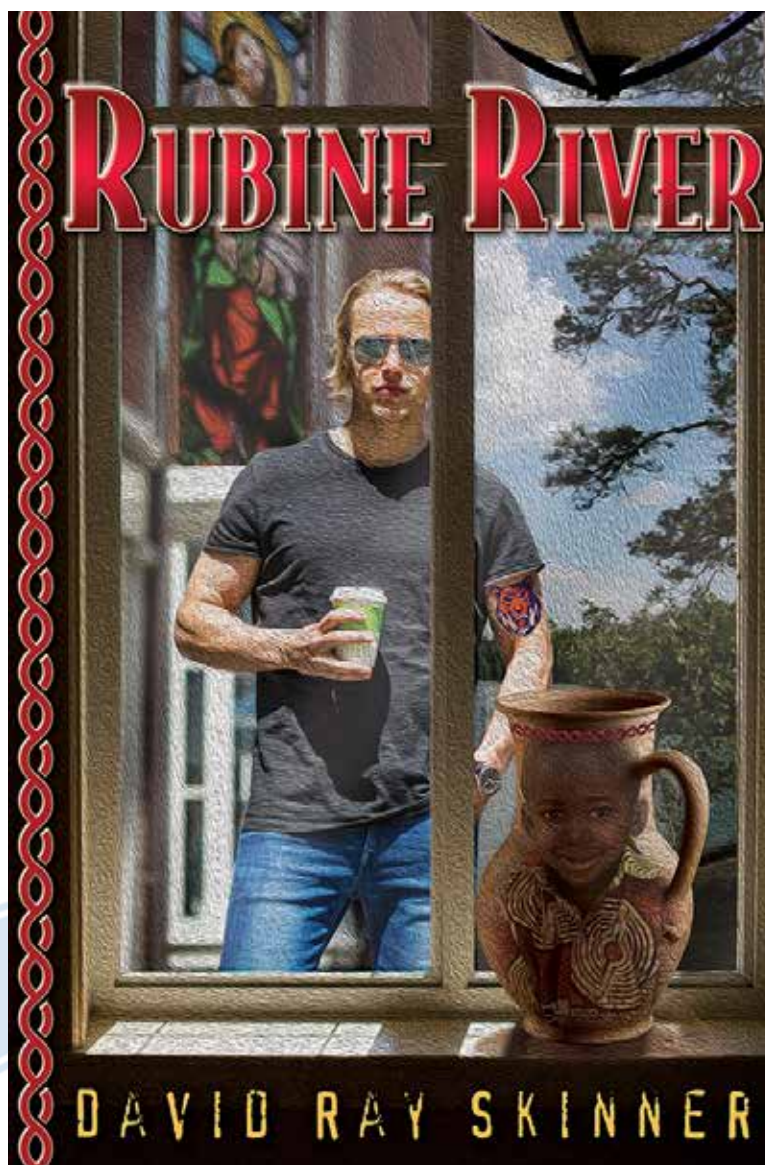
through."

"Uh, sorry, but I hope I'm not."

"Oh. Right," Hank said, "That might be a little unpleasant, heh, heh. Okay. Well, good luck to ya. Take care." And with that, Hank gunned the big Buick and it disappeared down the highway in a cloud of exhaust. Clay sighed and crossed the road to the interstate entrance ramp to wait for the next car.



*The above is an excerpt from the novel, "Rubine River" by David Ray Skinner, which is available on Kindle, iBooks and most online book distributors.*







# An Inconvenient Weight

By Ron Burch

**I** spent much of my early working life as an account executive for several graphics production firms. In those positions, I assisted ad agency and corporate accounts alike in producing their ads and executing their print marketing ideas.

Success came from failsafe performance and in establishing and investing big time into long-lasting business relationships. Over time, some of these business relationships evolved into personal friendships. That was the case with my good friend Ronnie—one time, the production manager for one of the largest ad agencies south of New York City.

For many years, Ronnie and I had a standing business lunch every Friday. It was the age of unlimited expense accounts and we took proper advantage. Some Fridays we'd visit the hot spots. On others, we'd go back to a favorite. After ten years of spending nearly every Friday morning on the phone with the old boy trying to decide where we would go to lunch, we finally made a popular restaurant at the intersection of Peachtree and Spring Streets in midtown Atlanta our Friday default.

It wasn't the food that took us there; it was the friendly service and the warm atmosphere—especially at the bar where we chose to put on the feed-bag. We'd grab a stool, order a beverage and begin nibbling on an unlimited supply of cheesy Goldfish crackers that somehow tasted better than what we'd get at the grocery store. We'd chat with each other and with the other Friday regulars. Also with Shirley, the cute, dark-haired gal behind the bar, who took very good care of us.

*Some of these business relationships evolved into friendships. That was the case with Ronnie—one time, the production manager for one of the largest ad agencies south of New York City.*



We always ordered the same thing: a couple of sprucers, a bowl of clam chowder and a side of crab legs. At the close of the meal, our conversation would typically turn to the weekend and any special weekend plans.

That Friday in late July was no different. Ronnie said that weekend, he and his wife were traveling to South Georgia to attend her family reunion. He was looking forward to the company and the food, but not the four-hour drive. I smiled and told him he should be grateful for family. As an only child, my family members were few and far between. Matter of fact, we'd never had a family reunion. Even if we did, everyone eligible to attend could sit in our smallish den without us bringing in extra chairs!

Typical of the pal he was, Ronnie chimed-in, "Come on Burch, go with us—there'll be plenty of food—and there's an extra bedroom at my wife's aunt's house, where we'll stay. Come on, man, it'll do you good and it'll be fun." I thanked him for being so gracious, but declined. I felt family reunions were personal occasions—far too personal to be opened up to outsiders.

"No way," he exclaimed. You can bring your guitar and join in with my brother-in-law on Saturday night. My wife will sing; you can too. Believe me, it'll be a hoot." He was nothing if not persistent.

I thought about it for a couple of minutes and said, "Okay, sport. If you're serious, and if my wife doesn't have anything important planned, we'll go...on one condition: we'll take the airplane and eliminate the driving."

"Super," he said, "how long will it take us to get there?"

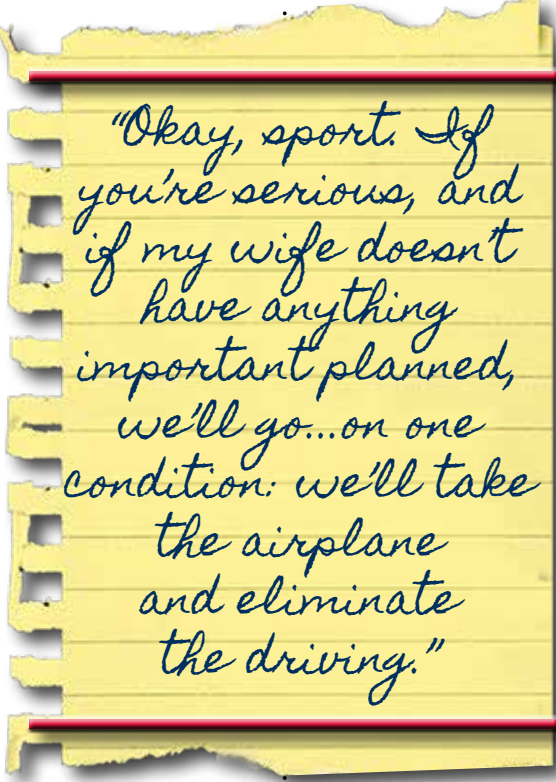
"Without looking at a chart, I'd say about an hour and a half. Beats the heck out of a four hour drive," I said reassuringly.

We agreed that we would meet at the airport at 8:30 am on Saturday morning. As we were slap in the middle of the summer's worst dog days, I wanted to be airborne and into cooler air before the heat of the day began to build in earnest (small airplanes aren't air-conditioned).

That night, I pulled out the aeronautical charts and planned the details of the trip. We'd depart Atlanta to the south and then fly a southeasterly heading until we were well beyond the Atlanta/Hartsfield-Jackson Class B Airspace on the east side. Once we were clear of Hartsfield-Jackson's "big iron," a course of 155° would take us directly to "FZG"—the airport identifier at Fitzgerald.

I measured the total distance point-to-point as being roughly 195 air miles—probably closer to 240 miles by car. With an average groundspeed of 120 knots (140 mph), our time en route would be 1:24—darn close to the hour-and-a-half I had estimated at the restaurant.

The next part of my pre-flight planning is what pilots call the "weight and balance." In airplanes, big and small, consideration must be given to the load you are carrying and how it is distributed inside the aircraft. My little Beechcraft was a 200-hp, four-place airplane that had a useful load of 1,057 pounds. With full fuel and eight quarts of oil, we could carry



*"Okay, sport. If you're serious, and if my wife doesn't have anything important planned, we'll go...on one condition: we'll take the airplane and eliminate the driving."*

roughly 690 pounds of payload—weight that could be allocated to passengers and luggage.

At the time, I weighed in at 180; my wife at 95. That left 415 pounds for Ronnie, his wife, and our combined luggage and gear. Now folks, these guys were big people. I estimated Ronnie's weight at 210, his wife's at 165. After a little fifth grade math, roughly 40 pounds remained for luggage, my guitar, the gal's curlers and hairdryers.

With Ronnie and me in the front, the wives in the back, and everything else in the baggage compartment, according to my calculations and the owner's manual, the airplane would be at maximum gross weight and within the center of gravity envelope for take-off—barely. No sweat.

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear but very still. The air was heavy, thick; hot and sticky. By the time we arrived at the general aviation ramp at the airport, the temperature was already past 82°. Our guests were waiting patiently on the tarmac, already dripping a small puddle of perspiration.

As was my custom, I spent a good fifteen minutes doing a very thorough preflight—inspecting the exterior of the airplane and the control surfaces. I visually checked the fuel quantity, drained a fuel sample and looked for contamination. Ronnie followed my every move. He was looking at his watch for the third time when I unlocked the baggage compartment door and began to load the luggage. As I stuffed our belongings into the rather smallish space behind the rear seat, the bags seemed heavier than expected,

and the thought of the weight and balance again came to mind.

Huffing and puffing, I said “Hey Ronnie, last night when I did the flight plan, I calculated your weight at 210 and your wife's at 165. Is that reasonably accurate?”

He broke into laughter. “You gotta be kidding? I weigh closer to 240 and she'll only admit to 190. Is that a problem?”

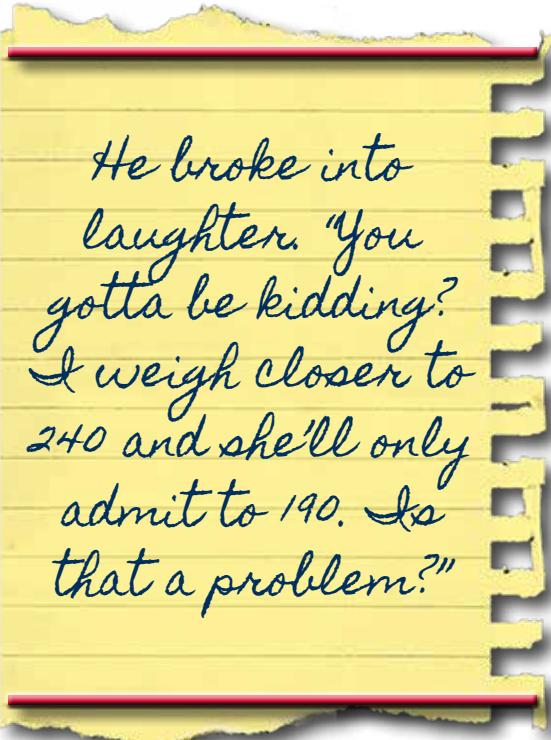
I replied somewhat sheepishly, “Uh, no... uh, of course not.” Then when he wasn't looking, I quietly removed my box of tools, a set of chocks and a couple of spare quarts of oil from the baggage area. “It shouldn't

be a problem,” I thought to myself, “these little airplanes are pretty forgiving of a little excess weight...aren't they?”

I recalled one other such occasion when I still had my first airplane, a 145-hp Cessna Skyhawk. One brisk fall evening following a flying club meeting, three two-hundred pounders and me shoehorned ourselves into that little Cessna and went for a ride over the city. Sure, old N1644Y squatted low, moaned and

groaned and creaked noisily as we began our taxi to the runway...and the ground roll was longer than usual. But we made it out just fine...and since my flight instructor, who also went along, remained quiet, I figured it must be okay to push the weight and balance past its limits—a least a little.

But that was then and this was now. That was on a cool fall evening and this was the hot, hot summertime. So to be on the safe side, I declined the 3750-foot runway, 20-right and



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asked the controller in the tower for runway 20-left...over a mile of concrete, 150 feet wide...the longest runway on the field. I hoped 20-left would allow a margin for error.

Engine run-up and a check of the flight controls complete, we were soon cleared for take-off. I taxied into position at the north end of the runway, locked the brakes, and pushed the throttle to full power. In the humid, less dense air, I went ahead and leaned the mixture a bit in hopes of getting a few more horsepower out of the little Lycoming 4-banger.

A release of the brakes, and we started to roll—slowly, ever so slowly. At a position on the runway where I would normally be at 60-knots—the minimum airspeed for a safe take-off—the airspeed indicator was still resting on the left peg. It seemed not to be moving at all. A few hundred feet more down the runway, and it started to move up slowly—only about a needle-width past 40-knots indicated. We rumbled past mid-field still well below take-off speed.

As the white touchdown stripes painted every five hundred feet on the opposite end of the runway started to pass underneath the nose, I knew I was past the point of no return. In literally the last few hundred feet of concrete, I applied the slightest backpressure to the control yoke to see if, by chance, the airplane was ready to fly.

The nose rose slightly, the stall horn blared its warning. The airplane wallowed back and forth on the mains as the nose wheel gradually lifted inches off the runway. We over flew the grassy overrun at the end of the runway at

no more than 50 feet. The airspeed was still critically low and our rate of climb was 'nil. I was looking dead ahead when my wife said we cleared the roof of the K-Mart store just south of the field by less than a hundred feet. In the meantime, our passengers were quietly enjoying the view. I suppose they thought take-offs in small planes were always like this!

Riding a few thermals from the asphalt below and slowly gaining altitude, I kept saying to myself, "Airspeed...watch your airspeed...don't stall this sucker." We made what's called a right-downwind departure from the airport traffic pattern. As I turned tail to the field, I

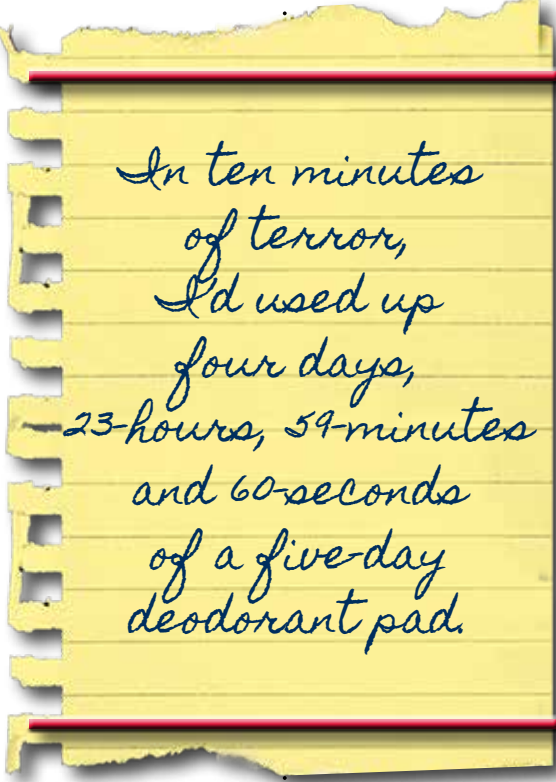
breathed for the first time in several minutes. We were now 800 feet above the ground, climbing at 200 feet per minute with an indicated airspeed of 75 knots.

At 1000 feet, I blew-out a long "whew," shrugged my shoulders, recycled my neck and tried my best to regain my Captain's composure. Suddenly, I noticed a somewhat foul odor. I thought to myself, "Is it Ronnie or is it me?"

I checked my armpits as guys are prone to do. You betcha, it was me. I was

dripping wet with sweat and smelling like a goat! In ten minutes of terror, I'd used up four days, 23-hours, 59-minutes and 60-seconds of a five-day deodorant pad.

The rest of the flight was incident free but I was quietly thinking ahead. With a fuel burn of 11 gallons per hour and an allowance for take-off and climb, we'd have used 18 gallons of fuel by the time we arrived at Fitzgerald. That meant we'd be almost 103 pounds lighter and within landing limits. However, the



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lesson of diminished performance from being over gross weight had not been lost on me. I decided that there would be no steep turns in my approach to Runway 1 at Fitzgerald, no sudden movements at all. I'd keep it high on approach, and if everything didn't look right, we'd go around and try again. And go around we did. Twice.

On the third approach, we landed and I squeaked the tires onto the tarmac. We taxied to the parking area and somewhat weak in the knees, I climbed down out of the airplane. We loaded our gear into an awaiting car—a big black Lincoln—coincidentally being driven by the town's mayor and the uncle of my friend's wife.

As soon as we arrived at the mayor's home, I excused myself, went into the bathroom, and took what we in the South call "a spit bath." I borrowed my wife's roll-on and changed shirts.

The weekend and the experience of a family reunion in South Georgia was as much fun as Ronnie had promised. The food was fantastic—a lot like funeral food, but even better and more of it. Best of all, the pickin' and grinnin' on Saturday night was an absolute blast.

If anyone knew that we weren't related to the hosts, they sure didn't let on. We were treated as family—kissed by aunts and hugged by uncles. We were welcomed into everyone's home and into every activity with warmth and friendship, southern style.

On Sunday, after sleeping in and making a few last-minute social calls, we returned to the Fitzgerald airport. We'd off-loaded all the spare gear and baggage to a relative return-

ing to Atlanta in a big Buick station wagon. Coupled with the fuel burn on the flight down, we were roughly 160 pounds lighter at take-off than we were in Atlanta—even considering a weekend of heavy eating,

Thanks to the extra lift supplied by the radiational heating from a hot asphalt runway and by a hot South Georgia cornfield beyond, the airplane literally jumped off the ground. Soon we were high above it all in a clear blue South Georgia sky, dotted with white puffy clouds.

Our return flight on that summer afternoon was a breeze. We climbed to 10,500 feet where

the air coming into the cabin was a cool 44°F. Ninety minutes later, the late afternoon cumulous clouds in and around Atlanta caused a somewhat bumpy ride on the descent and approach into the airport, but no one seem to mind—especially yours truly. I'd been well fed, entertained and embraced by a big, loving family—if only for a weekend.

Oh, and I learned another lesson about flying that day: you can

overload a Cessna, but you can't overload a Beechcraft! My wife noticed it, too and said, "Maybe that's why the doors on a Beechcraft are narrower than they are on a Cessna!" Yeah, right.



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

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