

Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

My First Ax Murder

East Tennessee writer Bill Dockery's reflection of a dramatic event

Jackson v. Clay

Back when politics were really dirty

Time Will Tell

One man's treasure...

The Beat Goes On

A lifetime of music

The Lesson

A childhood memoir

Underground Radio

The Athens, Georgia connection

Aiden & the Clown

An AI-generated story

David Skinner



...A Now a Word About Our Issue

By David Ray Skinner



Welcome to the Spring/Summer 2024 issue of *Southern Reader*. As usual, it features a hodgepodge of literary works, ranging from the whimsy to the serious.

Here's a breakdown of the issue:

The Cover

When I was a kid, I spent hours playing with my toy cars and army men. My cars were accurate replicas...I had a red '57 Thunderbird convertible, a 1960 Ford, and a '61 Mercury, to name a few, and all were to scale, with clear plastic for the windows and red plastic for the taillights. I'd spend entire summer afternoons creating scenarios for the cars and the army men. It was as if they came to life before my very eyes. Hence the cover. One of the "toy" watermelons has fallen off the truck, and the boy (who was apparently the master storyteller) has speared a piece—obviously using a fork "borrowed" from the kitchen of his sister's Barbie.

Aiden and the Clown

Fifty-six years after the cautionary tale of "2001: A Space Odyssey" warned us (by way of the supercomputer, HAL) about what could happen when we let artificial intelligence take the wheel, it seems that AI is "helping" us in all the phases of our lives. Not to be left behind, we fed an AI app a situation and some characters (mainly Aiden) and let it "create" a short story. Frankly, it came out pretty boring, so we regained control and re-wrote the ending. Take that, HAL! Which, by the way, if you advance HAL one letter each in the alphabet, it spells IBM. Pretty cool for '68.

The Beat Goes On

I first met Hal Gibbs back in the late '60s-early '70s onstage in Nashville. We were playing in a church musical. He played drums; I played a make-believe hippie (casting that the music director would regret a few years later). All these years later, we share a common interest in writing and music. Hal remembers



what it was like to have a transistor radio permanently attached to your ear.

The Clay-Jackson Feud

There is a cool new subscription service called Letterjoy that will send you a weekly letter from a famous people ranging from General Patton to Sitting Bull. The letters are quality reproductions to mimic the handwriting (or typewriting) of the time the letter was originally written. For example, we have “re-printed the re-print” of an 1825 “disagreement” between Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay. It illustrates that political mudslinging is not a new tactic. I grew up literally on land Andrew Jackson used to hunt on. In fact, our suburb, Donelson, was named after his father-in-law. Jackson cut a wide swath through history; not only was he the hero of the “Battle of New Orleans” in the War of 1812, he fought over a hundred duels. Presidential wannabe Henry Clay was painfully aware of both of these facts, but still chose to tweak Jackson’s nose.

The Athens Music Scene’s Role in Shaping College Radio

The late ’70s-early ’80s were an extremely exciting time to be a student at the University of Georgia in Athens. Not only was their football team (led by the 1982 Heisman Trophy winner Herschel Walker) undefeated (winning the National Championship in 1980), the Athens music scene began to also dominate the college radio airwaves. This issue features

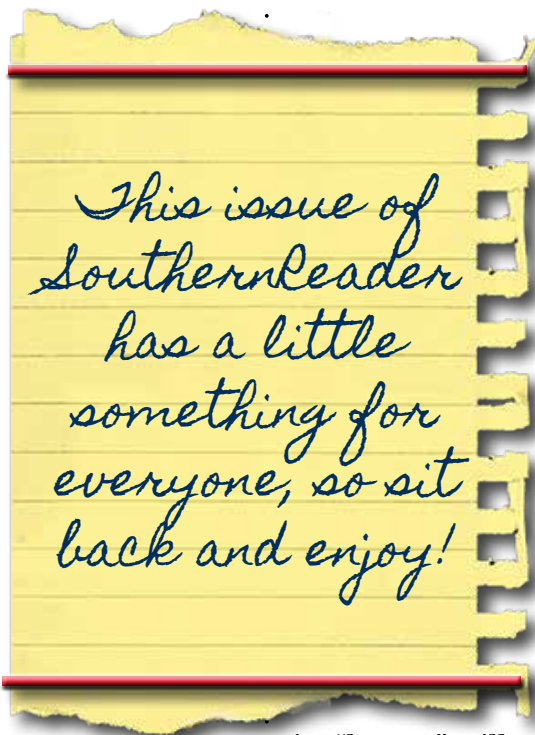
an excerpt from Katherine Rye Jewell’s new book, “Live from the Underground: A History of College Radio.” The excerpt focuses on the “ground zero” effect the UGA college station had on local and national music.

The Lesson

I first met Randy Dobbs back in 1971, when I pledged a fraternity at my little Baptist college in East Tennessee. He was always supportive and a great person to be around. None of us who knew him back then knew what he had gone through in his childhood or teen years, or even how he managed to find his way to college. In this memoir, he tells of some of these struggles we never knew about. We originally ran this in our Summer/Fall 2009 issue, but it was so powerful and its “lesson” still resonates these 15 years later.

My First Ax Murder

I also first encountered Bill Dockery back in the early ’70s at my East Tennessee college. Right before I graduated (in 1974), I had been struggling with what I wanted to do after college, and as editor of the campus newspaper, I was also getting into hot water with the administration. One day a letter appeared in my P.O. box from Bill Dockery. At the time, he was working as a “real” reporter at an honest-to-goodness newspaper, *The Sevier County News-Record*. He complimented me on the quality of my paper and offered to introduce me to his editor once I graduated. Consequently, once I had my diploma,



I headed for Sevierville, the little East Tennessee town that was home to Bill's newspaper. Much to Bill's embarrassment, the editor had no desire to meet me, let alone to offer me a job. As fate would have it, the Sevier County Times (the News-Record's competition) was interested in hiring me. Ironically, Bill and I found ourselves head-to-head competing for the same stories. Bill always won. In fact, the biggest story happened on the Fourth of July weekend (in 1975) when I was out of town celebrating. I missed the story completely, but Bill covered it, and it made a big impression on his life and writing. Sadly, we lost Bill this past April 6. We originally ran this in our Summer 2007 issue and thought it would be fitting to run it as a tribute to an incredible writer.

Only Time Will Tell

John Marshall Lancaster dusts off a "timeless" memory featuring his family, flea markets and an interesting old clock.

There you have it. A literary smorgasbord of articles. So, sit back, fire up the ol' desktop, smartphone or tablet and enjoy!

David

David Ray Skinner
ePublisher



Something old,
Something new,
Something fictitious,
Something true.

An illustration on a red background. On the left, an older man with a white beard and mustache, wearing a red and grey argyle sweater and khaki pants, sits on a blue stool holding a black vinyl record. On the right, a younger man wearing a red baseball cap, a white t-shirt with a watermelon slice graphic, and blue jeans stands with his hands in his pockets. He is wearing white earbuds and holding a smartphone with a red screen displaying a music note icon. In the background, a large, silver gramophone with a large horn sits on a wooden table.

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LETTERJOY

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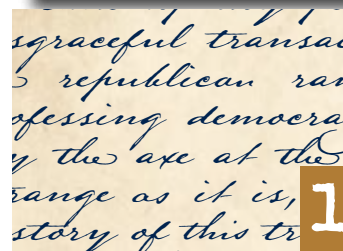
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Aiden and the Clown

an AI-generated short story

A

iden grew up in a small Tennessee county. Every year, the county fair would come to town in September, just when school was starting. Aiden had always yearned to go, but his parents always seemed just be scraping by and were never able to afford to take him and his sister.

Determined to experience the fair, Aiden decided that he was finally old enough to go by himself. He mustered up the courage to approach his parents and ask for their permission.

However, his father was concerned about the dangers of the outside world and strongly advised against it. He mentioned that county fairs, in particular, could be risky as they attracted a different social culture than what Aiden and their family were accustomed to. Despite his father's warnings, Aiden's desire to attend the fair grew stronger, especially after hearing his schoolmates rave about it. He also knew the fair would be moving on after the weekend.

On that Friday afternoon, as Aiden was walking home from school, he made a bold decision. Instead of going all the way home, he decided to take a shortcut through the woods, which would lead him straight to the fairground, which was on the opposite side of the woods from his family's house. As he entered the fair, he used his saved-up lunch money to buy some tickets for the rides.

However, as Aiden was exploring the fair, he noticed a clown out of the corner of his eye. The clown's menacing

Despite his father's warnings, Aiden's desire to attend the fair grew stronger, especially after hearing his schoolmates rave about it.



gaze made Aiden uneasy, so he quickly hopped on the Ferris wheel to escape. But to his surprise, when the Ferris wheel reached the top, he spotted the same clown below; the clown had attempted to hide behind a ticket booth in front of the Ferris wheel entrance, but his bright red clown wig, bulbous nose and colorful, star-flecked costume gave him away.

Determined to evade the clown, Aiden waited until others got off the Ferris wheel, blending in with the crowd to make his escape.

He swiftly made his way across the fairground's midway—carefully avoiding the ticket booth and quickly jumping on the roller coaster. Yet again, when the roller coaster reached its peak, Aiden looked down—sure enough, there was the clown staring back at him...not even trying to hide.

How could this happen in broad daylight? Aiden thought. Realizing he obviously couldn't shake off the clown easily, Aiden decided to seek refuge in the fortune teller's tent. However, the fortune teller insisted on "giving him a reading," and she snatched a Aiden's next-to-last ticket out of his hand.

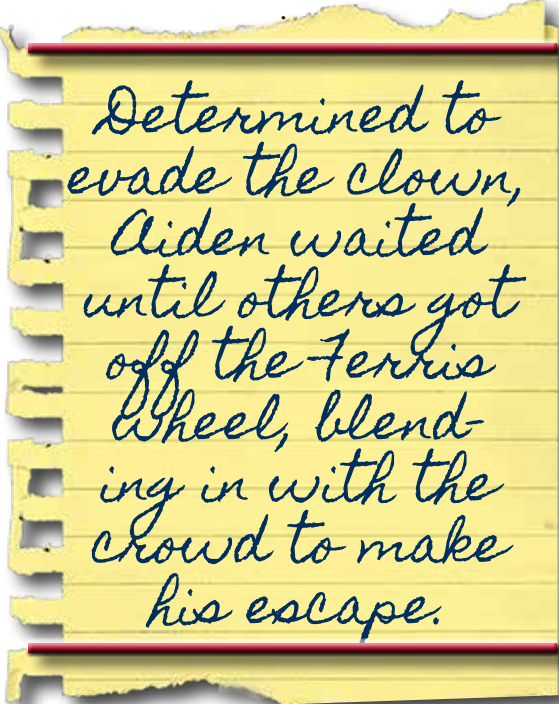
Assembling her cards around a cracked crystal ball, she began to smile. It was not a warm and inviting smile. "Expect unexpected

happenings." She cackled, "There will be a distinct unpleasantness in your near future!" The reading only heightened Aiden's concerns, and he knocked over his stool as he escaped from the fortune teller's tent.

Once outside, again on the midway, he quickly glanced around, looking for the clown. Not seeing him, he made a beeline for the exit. But the last ticket was burning in his pocket. And behold, there beside the exit, was the Funhouse, and he remembered that was what most of his classmates enjoyed most at the fair.

So Aiden pulled out his last ticket and quickly entered the Funhouse. Sure enough, the distorted mirrors and laughter-filled hallways were a delight. But his joy turned to fear when he spotted the clown's reflection in one of the mirrors. *The clown was in the Funhouse with him, getting closer and closer!* Aiden struggled to find his way out, losing himself in the maze of mirrors and glass.

Finally escaping the Funhouse, Aiden realized he couldn't trust the adults around him, fearing they would ask about his parents. He sprinted through the fair's exit, darting into the woods towards his home. Halfway through, he paused to catch his breath, only



Determined to evade the clown, Aiden waited until others got off the Ferris wheel, blending in with the crowd to make his escape.

to hear something rustling on the other end of the forest. Peeking out from behind a tree, he saw a patch of red—the clown was following him!

Thinking quickly, Aiden decided to double back and cross a creek to confuse the clown. As he looked back, relieved to see no one following him, he finally reached his house. With his key in hand, he cautiously opened the door. To his shock, sitting on the sofa beside his mother in the living room was his father, who was adjusting his red wig and bulbous nose.

“So much for surprises,” his mother said. “Your father picked up extra work at the fair so he could take the family this weekend.”

“So...why are you sitting on the couch?” Aiden demanded, shaking with anger and relief, “Why aren’t you back at the fair?”

“Well, obviously,” said his mom, “Your father just got home from the factory, just like every day. He’s working the *late* shift at the fair. He’s the night clown.”

Aiden stared at his parents. His parents innocently returned his gaze. When his father blinked, little clouds of clown makeup puffed from his eyes.

“Well,” his father said as he stood up, “Let’s go make some people laugh.”

The next afternoon, Aiden, his sister and his parents visited the fair. His father had a pocketful of tickets that he distributed to Aiden and his sister. Aiden immediately went up to the Ferris wheel, gave the operator a ticket, and climbed aboard. When he reached the top, he scanned the fairground looking for a clown—the clown. He had brought his binoculars (which had been a Christmas present) for that very reason.

Nothing.

However, on the third pass up, he spotted his parents on the midway, standing by the Funhouse. They were laughing with the carnival’s bearded lady who Aiden guessed was on a cigarette break. His father was gesturing through the cigarette smoke and apparently sharing an amusing story.



The above metaphorical story was created using an artificial intelligence app, by simply plugging in some of the characters and settings and asking for a “semi-mysterious” mood. However, an actual human hijacked the ending, which will hopefully entertain and surprise both the reader and the app.

“So why are you sitting on the couch?” Aiden demanded, shaking with anger and relief, “Why aren’t you back at the fair?”

The Beat Goes On

by Hal Gibbs

I

It started with a hand-held, shiny, fire-engine red AM transistor radio with a huge gold tuning knob. It was my portal to the world of music and was a gift for my 10th birthday from my Aunt Lora in 1963.

Although huge in my small hand, the speaker was small, and the only fidelity was when it was held close to your ear. When my mom saw me with it pressed up to my ear, she would jerk it away and tell me, “Son, you are going to go deaf with that so close to your ear.” As I walked around listening to WMAK, Nashville’s top station, my brain absorbed all the top songs on the pop record charts like a sponge. I loved the Beatles, the tunes of Motown, the sounds and stacked harmonies of the Beach Boys and the wacky DJ’s that kept us entertained. At the time, the technology of transistors allowed the production of these small radios and just like me, thousands of young kids were walking around with the radio close to their ear. At bedtime, I went to sleep while listening to music.

Aunt Lora always had music on at her house and loved to sing and play the guitar. She taught me to be a music fan and her taste influenced me greatly. First in the family to have a real “stereo,” she had a huge record collection. Fats Domino, Nate King Cole, Dean Martin, Hank Williams, Elvis, and Roger Miller were some of her favorites, and then she also had classical music from Mantovani along with calypso music. While listening to her records, she taught me the importance of reading the liner notes, learning who wrote the songs and who played on them—all the information that a serious fan must know. To this day, whenever I get a CD or an album, I still read the liner notes.

In 1964, a new TV show came on that she insisted I watch when I spent the weekend at her house. The live show was WLAC’s “Night Train” and was the nation’s first black variety

As I walked around listening to WMAK, Nashville's top station, my brain absorbed all the top songs on the pop record charts like a sponge.



TV show and featured local artists such as Jimmy Church and included one act that featured an unknown guitar player by the name of Jimi Hendrix. My favorite artist was “Ironing Board Sam” who played his portable electronic keyboard atop an ironing board. The show was mesmerizing to a young kid like me and created a passion for R&B music.

Aunt Lora also let me stay up to watch Johnny Carson because he always had either a great musical guest or let the NBC Orchestra play a song. Both shows influenced me greatly.

Change came to our house in 1965 the day two strong delivery men struggled to get our new stereo through the door. It was a huge, 5-foot-long Magnavox stereo

console. A beautiful piece of furniture with a pecan finish, it featured huge speakers on each end, and when you opened the top, inside was a turntable and radio. Mom loved her Christmas records and instrumentals while my sister was enamored with Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons and the Lettermen. They bought albums while I bought 45’s like the “Purple People Eater,” “Louie, Louie,” and “Twist and Shout” by the Beatles. Meanwhile, my dad loved his country music, and a friend would come over on weekend nights and they would play guitars and sing Marty Robbins and Johnny Cash songs. Thanks to him, he gave me my country roots.

Then Aunt Lora bought her son (my cousin) a set of drums. Seeing them for the first time brought a huge smile to my face, and

he showed me how to play. Like an octopus waving his tentacles around in the air, playing drums utilizes both hands and feet all working at the same time. Your right foot works the bass drum, and your left hand plays the snare, and they set the beat, while your right hand plays the cymbals along with your left foot working the hi-hat.

“Hey, sit down and see what you can do,” he said. Sitting down, my life changed when he put on “Happy Together,” by the Turtles. I knew it well and instantly; I started playing, and my hands and feet magically played the right parts.

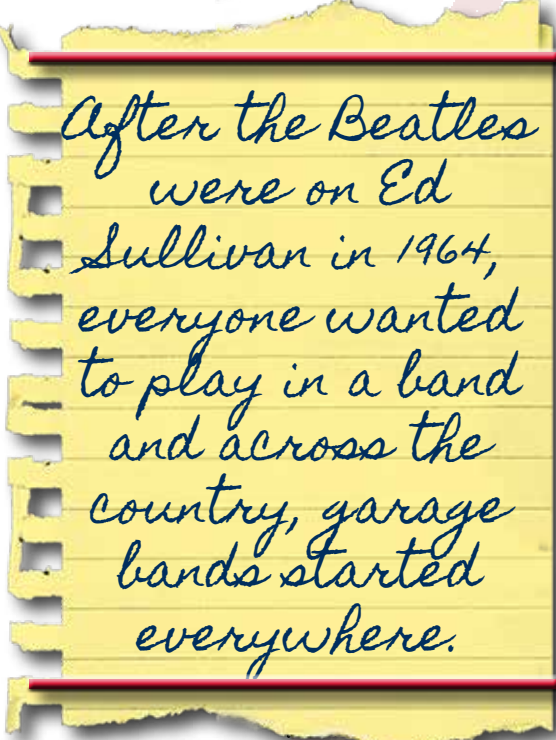
My cousin was amazed and asked, “How are you doing that?”

My reply was simple, “I have no idea, my brain knows what to do

and it just works.”

After the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan in 1964, everyone wanted to play in a band and across the country, garage bands started everywhere. My neighborhood was no exception and in 1968, several of my friends and I started a band, with me using a Chinese checkerboard as a snare drum. We were all intrigued by the musical performances on “American Bandstand” and shows like “Where the Action Is” and “The Monkees.”

Impressed, my Aunt Lora stepped up and loaned me the money for my first set of drums. Our repertoire included simple three-chord songs, like “Louie, Louie,” and “House of the Rising Sun,” but we were proud to say we were in a band. When we had worked up ten songs, one of the neighborhood girls



After the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan in 1964, everyone wanted to play in a band and across the country, garage bands started everywhere.

had a party and invited us to play. She was excited and bragged that she had a band to play for her party and for us, it was our first “gig.” That was my start as a musician. After that, I constantly practiced with whatever records I could buy and jammed with other musicians. And, it didn’t take long for Aunt Lora to finance a real set of drums for me—a nice set of Gretsch drums along with six cymbals and hard cases. Every year for the next three summers, I played in a different youth-oriented Christian musicals such as “Good News,” and “Tell It Like It Is,” and we toured Tennessee and several other states playing to crowds of up to a thousand or more in different churches and venues.

There, I learned how to be a stage performer, along with the thrill of riding all day long to a gig, playing that night and then repeating the same thing the next day. Most never understand how many hours a musician spends traveling to and from a gig, setting up and then waiting before you play.

Then in 1971, I got a call from a read band called “Leatherwood,” and there were two questions: *Are you available?* and *Do you know these songs?* My response was “yes” to both, and I was amazed that the pay was \$75 a night. With minimum wage at \$1.60 an hour, the money was huge for the time. Suddenly all those years of listening paid off. The genre of music did not matter, I knew all kinds of pop, rock, rock ‘n’ roll and country songs, and it was easy and fun. After

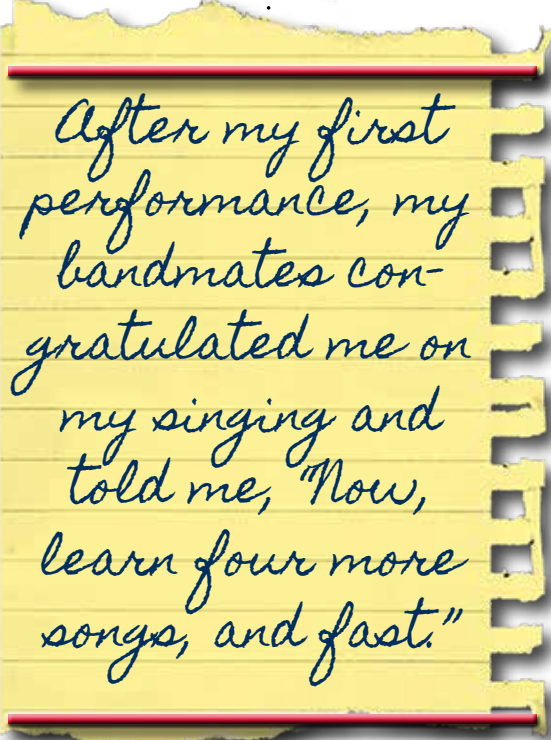
that came a succession of bands playing all types of music, and it was rare when I was stumped on a song. Even without rehearsing, I was good enough to go play with a new band and fit it. Playing gigs became my livelihood for several years.

While I loved music, my focus was always on it, not the words to the songs. For some reason, they were never important to me, and I could never remember them. As a drummer, I never worried about singing—that is what singers did. But I did remember the chorus and the background parts of songs.

Several years later, a friend in a local band called looking for a drummer, but there was a catch, “You have to sing,” I was told.

The lead singer booked the band but was not much of a singer and to compensate, they wanted everyone in the band to sing at least one song per set. “I’m not much of a singer,” I told the guitar player, and he whispered to me, “Neither is our lead singer.”

I quickly found a vocal coach, and we picked an easy song for me to sing. The song was “Margaritaville,” which had been a huge hit for Jimmy Buffett. It was also an extremely popular song, easy to sing, but most importantly, people loved to sing along with it, and I picked it thinking they would be singing and not listening to what I was doing. After my first performance, my bandmates congratulated me on my singing and told me, “Now, learn four more songs, and fast.” I did so and became a singing drummer.



After my first performance, my bandmates congratulated me on my singing and told me, “Now, learn four more songs, and fast.”

Since I couldn't remember the words, I wrote them down, put them in a transparent plastic sleeve, and when my song came up, I would grab one of my five songs, tape it to the tomtom in front of my snare drum and sing and play. Fortunately, I did remember enough words to sing background and learned to sing harmony parts with the band.

For the next couple of years, whenever I got the call to sit in with a band, I was always asked, "Do you sing?" and I would say "yes" and give them my song selection. A singing drummer usually made more money.

Unfortunately, Jimmy Buffett passed away last September. About a week later, during our weekly family dinner, my stepson's wife asked if I had a piano music book she could have. "Sure, I have some in the garage," I said, and pulled out the box and grabbed one for her. Before I gave it to her, I noticed something sticking out of it—there were my old lyric sheets to Margaritaville, and four other songs.

"What are those?" my granddaughter asked. "Lyric sheets from my old band days. You know I told you I had to sing some songs," I told her. For years, they were stored in one of my drum cases, and I had no idea that I had kept them.

As she looked through them, she saw "Margaritaville," and said, "I know that one—that's one of Jimmy Buffett's famous songs—the guy who just passed away, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," I said and smiled. "And remember you liked his song, "Pencil Thin

Mustache." And she smiled.

Seeing those lyric sheets was a trip down memory lane for me. Although I have not played in years, as a homage to my past, there are two drum sets and three guitars in my home office, along with my microphone that I sang into all those years. I owe a debt of thanks to my Aunt Lora for giving me the love of music and to Jimmy Buffett for the music he gave to all of us—and especially what he gave to me.

For her 13th birthday last year, I gave my granddaughter a small MP3 player and a nice set of Sony headphones. Loaded with 32 GBs of my favorite music, it is a soundtrack of my life with songs from the 50's to the 90's, and it

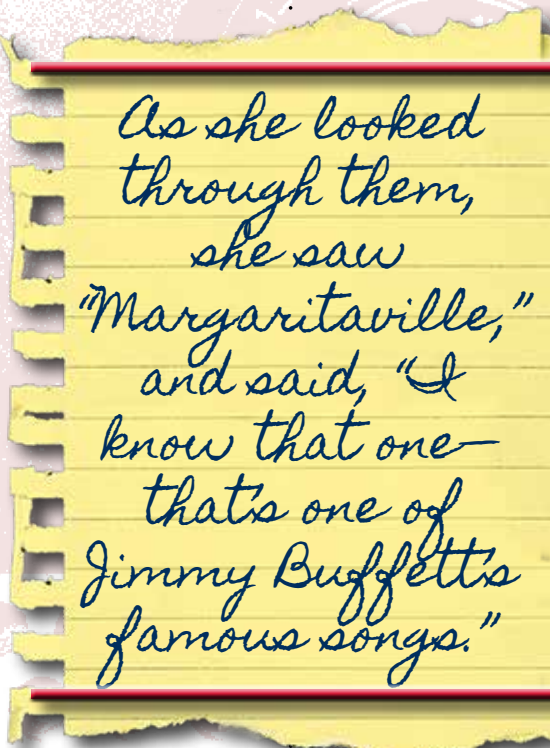
includes Jimmy's greatest hits. She loves it, along with the huge stack of 45's and albums we have given her over the last year or so. My goal is for her to appreciate music of all types.

Her mp3 player? Like my transistor radio, it's red and fits in your hand.

The family tradition continues, and Jimmy Buffett has a new fan.



Hal Gibbs is a retired court officer living in Nashville, TN and is currently finishing his first book that follows his path through 26 years of working in the legal system. A former musician, he appeared on stage with e-publisher David Ray Skinner back in the early 70's.



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The Clay-Jackson Feud

by Letterjoy

W

hether he was representing Kentucky in the Senate, serving as Speaker of the House, or helming the State Department for John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay dreamed of only one office.

He desperately wanted to be President. He tried repeatedly to win the White House, but again and again, one of his least favorite people kept getting in his way: Andrew Jackson.

The Clay-Jackson feud began in 1817 when President James Monroe sent Jackson, the most famous American general since Washington, down south. Monroe tasked Jackson with neutralizing Seminole tribes based in Spanish Florida who'd been warring with settlers across the border in Georgia, but his orders to "the hero of New Orleans" were ambiguous. Jackson used that ambiguity to expand his mission, capturing Spanish Florida and its capital, Pensacola, for the United States. The capture of Pensacola infuriated Spain; Jackson's execution of two Englishmen (who allegedly aided the Seminoles) infuriated Britain. Monroe faced a difficult choice: Defend his famous general or condemn him to preserve relations with Britain and Spain. Monroe opted to defend Jackson, but Clay, the Speaker of the House, took a different tack. He thought Jackson's unilateral actions set a dangerous precedent, and he publicly excoriated Jackson, labeling him unfit for public office and moving to censure him formally.

Attacking Jackson's character was a risky proposition. He fought over one hundred duels in his lifetime. In this case, though, Jackson stewed silently. He'd once hosted Aaron Burr as a houseguest and knew well the political ruin that befell those who killed government officials. With presidential aspirations of his own, Jackson knew he needed to squash rivalries, not fuel them. In 1823, Tennessee sent Jackson back to the Senate. He used his time in Washington to make peace with old enemies. He even befriended Thomas Hart-Benton,

Attacking Jackson's character was a risky proposition. He fought over one hundred duels in his lifetime.



Washington, Jan. 25, 1825.

Dear sir:

I take up my pen to inform you of one of the most disgraceful transactions that ever covered with infamy the republican ranks. Would you believe, that men, professing democracy, could be found base enough, to lay the axe at the very root of the tree of liberty! Yet, strange as it is, it is not less true. To give you a full history of this transaction would far exceed the limits of a letter. I shall, therefore, at once proceed to give you a brief account of such a bargain, as can only be equalled by the famous Burr conspiracy of 1801.

For some time past, the friends of Clay have hinted, that they, like the Swiss, would fight for those who pay best. Overtures were said to have been made, by the friends of Adams, to the friends of Clay, offering him the appointment of secretary of state, for his aid to elect Adams. And the friends of Clay gave the information to the friends of Jackson, and hinted, that if the friends of Jackson would offer the same price, they would close with them. But none of the friends of Jackson would descend to such mean barter and sale. It was not believed by any of the friends of Jackson, that this contract would be ratified, by the members from the states which had voted for Clay.

I was of the opinion, when I first heard of this transaction, that men, professing any honorable principles, could not, nor would not, be transferred, like the farmer does his team of horses. No alarm was excited. We believed the republic was safe. The nation having delivered Jackson into the hands of Congress, backed by a large majority of their votes, there was on my mind no doubt, that Congress would respond to the will of the nation, by electing the individual they had declared to be their choice. Contrary to this expectation, it is now ascertained to a certainty, that Henry Clay has transferred his interest to John Quincy Adams.

As a consideration for this abandonment of duty

who'd once nearly killed him in a streetfight, but his rift with Clay was irreparable. Clay and Jackson truly went head-to-head for the first time in the election of 1824. The previous election had been among the least contentious in American history. Monroe, head of the dominant Democratic-Republican Party and disciple of its founder, Thomas Jefferson, ran unopposed. Monroe had no clear successor, so four major candidates ran in 1824, Clay, Jackson, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, and Treasury Secretary William Crawford.

Clay thought his western bona fides would carry him to the White House, but the entrance of Jackson, with his military glory and populist platform, complicated matters. They promoted dueling visions. Clay and his "Whigs" promoted an "American System" where tariffs and land sales funded the construction of canals and public roads, which would stimulate manufacturing. Jackson and his "Democrats" urged just the opposite, calling for more local autonomy, lower tariffs, and the dissolution of the controversial Second Bank of the United States. Jackson's message resonated better than Clay's with the rural voters that Clay hoped to attract. Clay was forced to fight for more traditional northeastern voters. Adams, with his famous name and diplomatic expertise, was more appealing to this set.

When election day came, Jackson won a plurality of the popular vote and the Electoral College but not the majority required by law.

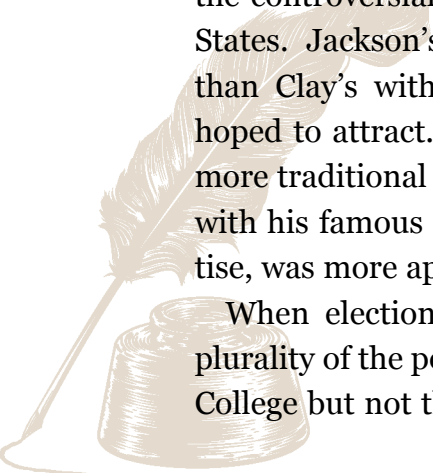
Adams came in second, and Crawford came in third. Clay, humiliatingly, came in fourth. When no candidate won an Electoral College majority, the Constitution dictated that the House select the President, but only among the top three finishers. Not all was lost for Clay. While he wouldn't be the next President, as Speaker, he had more influence than anyone in selecting who would be.

While Clay wouldn't be the next President, as Speaker, he had more influence than anyone in selecting who would be.

With Crawford all-but-eliminated after a severe stroke, the choice was between Adams and Jackson; it didn't take a psychic to guess Clay's pick. Still, rumors began to swirl in the weeks leading up to the House vote that Clay was not taking only merit into account when choosing who to support. Philadelphia's *Columbian Observer* and other newspapers ran an anonymous letter

from a member of Congress claiming that Clay had agreed to support Adams if he agreed to make Clay Secretary of State and had made the same offer through friends to the Jackson camp.

Clay responded through a "card" in the *National Intelligencer* denying the bribery allegations, suggesting the letter was a forgery, and challenging its author to a duel. To his surprise, Pennsylvania's George Kremer, known for wearing a leopard-skin coat on the House floor, admitted to writing it. Clay never believed that Kremer had penned the letter on his own (Clay was right. James Buchanan put him up to it). Yet, he dropped the duel demand, instead proposing that Congress



to his constituents, it is said and believed, should this unholy coalition prevail, Clay is to be appointed secretary of state. I have no fear on my mind. I am clearly of opinion, we shall defeat every combination. The force of public opinion must prevail, or there is an end of liberty.

30 Jan. 1825

Gent,

I will thank you to inform me if you will publish the inclosed article in your paper of tomorrow.

Yr. ob. Servt.

H. Clay

A Card

I have seen, without any other emotion than that of ineffable contempt, the abuse which has been poured out upon me by a scurrillous paper issued in this City and by other kindred prints and persons, in regard to the Presidential election. The editor, of one of those prints, ushered forth in Philadelphia, called the Columbian Observer, for which I do not subscribe, and which I have not ordered, has had the impudence to transmit to me his vile paper of the 28th. instant.

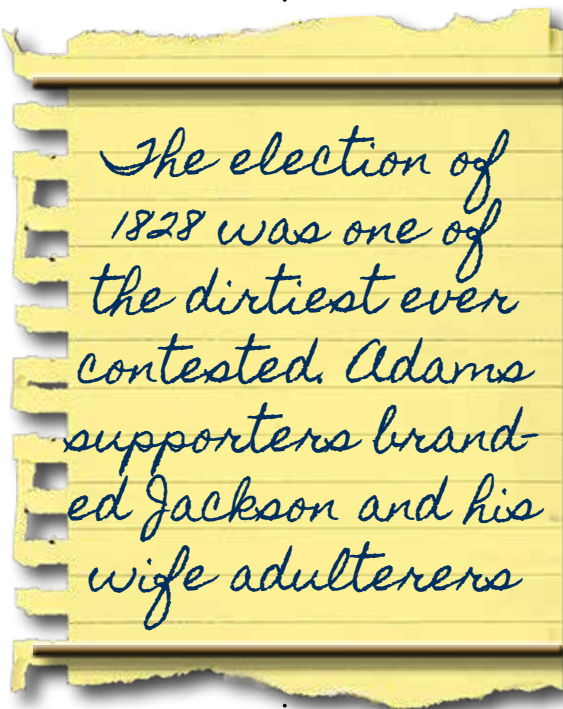
In that number is inserted a letter, purporting to have been written from this City, on the 25th. instant, by a member of the H. of R. belonging to the Pennsylvania Delegation I believe it to be a forgery; but, if it be genuine, I pronounce the member, whoever he may be, a base and infamous calumniator, a dastard and liar; and if he dare unveil himself and avow his name I will hold him responsible, as I here admit myself to be, to all the laws which govern and regulate the conduct of men of honor.

investigate. He demanded that Kremer appear to prove his charges, but Kremer refused and the narrative of a “corrupt bargain” continued to spread. His nomination as Secretary of State days after the House selected Adams did not help his cause. Jackson wrote gleefully to a colleague, “So you see the Judas of the West has closed the contract and will receive the thirty pieces of silver. His end will be the same. Was there ever witnessed such a bare faced corruption in any country before?” Clay erred in accepting Adams’ job offer after Kremer’s letter. In one fell swoop, he gave Jackson a tangible grievance to campaign on in 1828 and did irreparable harm to his reputation. He gave lengthy speeches and published books of “Evidence in Refutation of the Charges Against Him Touching the Last Presidential Election Made By Gen. Andrew Jackson”, but it’s difficult to prove a negative.

The election of 1828 was one of the dirtiest ever contested. Adams supporters branded Jackson and his wife adulterers and relitigated his actions in Florida a decade earlier. Jackson’s allies, in turn, spread the rumor that while Adams was serving as a diplomat in Europe, he’d acquired young prostitutes for Emperor Alexander I. Benefiting from loosened voting laws, which allowed men without property to vote, Jackson won handily. On taking office, he cleaned house, firing Adams and Monroe appointees (Clay included) and filling the Executive Branch with his own partisans. He also took up the veto pen more

actively than any of his predecessors, using it to halt the advance of Clay’s American System and dissolve the national bank. Jackson vetoed twelve bills over eight years, more than his six predecessors combined. Clay attempted to fight Jackson from the Senate. He censured Jackson for his actions in dismantling the bank, but Jackson’s allies soon managed to repeal it after which Clay, dressed for mourning, pronounced, “The Senate is no longer a place for any decent man.”

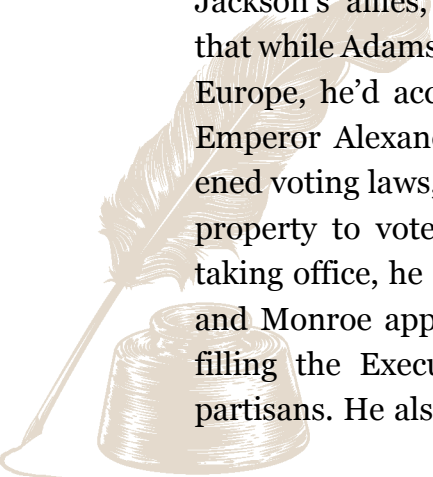
In 1832, Clay tried again to beat Jackson head-to-head. Jackson steamrolled him, 219 electoral votes to 49. In 1844, Clay ran one last time. Jackson was in failing health, but he wrote scores of letters to undermine Clay’s support and boost his rival, James K. Polk (another Jackson disciple). Jackson died in June of 1845, months after watching Clay face defeat one more time and finally come to terms with the fact that he’d never be president. Clay died in a DC hotel in June of 1852, six blocks from the White House.



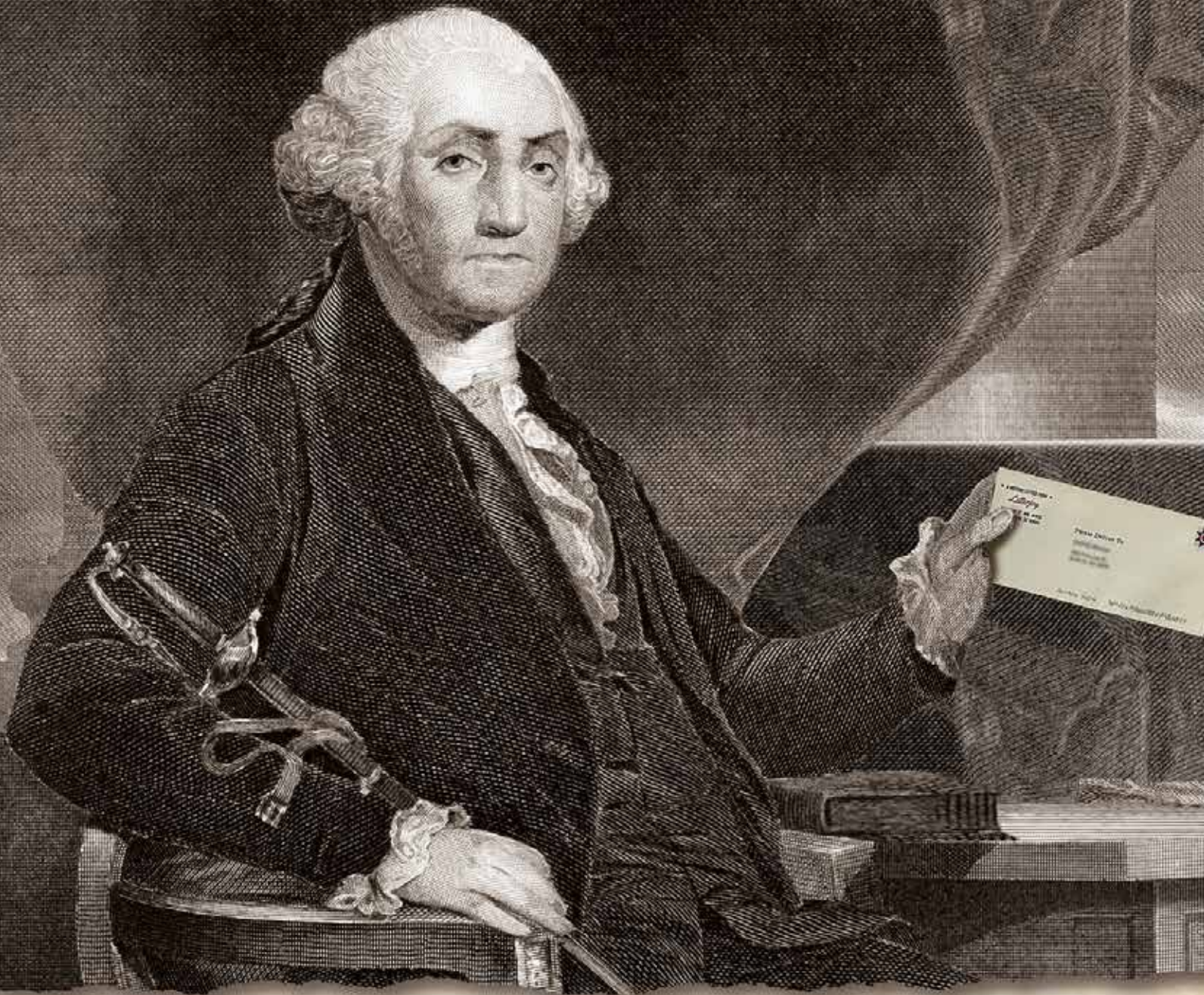
The election of 1828 was one of the dirtiest ever contested. Adams supporters branded Jackson and his wife adulterers



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The Athens Music Scene's Role in Shaping College Radio

By Katherine Rye Jewell

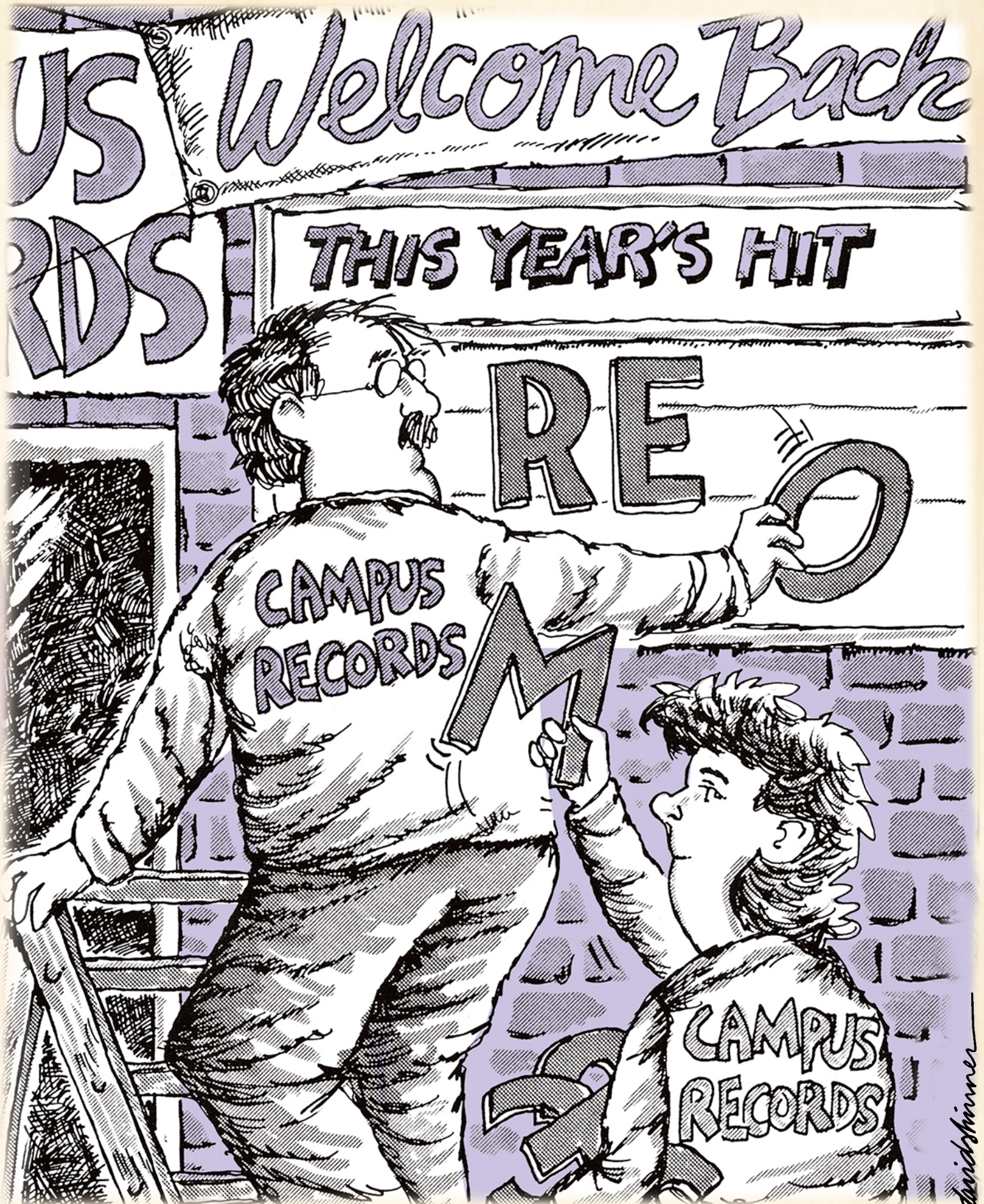
W

UOG (the University of Georgia's student-run radio station) in the late 1970s challenged UGA's fraternity-oriented culture. It offered jazz and classical music alongside progressive rock usually programmed later at night.

It flirted with country and bluegrass, and in 1974 added bands such as REO Speedwagon, Santana, and Redwing and David Bowie to its rotation. Occasional complaints cropped up regarding the station's unusual selections, with one listener carping, "Should WUOG ignore the more established and proven varieties of rock as characterized by the Beatles, Jethro Tull, Yes, and a host of others?" DJs shunned more mainstream fare, with the listener concluding, "How else can they explain their selection of obscure groups of questionable musical capabilities?" In April 1975, DJs repeated Kraftwerk's *Autobahn* for five hours, punctuated with "taped messages and comments of questionable taste," prompting grumblings from the student communications board that the FCC might levy a fine for obscenity. No fine emerged, but the station developed a reputation for defiance of local cultural norms and for, well, amateurism.

In 1977, the student communications board inquired about increasing WUOG's wattage from 3,200 to 10,000, aiming for a stronger on-air position to attract promotional support from record labels, secure artist interviews, and keep area alumni connected to their alma mater. The power increase stemmed not from the FCC's pending class D decision, but rather from a realization that college stations could enhance an institution's

Athens's nascent music scene joined promising bohemian underground scenes across the nation.



David Shinner

Depicting the switch in focus in college radio from AOR staples like REO Speedwagon to "college rock" from bands such as R.E.M. "Back to School Comeback Special," CMJ Progressive Media 8, no. 11 (1983). Courtesy of Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum

image by “educating” the public with music unavailable on commercial radio. The ensuing saga over WUOG’s professionalization illustrated the nexus of claims and aspirations transforming college radio culture in the late 1970s, often with students caught in the middle.

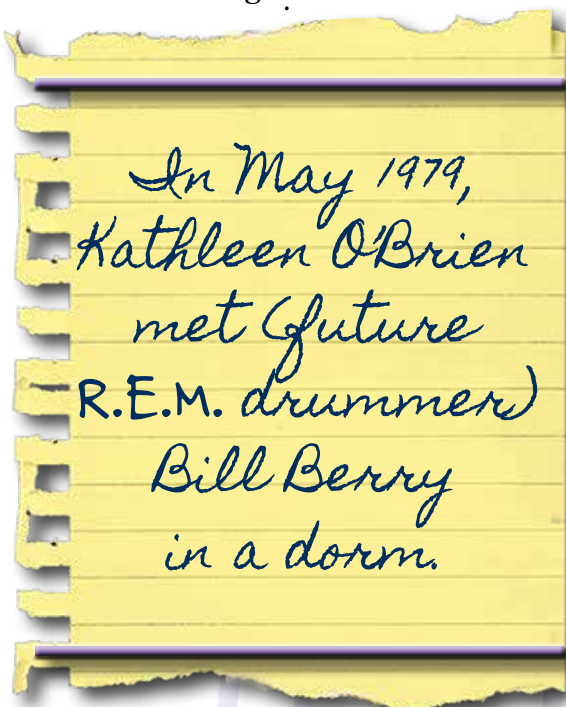
Athens’s nascent music scene joined promising bohemian underground scenes across the nation. But an oppositional relationship emerged between art students, concert-committee types, and devotees of, as one scene chronicle put it, “frat rock, disco, and rednecks harassing anybody who didn’t look like them, shouting (what else?) ‘Hey, you, faggot!’ Local band the B-52’s offered escape and expression for gender nonconformists and mass culture critics and charted new directions in post-punk music. Sarcastic, excessive, and colorful, “polite, nonthreatening, feminine,” the Athens scene yet only promised, rather than delivered, the vibrancy and persistence of regional cultural variations and the patchwork scenes of underground music. Nevertheless, a series of loose affiliations, sometimes involving the radio station, began to cohere.

In May 1979, Kathleen O’Brien met (future R.E.M. drummer) Bill Berry in a dorm. O’Brien, a DJ at WUOG, danced with an informal band calling itself the WUOgerz that offered kazoo songs and new wave covers. Berry joined the group. He accompanied the band as it opened for the Police in 1979, who played for a half-filled venue. The British

band with punk–new wave image invited the WUOgerz to accompany them to Florida for more shows, but band members had classes to attend. Berry continued to work on the concert committee.

A raucous party destination, WUOG created its own controversy. College radio DJs across the nation developed reputations for a lackadaisical sound, love of less popular music, and drug use. At UGA, student DJs developed an antagonistic relationship

with mainstream campus culture; they also rejected commercialism and control. Their ideals of freedom of expression and lack of formatting clashed with attempts to create a more structured format and station identity—both from within the university and from state regulators. Following the 1978 class D ruling (FCC v. Pacifica Foundation, a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that upheld the ability of the FCC to regulate indecent content sent over the broadcast airwaves), the state of Georgia pursued its own public communications bill to govern the radio training facilities at public institutions such as UGA. Student DJs and advocates of localized educational programming disparaged the bill, which would have given a state-level bureau control over training and programming. Not only was the bill “a crime against the English language, [with] long, vague sentences,” one critic charged, the law empowered the Georgia Public Broadcasting Commission with “providing a mechanism to



prime the quality and variety of educational experiences for all Georgia citizens” without clearly exempting student-run stations such as WUOG. Critics argued students should be able to pursue “cultural and educational diversity” free of such bureaucratic oversight.

A state takeover did not emerge. Instead, pressure on DJs’ laissez-faire attitudes materialized from within Athens.

Fears of micromanagement were merited. The state might not have its sights on WUOG, but university administrators did. Administrative requests to study whom the station served had been proceeding for some time, and spring 1981 saw an acceleration in this trend. A new general manager attempted to reverse “the impression” that WUOG was a “weird jazz” station, which student newspaper editors explained was “a pedestrian buzz word for music that people can’t sing to.”

Still, that manager only made changes around the edges as the station engaged in a self-study. He did not move toward the Top 40 fare many students demanded, but he tried to impose order, standardizing musical rotations and programs. The self-study suggested moving the studio to a more “desirable” space to increase visibility among students and recommended an advisory board to offer guidance. Student activities assigned WUOG a new coordinator, graduate student James Weaver, to provide consistent leadership and proper oversight, as well as implement administration-backed reforms.

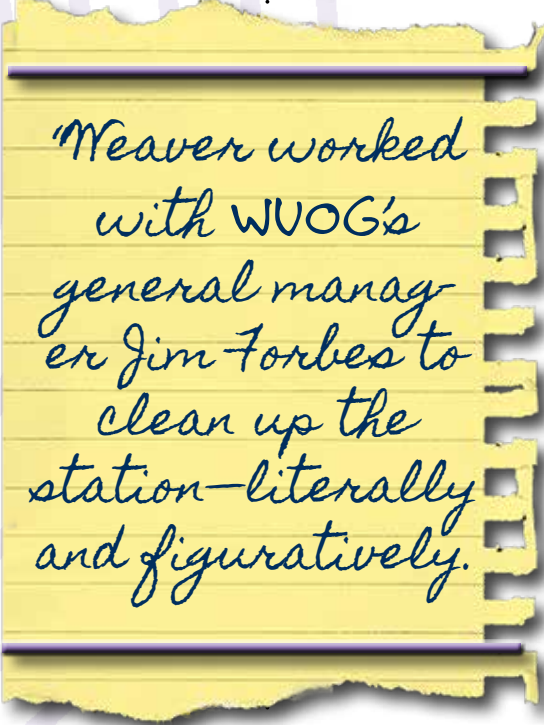
“Weaver worked with WUOG’s general manager Jim Forbes to clean up the station—literally and figuratively. The inch-thick dust on tapes strewn about disappeared, and the gum that had “long been stuck under tables” got scraped away.

DJs did not respond positively. Someone took Weaver’s picture, published in the student newspaper, and scribbled “Pig!” on it. Emotions ran high. Looking back, one DJ reflected, “In the name of alternative, we were arrogant, elitist, self-indulgent, and excessive.” DJs lost touch with “whom we were serving.” After station leaders held a meeting in early February 1981 to discuss format changes, recent on-air obscenities, and students broadcasting without credentials, Forbes grew incensed.

Disgusted by staff balking, he called volunteers to the studio and “summarily dismissed every one of us,” one DJ remembered, and took the station off the air—immediately. All volunteers had to reapply. The station remained closed for forty-six days.

DJs filed an injunction, declaring their First Amendment rights had been violated, and they

formed “FERN: Free Educational Radio Now!” Forbes declared the closure to protect the license, as lax attention to regulations put it at risk. (The local FCC office had no knowledge of the station’s troubles.) Forbes insisted that jocks protested changes with “little petty stuff” such as “pretending to be dumb about rules and procedures” and acting “immature



Weaver worked with WUOG's general manager Jim Forbes to clean up the station—literally and figuratively.

and irrational.” Working with student affairs administrators, Forbes and Weaver implemented order.

The administration, as license holder, violated no First Amendment rights by implementing changes at a station that represented the institution, not individual students. The student activities director declared he acted in WUOG’s best interest. “The old days are gone,” he told fired DJs. The closure “saved the license,” and “there was no other way to get the donkey’s attention than to hit him upside the head.” One fired DJ, who went on to a career as a news director in commercial television, complained that the changes set the station back. But he credited Forbes with improving facilities and building a stronger station identity. Musical exposure benefited from stricter structuring.

Forbes reorganized programming and created more identifiable blocks. He took the “more esoteric stuff” and relegated it to nighttime shows, leaving popular rock for the daytime hours to cater to a wider cross-section of students. With time, he hoped, listeners would tune in to the hours dedicated to new music and discover up-and-coming and local artists. In preparing the relaunch, WUOG management rebranded the station. Forbes aimed for a “new and cleaner identity” that “stresses professionalism in all endeavors.” Since the station had an educational license, it would provide alternative programming while connecting the university with the public.

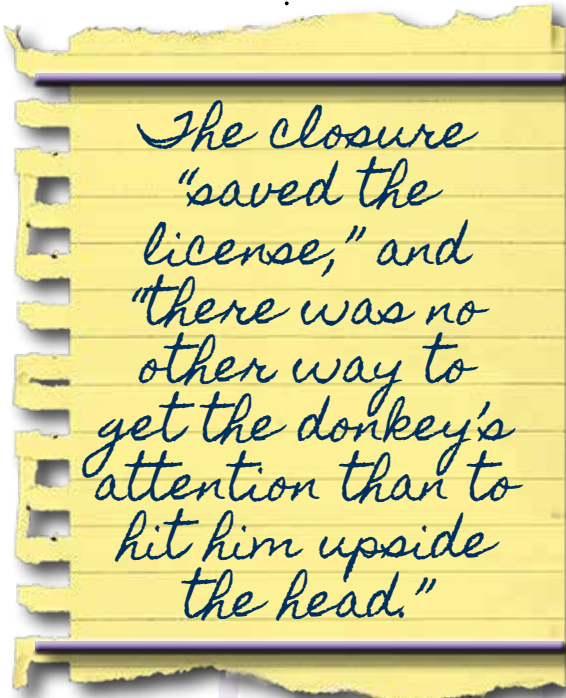
University administrators lauded WUOG when it resumed broadcasting in April 1981.

The student activities director praised Forbes for taking “a bad situation” and making it positive, putting “professional student-operated educational radio back on the air.” As one supporter of WUOG’s new order stated, “This is not a toy.” The station’s “[recently boosted] 10,000 watts of power ... represents the university. Things have gotten kind of loose up here....

The philosophy has not been in the interest of trying to be as professional as we should be.” Drugs were banned from the control room (or rather, rules were more strictly enforced) and volunteers had to meet minimum professional standards. DJs did not own the station, the new GM explained: “It is owned by the University of Georgia, and President Davison signed the license...It is a privilege to be allowed to represent the university on air.”

This deference to educational context and mission yielded a more hierarchical, systematic, and consistent approach to college radio programming—a trend across college stations. Other benefits emerged. Student DJs grumbled about the new rules, but most resumed their positions and enjoyed rising status and influence in the Athens music scene.

Playing the role of tastemaker required rules, policies, hierarchies, and management structures. As scrutiny on college stations grew with greater range and institutional investment, as well as competition for listen-



ers, new imperatives emerged. Stations had to do more than share university news and sporting events or broadcast campus lectures and highbrow musical offerings. Visibility required a stronger identity than the vague alternative to commercial radio that predominated in the 1970s at student-run stations. A coherent college radio reputation emerged, even as diversity missions and programming remained. Music without broad commercial appeal still defined service, as it had in the past, enhanced by a more robust definition of educational radio distinct from public radio. Not all stations fit this profile, but the identity became more nationally coherent, with local variations.

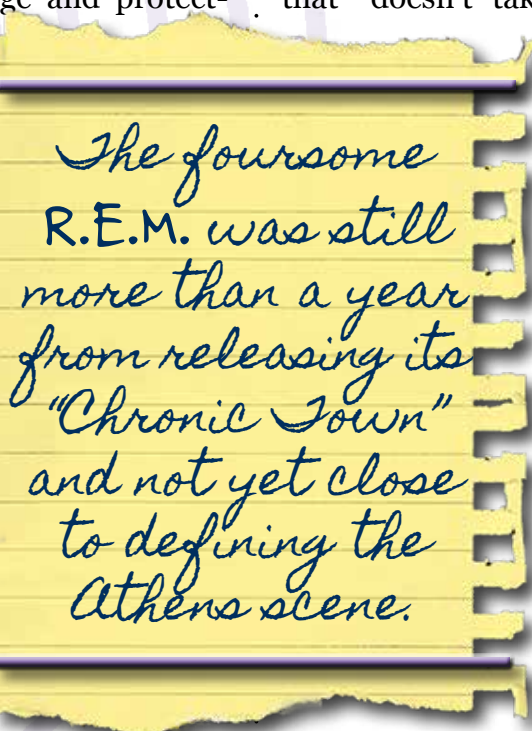
Bolstered by higher wattage and protected under the concept of educational radio, WUOG increasingly mirrored Athens's growing reputation as a haven for bohemian experimentation. Block programs in jazz, blues, and reggae and the diversity of cultural programs remained. The new general manager explained, "We will never be a top-40 station...Why would we spend student money to duplicate what's already been done?" Insularity undermined the station. He explained, "I think in the past that the people in programming just consulted among themselves. They never tried to find out what somebody at a frat house, or a person eating at Belmont Hall or somebody down by Legion Pool might want to hear. We are not eliminating any of the esoteric music. We're just program-

ing it proportionally to the interest in it that exists out there." Even this purportedly more "student-oriented approach" did not cater to fraternity and sorority tastes. WUOG maintained its connection to the local, underground music scene and its commitment to airing musical styles not available elsewhere on the dial.

"By reining in amateur DJs' excesses and emphasizing professionalism to accompany its increased wattage, WUOG's educational format expanded its connections with Athens's music scene in the 1980s. It gained a reputation for broadcasting the best of Athens, challenging punk's depressing anger with a "happier, freer and apolitical" sound that "doesn't take itself, or anything else,

very seriously." It offered an outlet for diverse and minority voices of those on campus who did not enjoy athletics or Greek life. While WUOG implemented a professional image, hierarchical management, and musical rotations, the station developed a powerful alternative voice in the 1980s—putting the college town on the counter-cultural map, nationally.

In January 1981, as forces converged for WUOG's reorganization, UGA's student newspaper featured a new band packing in fans at a local club, naming them the best local band for 1980. A picture of four young-looking men sitting against a wall accompanied the announcement. (It was juxtaposed with singer-songwriter Dan Fogelberg's photo, whose "Longer" received



The foursome
R.E.M. was still
more than a year
from releasing its
"Chronic Town"
and not yet close
to defining the
Athens scene.

the less-impressive award for year's worst single).

The foursome R.E.M. was still more than a year from releasing its *Chronic Town* EP (extended play vinyl record) and not yet close to defining the Athens scene for the nation as it would in coming years.

Buzz about the band coincided almost exactly with WUOG's takeover, which in April 1981 reopened to "prove" itself to the UGA and Athens community. Greater professionalism and wider reach stemming from the FCC's class D decision changed the landscape of college radio, with signals reaching potentially more receivers even if the threat of administrative takeover or conversion to NPR loomed. It is impossible to say if stricter standards and greater professionalism drew more listeners to stations. What is clear is that something was happening in college radio leading up to 1981 that would "amplify its collective cultural clout.

The class D rule change took place within a broader transformation of college radio, commercial FM rock radio, and the music industry. By the late 1970s, college radio's "alternative" reputation grew increasingly defined by jazz, reggae, folk, and new rock, particularly postpunk and new wave. The record industry took note, hiring staff to service and promote to campus stations, hoping to reach a demographic of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds with new music. While the class D decision presented an existential challenge

...College radio's "alternative" reputation grew increasingly defined by jazz, reggae, folk, and new rock, particularly postpunk and new wave.

to students' power to run radio stations—threatening the aural "sandbox" of learning radio laboratories—the decision produced unexpected results.

As the class D decision unfolded, financial troubles plagued the music industry. In 1979, several major labels laid off college promotion staff, and executives pondered how to make record service to college stations worthwhile. As one former promoter put it, "It's kind of ironic that all this should happen now when college stations will be going to 100 watts and full broadcasting days," because of the FCC's change. Stations added power and reach, but they had yet to demonstrate their influence.



Katherine Rye Jewell is Professor of History at Fitchburg State University, where she teaches modern U.S. history. She is a historian of the business and politics of culture in the twentieth-century United States. Jewell grew up in New England and now lives outside of Boston with her family — which includes her husband, three children, and two cats.

The preceding article is an excerpt from Jewell's latest book, *Live from the Underground: A History of College Radio*, published by University of North Carolina Press in December 2023. It is reprinted by permission from Katherine Rye Jewell and the University of North Carolina Press. For order info, click on the book cover at the right.

LIVE

**FROM THE
UNDERGROUND**

A History of College Radio

KATHERINE RYE JEWELL

The Lesson

by Randy Dobbs

M

ary Lee Armstrong was my 7th grade teacher, and I adored her. She was short, but she moved like she had legs nine feet long. She was a ball of fire and seemed to have energy that never ran low.

I think she knew that I was fond of her and frankly, I think she was fond of me.

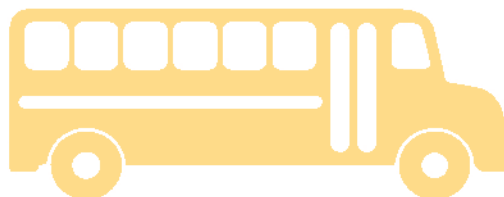
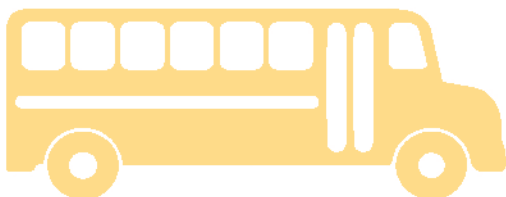
Actually, I've often wondered if she was fond of me or felt sorry for me and started watching out for me. Sometimes, I think she even worried about me. She talked to me a lot—at interesting times: at the end of the lunch line while we were waiting on everyone to go through the line; in the line while we waited to get water after P.E.; and in line at the end of the day for dismissal.

I worried that others were aware of how much she liked me, so often I pretended to ignore her—it didn't work—she would ask me if something was wrong.

I worried a lot about my mother while I was at school. I wondered if she was getting along OK—worried that she was able to do the chores at home—worried that she would fall while getting in or out of the car at the bank—worried that a robber would break into the house during the day, and she would not be able to get away.

My mother was handicapped. I use that word because she was handicapped long before the politically correct word of

I worried that others were aware of how much Mrs. Armstrong liked me, so often I pretended to ignore her...





disabled was used. Having now worked in the field of children with disabilities and understanding the subtle difference that people with disabilities want you to know and understand about those two words, I've decided that my mother was handicapped—certainly disabled as well, but really just handicapped.

In fact, our whole family was handicapped.

When they took my mother's leg off, her life, my father's life, and my life were all changed forever. In fact, my sister—who was not yet born—was changed as well. Can someone be changed even before they are not conceived and born? I now know they can.

My 7th grade year was a particularly difficult one for me. Mrs. Armstrong knew that, and she provided support day in and day out. What

she did most was to talk to me—and help me talk about what was going on with my family. During one particularly difficult time in the spring, Mrs. Armstrong decided that if perhaps I talked to some of the students about my mother and her handicap it might help me. You see, the kids at school never knew why I was always worried, upset, confused or just plain out-of-it. Mrs. Armstrong talked to me about what I might say and how students might respond. I told her I wasn't sure if I could do it.

Days dragged on, and she continued to talk

and encourage me.

We had never had a maid at home. I guess that was because we really couldn't afford it, and also because my mother never trusted anyone in the house. She was afraid of almost everything. However, finally, my father talked her into it.

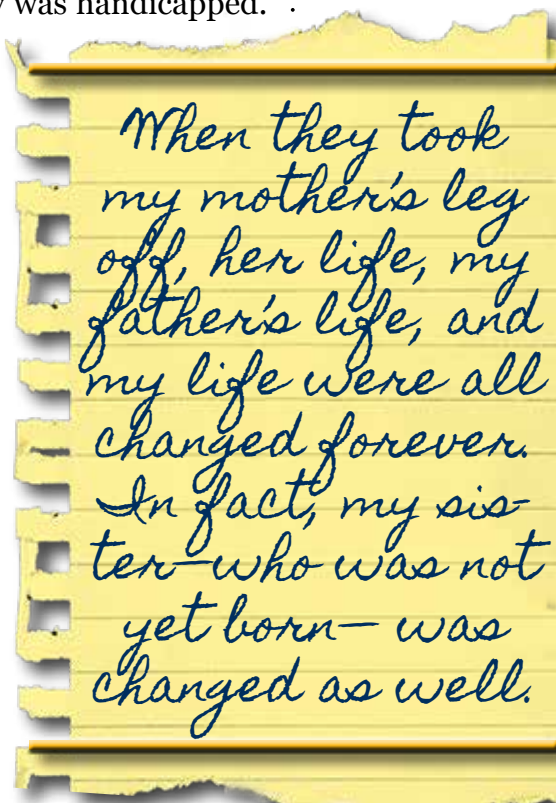
My father had hired a day-laborer—a man

named Ronald—for his construction work and the man had worked for him for several weeks. In fact, the guy was so good that my father kept him busy by bringing him to our house for odd jobs. This was to keep him busy and keep him paid so he wouldn't go to work for someone else. Ronald told my father that his wife needed to work and that she did domestic work. They had kids and really needed the money.

My parents argued over it—

mother proclaiming that we needed the money also and why would we keep paying these people we didn't even know when it might be us who was desperate in the near future.

I hated it when they fought—I always wanted to do something to stop them. I found that the most effective way was to scream and holler at them or sometimes just throw up. My father always said nothing, and my mother would tell me to go to bed, explaining that everything was okay. "However," I remember thinking, "If everything was okay, why did they fight all the time?"



When they took my mother's leg off, her life, my father's life, and my life were all changed forever. In fact, my sister—who was not yet born—was changed as well.

My father won out—which he did often—by simply not giving up. It may have taken days of arguing and fussing, but he was good at staying the course.

Ronald's wife showed up at 7:30 AM sharp on a Saturday morning, dressed in a white maid's uniform that had more starch in it than any shirt my dad or me had ever worn. Mother made her come on Saturday, so I would be there with her, because she was uncomfortable having someone in the house with her when she was there alone.

The woman's name was Joyce, and she was polite and very business-like. She acted insulted when my mother would tell her how to do things. My mother finally quit telling her how to do things and just sat down. My mother seemed sad. It made no sense to her; here was this professional cleaning lady doing all the chores, leaving her to sit at the kitchen table and drink coffee.

On the other hand, I was thrilled—it meant I wouldn't have to vacuum for at least a couple of days. Our floors were vacuumed more than any carpet in Decatur, Georgia, and I was the master of vacuuming! "Now," I silently hoped, "I would be free from it until at least Monday!"

Lunch was served at promptly 12:00 noon—our maid fixed lunch! *Wow!* She not only knew how to expertly clean, she fixed us lunch, as well! She also told me to quit playing with

my food, to sit up straight and to finish eating the soup without picking up the bowl. Soup and a peanut butter sandwich—it was just like a scene out of "Leave it to Beaver."

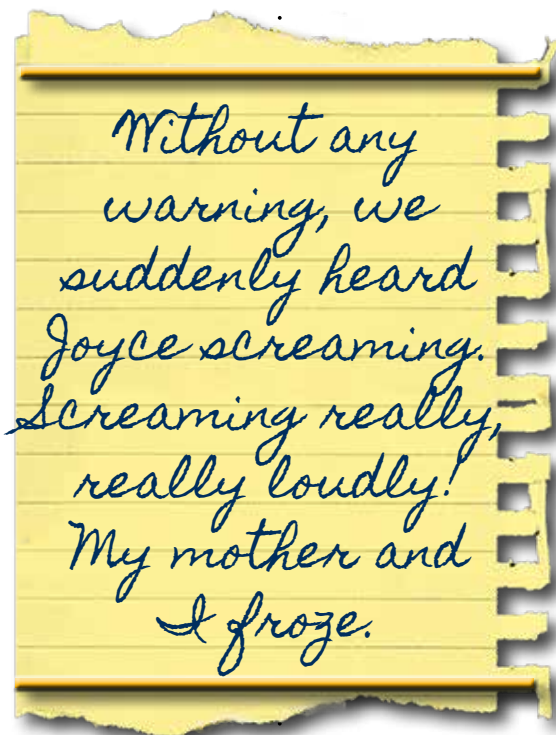
While we were eating, Joyce went back to work in the back of the house—in my parents' bedroom. We heard the vacuum cleaner going—*yes, I would not have to vacuum until Monday!*

Without any warning, we suddenly heard Joyce screaming. Screaming really, really loudly! My mother and I froze. The screaming was getting louder—she was coming toward us. Still screaming—she ran into the den, grabbed her purse and shopping bag and ran out the door. My mother and I just sat looking at each other—perplexed—we could still hear the

vacuum cleaner. My mother got up and went to the door where Joyce had left leaving the door open. Joyce was running up the street toward the bus stop. My mother stepped outside and tried to call her, but she was gone and not to be slowed in her rapid exit.

My mother told me to go into the bedroom and see what was in there. I said *no—I was afraid to go into the room with the vacuum cleaner still running.*

Mother insisted, giving me no choice but to go into the back of the house by myself. The vacuum cleaner was still running where Joyce had left it as she departed, screaming at the top of her lungs.



Without any warning, we suddenly heard Joyce screaming. Screaming really, really loudly! My mother and I froze.

I slowly walked down the long hallway toward their bedroom. The vacuum cleaner was getting louder—my heart was pounding, and I felt like it would soon jump out of my throat. I slowly peeked into their bedroom. Nothing. The vacuum cleaner was lying on the floor on the other side of the bed, out of sight. Nothing looked unusual. However, the door to the closet was open.

As I got closer, I could tell that the vacuum cleaner was on the floor half in the closet and half out, but still running. I slowly walked around the bed. When I got to the end of the bed and had an unobstructed view into the closet, I saw it. There it lay on the floor—the vacuum cleaner pushed up against it. It was the shin of a leg; the leg was on the floor, foot out toward the door of the closet and the knee and thigh slanted back toward the back of the closet. The upper part of the leg was covered in fallen clothes.

Joyce had found my mother's old artificial leg—stored neatly in the closet. My mother had been going through the fitting for a new leg. When cleaning the floor of the closet, Joyce pushed the vacuum up against the foot of the prosthesis, causing it to fall. It was obviously more than she could handle.

I turned the vacuum cleaner off, picked up the leg and walked toward the den. By the time I got to the den, I was laughing hysterically. When my mother saw me, she knew

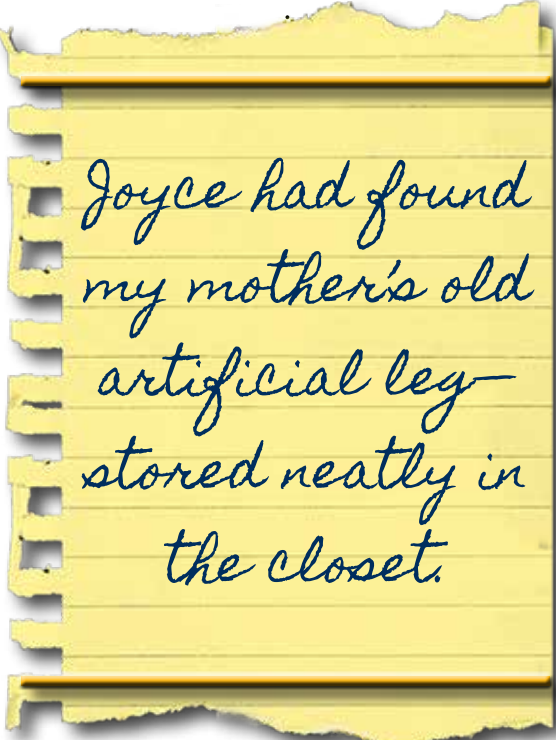
immediately what had happened. I could say nothing—I was about to wet my pants in hysteria! I just stood in front of my mother holding her artificial leg.

But she didn't laugh...in fact, she didn't even smile. To her, it was not funny. In fact, she told me it was not funny. She told me I should be ashamed of myself and to go put the leg up immediately.

When I returned to the den, having put the leg up and stopping by the bathroom for relief, mother told me not to mention this to my father. To make matters worse, she then told me to go finish the chore. So much for my break from vacuuming.

That night, I heard my mother telling my father about the incident after they had gone to bed. I eased into the hall to listen, as I did so often. She was fussing at him for having suggested that we have a maid in the first place. It was horrible, she told him, and she was so embarrassed.

On Monday, Mother picked me up from school and didn't drive straight home. In fact, we were going toward downtown Decatur. I asked where we were going, but she offered no explanation. Soon we were driving into a downtown housing project. I was uneasy—I had been told many times NEVER to ride my bike into projects, as it was not safe. I had only been in the projects one other time, and that was when I had ridden



Joyce had found my mother's old artificial leg—stored neatly in the closet.

with my father to pick up a day-laborer who lived there.

I was somewhat surprised by what I saw. Most of the houses were nice—small, but nice. They seemed to be well kept, and the yards were well groomed. I watched small children playing on the sidewalks—riding bikes, playing baseball and chasing each other.

Hm-m-m-m...just the same games we played after school. But we might as well have been thousands of miles away instead of the two miles that separated our house from the projects.

We soon stopped in front of a duplex. Mother did not pull into the driveway—she seemed very nervous.

The yard was incredible. It had rows of flowers along the walkway that made it look like something out of a magazine, especially if you didn't look too far up the sidewalk to realize that it was a duplex in a housing project. The house was freshly painted with neat trim around the windows and doors.

My mother gave me an envelope with cash in it. She told me to go to the door and give the money to Joyce. I simply stared at my mother in disbelief. We were sitting in front of Joyce's house. How did she know where Joyce lived? I had heard my father argue that they needed the money—this place looked better than ours.

Again, I did not want to go, but she gave me no choice. I don't know why I was ner-

vous, but again, my heart was in my throat. There was no doorbell, but instead a nice, new brass knocker on the door with "The Porters" etched in it.

I slowly raised the knocker and let it fall. It was sooooo loud. I thought I had broken it.

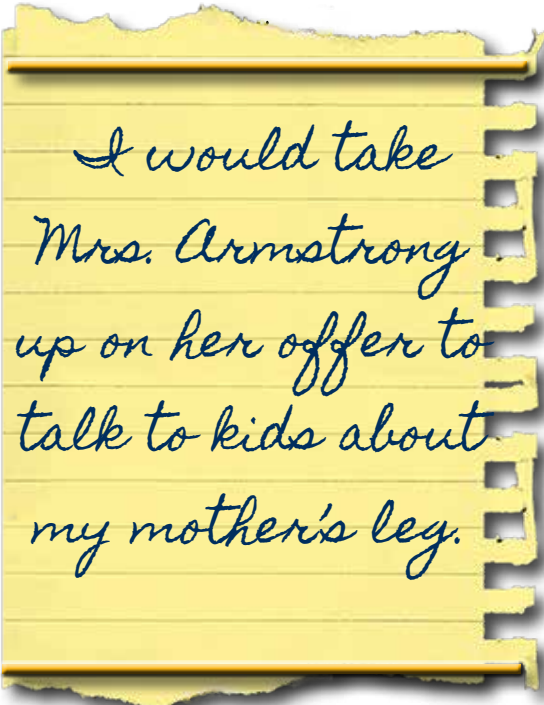
No answer—good, I could leave. I looked back out toward the car. My mother motioned for me to knock again. I reluctantly complied. This time I heard footsteps coming toward the door.

I saw the curtain beside the door move, but I was still not able to see anyone. Then, I heard a voice—it was Joyce. Without opening the door, she asked what

I wanted. I spoke loudly into the door that my mother wanted to pay her for her work. To my surprise, she shouted back to go away. She did not want our money. I quickly ran to the car and jumped in.

Mother seemed puzzled and sad. The envelope of money lay on the seat between us as she slowly drove back toward our house. We said nothing.

The leg incident was not lost on me. I had developed my plan. I would take Mrs. Armstrong up on her offer to talk to kids about my mother's leg. The leg falling out of the closet and scaring Joyce had strangely inspired me to want to talk. I wasn't sure what I would talk about. I wasn't sure I was prepared to tell them about Joyce; about my mother's leg and how she lost it; about how



I would take Mrs. Armstrong up on her offer to talk to kids about my mother's leg.

I had had to learn how to give her physical therapy; about how I had learned to rub my mother's stump with lotion to help increase blood circulation; about how I had to put my mother's leg on every morning before I left for school; about how I couldn't go on scout camping trips on Friday nights because

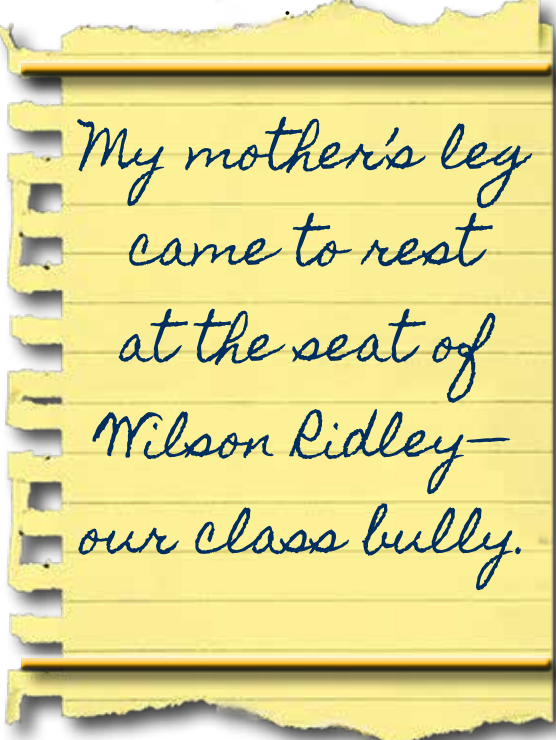
my father went fishing on Saturdays, and I had to put my mother's leg on; or about how I had to vacuum the house every other day, because my mother couldn't. I wasn't sure what I would tell them but it didn't seem to matter as I sneaked the leg out of the house and headed toward the bus stop. I was taking my mother's old leg to school to show, and I didn't have a clue what I

would tell them. I had not completely thought through the process of getting the leg to school. I had taken a black plastic garbage bag from the kitchen to put the leg in. No surprise...it didn't completely fit. Which end should be in the bag and which end should hang out? Walking to the bus stop I decided to put the heavier thigh part of the leg in the bag leaving the foot out in full view.

The kids at the bus stop stood in disbelief. I had a really hard time explaining it to them. I was surprised that most did not know that my mother wore an artificial leg. Had they not been paying attention? Had they not seen her limp? Had they not seen all the things I had to do for her?

I had about decided to abandon the whole idea of my presentation when the bus pulled up. I waited to board last. Juggling my book bag, the garbage bag and the leg, I climbed the steep steps of the bus. The bus driver ignored me as I walked by. He quickly jolted forward before I had a chance to sit down. We were

the next to the last stop, so the bus was almost full. I fell forward as the bus jerked away quickly. I managed to keep my balance almost to the back of the bus when everything I had been carrying became too heavy and too off-balance, and it all tumbled to the floor of the bus. Silence filled the bus as my mother's leg went sliding under seat after seat. It came to rest at the seat of Wilson



*My mother's leg
came to rest
at the seat of
Wilson Ridley—
our class bully.*

Ridley—our class bully. He screeched in disbelief and picked the leg up. I tried to wrestle it from him, but I was no match. He pulled it from my hands and placed it high above his head shouting and announcing to the bus that he had found a leg on the floor.

Before we could get to the next stop, he had the foot part of the leg hanging out of the window. Just as we approached the last stop, we greeted the waiting students with half a leg—out the window.

General chaos filled the bus as we rode the remaining short distance to the school. We arrived at school with the bus rocking and rolling as Wilson led the crowd with my mother's leg!

We entered the school en masse with loud shouts and screams. The teacher on bus duty at the front hallway, Mrs. Smith, snapped into action. She halted the mob by raising her arms in the air as if she was calling on strength from heaven. Everyone fell silent, even Wilson who was leading the crowd with my mother's leg.

She walked slowly toward Wilson and the leg with great authority. She looked over her glasses—first at the leg, now totally out of the bag—and then at Wilson. She asked him where he got it. He nonchalantly explained that it had come sliding under the seats and stopped in front of him. He had merely picked it up to keep it from becoming a problem

on the bus. He explained that he tried to keep everyone calm on the bus, but they would not stop screaming. As if she had handled legs every day, Mrs. Smith reached out and took the leg from Wilson. Reluctantly, he volunteered his find. She then looked up at the crowd, still silent, and asked to whom the leg belonged. I froze.

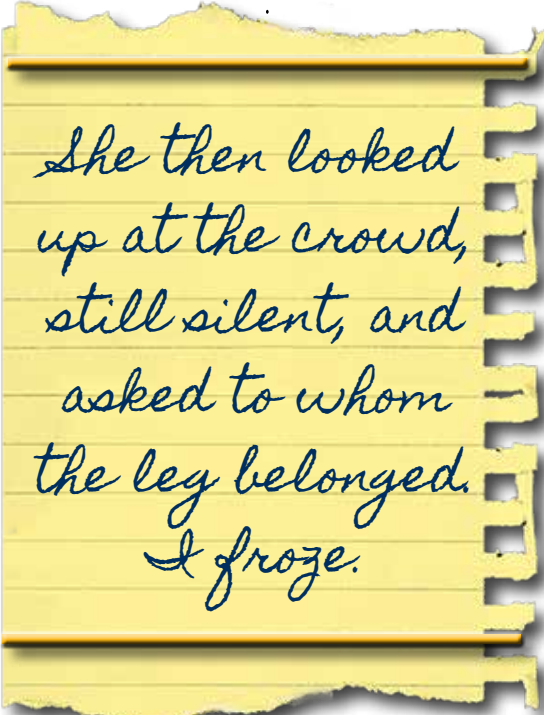
As if moving away from a terrible smell, the students slowly but deliberately moved away from me. The parting mass left me standing directly in front of Mrs. Smith—all alone. Again looking over her glasses, she asked if the leg belonged to me. The best I could muster was—sort of! Without saying anything, her face demanded additional information. I told her it was my mother's and

that Mrs. Armstrong had told me it would be good if I could explain my mother's handicap to the other students.

Still holding the leg, she stood upright and seemed 8 feet tall. She instructed everyone to walk quietly to their classrooms to begin their day of learning. In what seemed like hours, everyone slowly departed down either the upper grade hall or the lower grade hall leaving Mrs. Smith, the leg, and me standing there alone.

Without saying anything, she marched toward the school office with me in tow. She stood at the entrance to the office and told the secretary that she would return shortly. Without turning toward me, she told me we were going to Mrs. Armstrong's room. As we walked down the long, upper-grade hallway, we passed the library, the music room, the 4th grade classrooms, then the 5th and 6th grade classrooms, the exit to the playground, and finally, the 7th grade rooms. As we passed the exit, I thought of bolting—running until I could run no more. However, I didn't, if for no other reason than because I couldn't leave my mother's leg.

The halls were almost empty as school was about to begin. Mrs. Smith opened the door of Mrs. Armstrong's room and out stepped Mrs. Armstrong; her usual smile greeting all three of us. She smiled at Mrs. Smith and said "Good morning" as she took the leg from



She then looked up at the crowd, still silent, and asked to whom the leg belonged. I froze.

Mrs. Smith. She told me to go on inside and have a seat. I walked into a room that was all silence and eyes. I found my seat, put my books away and started immediately on the morning assignment from the board.

Shortly, Mrs. Armstrong came into the room carrying my mother's leg. She placed it on the table in front of the classroom as everyone watched in disbelief. In her usual upbeat voice, she told the class that we would have a special treat at the end of the day. She proceeded to her desk at the back of the room. As she walked by my desk, she smiled, winked, and started calling the attendance roll from memory. Even though I didn't know what would happen that day, I took a deep breath and knew that everything

would be okay. The last 20 minutes of every afternoon in 7th grade was reserved for homework. We did all kinds of things—usually catching up on anything that had been left undone during the day. Looking back now, I know what that last 20 minutes was really for. It was a kind of family time when Mrs. Armstrong taught us lessons that were not in textbooks. She gave us insights into life that were always related to something going on with students. The lesson taught that day in less than 20 minutes was designed entirely for me. Through her kind questioning of me as I stood beside my mother's leg, I became an expert on prosthetic devices explaining how a “suction” leg

worked, how the knee joint was balanced to bend just right as the user walked, how to climb stairs always leading with the “good” leg, how maintaining a healthy stump was very important and most of all just how normal it was to have an artificial leg.

I've often thought back to that period of time in my life, and I now understand how pivotal

that particular moment was in defining the person I would become. I also realize how symbolic and quintessential all of the characters were that were cast in my own little dramedy...the fearful, the bully, the status quo, and the leader who offered encouragement and grace. Throughout my life, I've met the same characters time and time again, all with different

faces and different stories. Mrs. Armstrong, however, will always take the lead as the encourager and tower overall the others in my mind...all five feet of her.



Randy Dobbs went on and followed the passion of Mrs. Armstrong and became a 7th grade teacher as well. He used many of those lessons he had learned in his own 7th grade to guide him in working with his adolescents. After serving in both regular and special education, Randy became a principal and a professor at Georgia State and found an even broader way to use the lessons he had learned.

A graphic of a yellow notepad with a torn top edge and a hole-punch on the left side. The text is written in a blue cursive font.

The lesson taught that day in less than 20 minutes was designed entirely for me.



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My First Ax Murder

by Bill Dockery

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.”

—Romans 8:28 (KJV)

“As we look out on the world around us and try to ‘make sense of it,’ as our mind requires us to do, we find that while some of it does make sense there is another part of it that makes no sense at all, resisting every attempt we make to put it in any light in which it would make sense.”

—Geddes MacGregor

Introduction to Religious Philosophy



In the mid-1970s, I lived in an apartment in an old boarding house in Sevierville, Tennessee, where I worked as a reporter on the local paper. The apartment had a shotgun layout, and I slept on a single-bed mattress and box springs in the middle room, between the kitchen and living room.

My bed sat atop the shag on the floor, and beside it a battered black tin footlocker held my reading lamp, a clock radio, and a phone. On July 4, 1975, a little before 4 a.m. the phone rang, waking me from a deep sleep. The conversation that followed went something like this:

Hello.

Is this Bill Dockery?

It is.

This is Houser from the sheriff’s department. The sheriff wants you to take some pictures at a crime scene. We’ve had the city police knocking on your door.

Sorry, I didn’t hear them. What’s up?

There’s been a horrible crime. We’ve had a murder down on Chapman Highway. I knew Houser, an older man who served as a reserve deputy. The way he emphasized “horrible,” I could imagine his jowls shaking as he rolled the Rs.

OK, I’ll have to go by the office and get my camera. What’s so horrible about it?

A man killed his wife with an ax.



Oh. I'll be right there.

I took down directions, pulled on some clothes and, after a five-minute stop to pick up camera and scratchpad, was on my way down Chapman toward the place where Ruby Rogers lay dead.

At the time, Chapman Highway was the primary route between the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the rest of the world. To accommodate the hundreds of thousands of park visitors every year, it had been four-

laned, but it still drove like a two-lane road, with hard turns and steep hills and unexpected dips that sometimes lured tourists and locals alike into spectacularly fatal crashes. That night in the hours before dawn on the busiest weekend of the year, I had it all to myself. I drove a hand-me-down blue '66 Impala, and I pushed it as fast as the road would allow.

I was not, per se, a photographer. Like all the other reporters and ad salespeople, I carried a twin-lens box camera and a strobe flash, a foolproof setup that let the publisher avoid hiring a professional photographer. I had a pretty good eye and usually came back with a publishable image, but the quality that had made the sheriff send for me that night was much simpler—I made myself available.

The affluence of the '70s had brought a new newspaper to Sevier County to compete with the one I worked for. To make sure that I had the inside on breaking cop stories, I had volunteered to come out any time anywhere to take evidentiary photos for the sheriff's department and the city police department. The offer was popular because, like my publisher, the local sheriff wasn't prepared to spend money on a pro. Over a couple of years, I had become the county's most in-demand

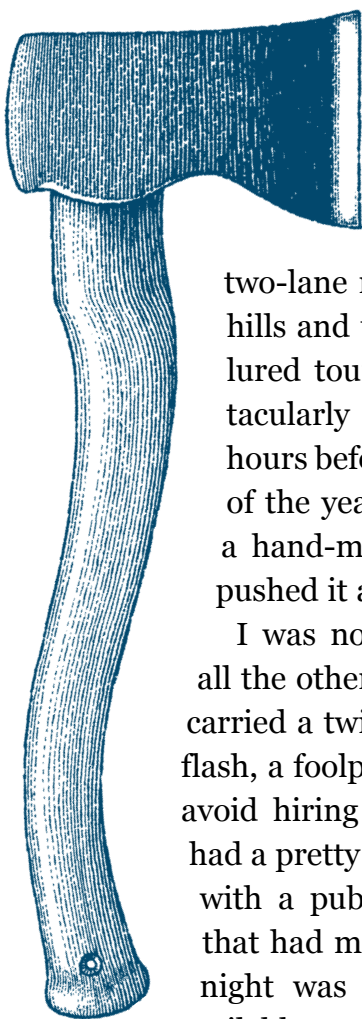
corpse photographer.

Truthfully, I didn't relish the work. Many of the emergency personnel were what I came to know as adrenaline junkies: They flourished in a world of disaster and trauma. Without the possibility of a rescue or the threat of immediate death, they weren't fully alive. Some of the young deputies were motivated by something darker: a morbid energy they gained from the odds and ends of car wrecks and murders, generated, I suspect, by some unconscious notion that the proximity of death made their own life somehow more real. The old hands—the coroner, the sheriff—had from long exposure developed emotional calluses; the coroner was infamous for lighting up a rancid cigar while inspecting a death scene.

For me, however, each new instance of violent death was a little harder than the last. This time, as I took the curves on Chapman, I wondered whether an ax murder would be more than I could bear.

A second motive drove me to this gruesome volunteer work. Even though state laws required that police records be open to public and press, in practice the authorities didn't normally make their dispatch logs and blotters available unless they saw some immediate political benefit. A reporter who wasn't present at the crime scene often found himself shut off from vital details of a case, unable to ask crucial questions that would help the reader make sense of the event. The circumstances produced a companionable mistrust on both sides, with neither officer nor journalists entirely comfortable conspiring with the enemy but both needing the products of that conspiracy for their own purposes.

Just a couple of miles short of the Seymour community, I came on a collection of flashing



blue and red lights. The emergency vehicles were collected in front of a country market and gas station on a straightaway before the four-lane dipped abruptly into a hollow and climbed the steepest hill on the route. I stopped along the shoulder far enough away so that my car wouldn't be in the way and couldn't be blocked in. Camera in hand, I approached a huddle of deputies.

"General Schmutzer is looking for you," one of them said, pointing up a gravel driveway that went up the embankment on the right side of the road. I climbed the drive toward a modest ranch-style house that overlooked the highway. Schmutzer, the district attorney general, separated himself from another cluster of officers and approached me.

"We'll do the house first." He guided me into the garage, systematically pointing out details he wanted photos of. The bottom half of the door into the kitchen was wood; the top half was small panes of glass. The varnished wood near the handle was scored with several long shallow scratches. I focused the camera as best I could in the dim light and shot a couple of frames.

"This is where the mother tried to get in to stop the fight." Schmutzer picked up a brush ax nearby. "This is the murder weapon."

The ax wasn't the typical wood-chopping wedge. Mounted on an ax handle, the blade was of thin steel, maybe eight inches long and five wide, built to cut through undergrowth without getting lodged in a thick sapling the way a traditional ax would. I took more

pictures of the blade.

Schmutzer led me past the kitchen to the bathroom. A hand mirror in a metal frame lay broken, and there were blood stains on it and around the lavatory. I shot photos, each shot punctuated by the whine of the strobe as it recharged for the next flash.

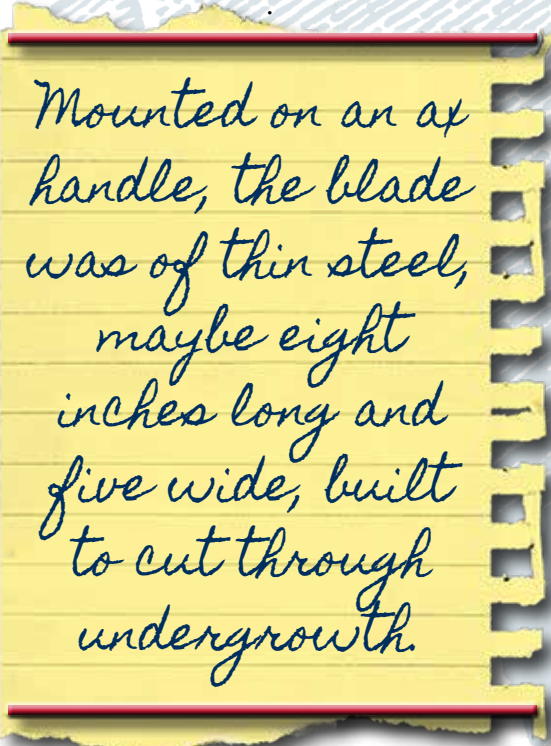
We moved to the bedroom, which was in serious disarray. "Here is where the fight apparently started."

We went out the back, where the screen on the bedroom was askew. "The mother tried to get in here." Schmutzer turned. "Now let's go down to the road."

Ruby Rogers lay crumpled in the middle of Chapman Highway. I had steeled myself for a grisly scene, with detached body parts and

unimaginable wounds; but on the dark pavement she looked little different from victims of car wrecks and other less horrific violence. She was wearing a nightie and step-ins, and her chubby flesh, where it wasn't slashed, was an almost translucent white. The wounds in her arms and legs were deep, dark, red cuts that seemed to swallow light. Around her the asphalt was black with shiny, gelatinous blood. The flashing lights from the emergency vehicles increased the darkness through the viewfinder and, in order to focus the camera, I had to have Schmutzer train a flashlight on different parts of her body as I shot from a variety of angles, trying to render clinically accurate images of the scene.

The photos taken, I pulled out my scratchpad and pen and turned to a senior deputy.



Mounted on an ax handle, the blade was of thin steel, maybe eight inches long and five wide, built to cut through undergrowth.

"Who did this?" I asked.

"Donald Rogers. Her husband. He's in the cruiser."

I looked toward a nearby patrol car. A frail old man with wispy white hair sat blankly in the backseat, not looking around, as if he didn't know what was happening to him.

The story the investigators pieced together was straightforward enough.

Donald and Ruby Rogers, both natives of the community, had lived quietly and apparently quite happily until that night. Donald, 70, had been a truck driver in Alcoa. He had a couple of grown children and had been widowed. By all accounts, he was known as a quiet, upstanding man. Ruby, an Ogle before she married him, was 49 and an inspector at Standard Knitting Mills in Knoxville. She had never been married before.

Sometime after they went to bed the night of July 3, a loud argument broke out. Ruby's mother, who lived in a singlewide trailer in a corner of the yard, was awakened by the row and came around the hill to help her daughter. Apparently alarmed at what she was hearing, she picked up a bush ax somewhere and ran to the bedroom window. She took a couple of ineffectual swings at the aluminum screen, bending it but not gaining entry.

Blade in hand, she hurried back to the garage. The kitchen door was locked so she swung at it several times, again to no effect.

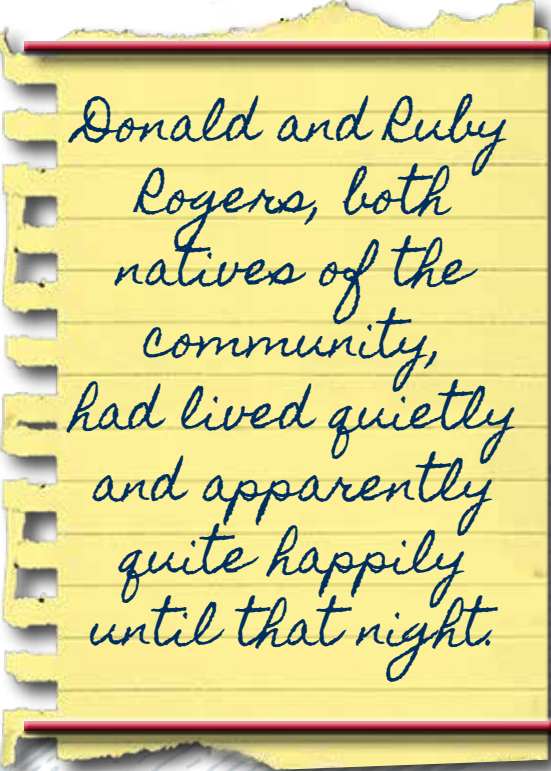
She leaned the ax against the wall beside the door and started back to the bedroom window, but the Rogerses were moving in her direction.

Ruby burst out the door, followed closely by Donald, who reached out for the ax as if it had been placed there specifically for his use. The mother put herself between her daughter and her son-in-law in an attempt to stop the fight. Donald told her to move, that he wouldn't hurt her if she got out of his way. When she did, Donald chased Ruby down the drive.

He caught up with her in the middle of the highway and killed her. When sheriff's deputies arrived, he was sitting passively on the steps of his small front porch. He had thrown the ax in the shrubs nearby.

Several of the deputies, including Houser's son, Steve, lived in the surrounding community, and the consensus was that the old man was a good man, and that she was a good woman. No one had anything bad to say about him, just that he was unusually quiet,

a man of few words. The prevailing theory that he had simply gone off, that arteries had imperceptibly hardened until he was no longer living in quite the same world as the rest of us. A couple of us pondered the irony that, in taking the bush ax to the door, the mother had provided her son-in-law with the weapon that killed her child. It was all the more ironic that, if gaining entry to the house would have helped anything, all the mother had to do was break the glass in the door, reach through, and unlock it.



Donald and Ruby Rogers, both natives of the community, had lived quietly and apparently quite happily until that night.

I wrapped up my note-taking and reached into my pocket for some ammonia. I had made smelling salts a standard part of my gear after covering an exceptionally gruesome Corvette wreck on Highway 66 and almost fainting on the drive back to town. Normally, my squeamishness was amusing to other regulars at these macabre gatherings, but Sandy, one of the sheriff's senior deputies, saw me pop and sniff the ampule. Sheepishly he held out his hand.

On the drive back to town, I decided not to go back to my apartment. I felt wrung out, convinced I should feel something but unsure what. With dawn close, I went to my parents' house. I let myself in quietly and lay down in the bedroom that had been mine and my brother's. I intended to sleep late, since it was a holiday, but was up at 7 a.m.

"A 72-year-old man is being held by the Sevier County Sheriff's Department after the body of his 49-year-old wife was found in the southbound lane of U.S. Highway 441..."

The *News-Record* was published twice a week at that time. The Friday edition had published Thursday evening the night of the murder, so the Rogers story couldn't run until the following Tuesday. In keeping with the publisher's sensitivity to community mores, I underplayed the sensational details, and the story ran at the top of page three in the front section, trumped for page-one display by stories about the county school board's financial plans, the sheriff's seizure of 5,600 marijuana

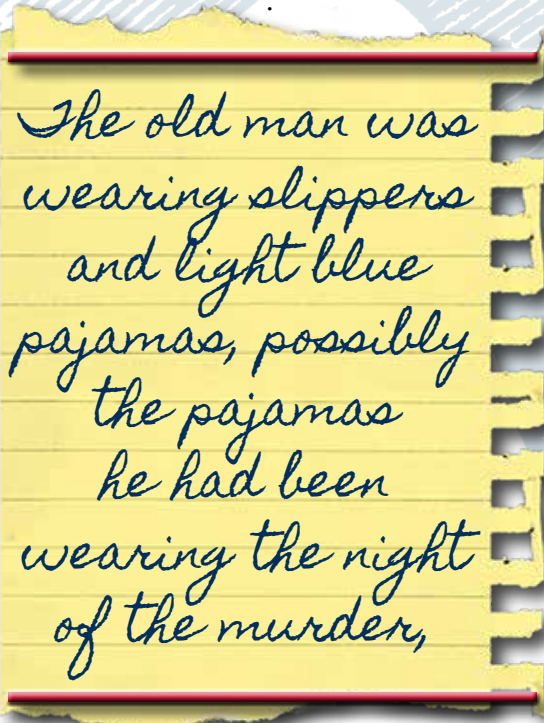
plants, a tentative property tax rate of \$3.38, and the departure of a prominent physician from Gatlinburg.

Later that week, Donald Rogers appeared in the county's trial justice court for a preliminary hearing to determine whether there was reason to hold him for trial. His sons had hired a crackerjack local lawyer to represent their father. Jerry Galyon had roots in the Knob Creek community and had known the various Rogerses most of his life. Prone to a pompadour and big-plaid sport coats, Galyon made a more-than-comfortable living in tort liability suits, and a savvier counselor didn't often appear before the state bar.

Rogers wasn't in the courtroom at first, as Trial Justice Judge Edwards ran through more mundane DUIs, misdemeanors, and minor felonies. When the case was finally called, deputies led him in. The old man was wearing slippers and light blue pajamas, possibly the pajamas he had been wearing the night of the murder, and his white

hair was still tousled. Mentally I chalked a tick for Galyon—usually when defense counsel arranges for the client to be cleaned up and dressed presentably in slacks and a sport shirt, or even a suit. But Rogers showed little recognition that he knew he was sitting in a public courtroom in his nightclothes—or why.

The hearing was over quickly. Galyon didn't try to argue that Rogers hadn't killed his wife. Instead the lawyer asked for a psychiatric evaluation. Schmutzer, the attorney general, readily agreed to the need for the exam, and



The old man was wearing slippers and light blue pajamas, possibly the pajamas he had been wearing the night of the murder,

the judge ordered Rogers to Eastern State Psychiatric Hospital in Knoxville.

I caught up with Galyon after the hearing, knowing that he would have a version of events favorable to his client. I wasn't disappointed. *"He thought someone was coming for her,"* Galyon said. *"You know how old men get. Someone turned around in their driveway about three o'clock, and he thought*

going to need them. Besides, we took some shots at the funeral home after the coroner got her cleaned up. We're OK."

Later I talked to the radio newsman who had shot the coroner's pictures. On the slab, Ruby Rogers had not looked like just another wreck victim. The ax had damaged her much more than was apparent on the dimly-lit roadway. One blow had virtually cut off the top of her head a couple of inches above the eyebrows.

With no one seriously doubting the appropriateness of an insanity defense, the case quickly faded from legal and public attention. Rogers was sent off to Nashville's Central State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

After another year, I abandoned chasing police cars and went to Nashville, too, fading from East Tennessee journalism into a better-paying editorial position on a United Methodist devo-

tional magazine. But the residue of that Independence Day remained with me—not in the physical horror of the butchery I had witnessed—but as a fundamental challenge to the way I understood the world.

I had grown up in Sevierville's First Baptist Church, where I had breathed in a piety that put God at the center of all history, the ultimate sparrow-watcher whose purpose was present, if not evident, in even the most trivial incident.

By the time I was leaving high school, my devotion had begun to fray around the edges. At the Southern Baptist college I attended, I was forced to confront some of the contradictions inherent in a literal approach to



The Rogers' house and driveway

they were coming to pick her up. That's what started it.

"I can tell you the people who were in that car. I can tell you where they had been and where they were going next. They had nothing to do with it. He just went off. He thought someone was coming for her."

I left Galyon to visit the attorney general's office and deliver a piece of bad news. The photos I had painstakingly shot had not turned out. One of the ad salespeople had messed with the synchronization on the camera I had used, so that the camera's shutter and the flash weren't working together. There was nothing of that night to see.

"Don't worry," Schmutzer said. *"We're not*

Scripture. I was growing out of a denomination that, at its most literal, believed neither in dinosaurs nor in dancing.

I had already begun to question, at least in theory, the notion that everything works together for good. I had seen and railed against the injustices of the Vietnam War and was growing more aware of the six million Jews systematically killed by the Nazis in World War II.

Still, on an emotional level, I think I still clung to the Sunday school notion of traumatic events—that for every overwhelming event there was some understanding of it that would redeem it for the people who survived it, some arcane knowledge or circumnavigation of logic that would make it just another instance of God’s positive intervention in life.

Ruby Rogers’ death made that approach untenable. It was difficult to imagine anything, that might redeem for Ruby those moments when she ran screaming into the middle of a highway in her night-dress, a step ahead of a husband she thought she knew who was swinging an ax at her head. And there wasn’t any more favorable interpretation of events that would comfort her family or her demented husband or his sons.

Oddly, the term that came to my mind soon after the murder was one I had learned in a philosophy course at the Baptist college. The Rogers event was nothing less than a dysteleological surd, a concept from “*Introduction to Religious Philosophy*,” by Geddes MacGregor. A Scotsman, MacGregor was less a philosopher than a Christian apologist, someone we

liberal undergraduates dismissed scornfully as less than rigorous.

But the term fit. “*Dysteleological*” meant “*meaningless*” or “*without purpose*,” and a “*surd*” was an irreducible point, something which couldn’t be parsed or dissected. There was no way my former Baptist brethren could explain away the suffering of the Rogerses that made it meaningful.

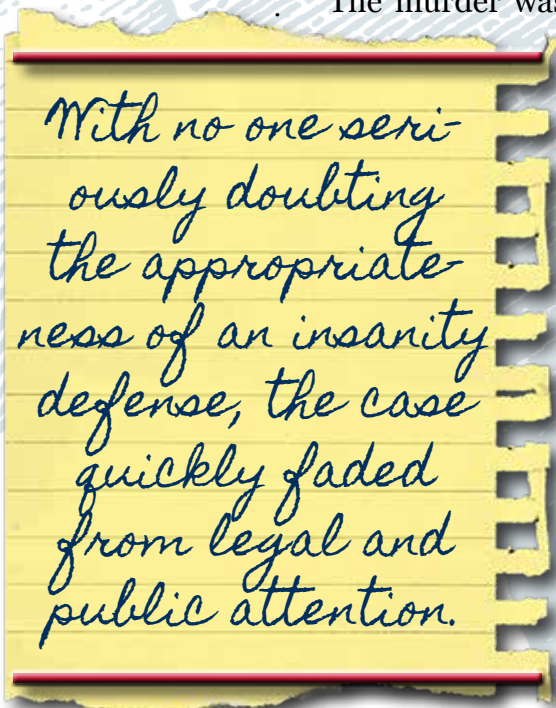
The murder was a black hole of meaning, sucking in any explanatory moves toward redemption. I was free of the notion that all things work together for good. I wasn’t even sure all things work together.

The murder also dealt another, although by no means the final, blow to my intrinsic trust of consciousness and rationality.

In my life as a Baptist, I had lived confident that, if you knew the right, you could invariably do it. Once you had made a decision for Christ, once you were saved, all you had to do to live a righteous life was make the right decisions. It was easy. All the major decisions were open to conscious inspection and rational choice.

I had also spent some time in therapy, so I knew that neither the world nor the people in it were rational and that consciousness does not guarantee true seeing. Yet invariably I slipped back into the self-deceit that, if I didn’t control the world, at least I controlled my self.

The little drama played out between Ruby and Donald reminded me once more that I might be proceeding in my nice, orderly life, making wise choices and planning for the



With no one seriously doubting the appropriateness of an insanity defense, the case quickly faded from legal and public attention.

future, and still kill somebody.

Nature, it turns out, abhors a dysteleological surd. What first appears irreducibly meaningless will accrete significance the way a gravestone collects lichen.

Thus, my first ax murder has stayed with me, reminding me every time I pass a certain spot on Chapman Highway how very little I control.

I visited Zion Hill Baptist Church on a recent Saturday in February, a blustery afternoon that blew hot or cold, depending on how often swatches of clouds blotted out the sun.

The staff of Sevier County Public Library's genealogy department had pointed me to the cemetery of the church where both Donald and Ruby Ogle Rogers were buried, and I had come to pay my final respects.

The church is a solid-looking red brick structure on a knoll above the creek bottom with two terraced asphalt parking lots in a semicircle below it. A substantial flight of steps leads to the front door, and to one side an equally substantial but more recent concrete-and-brick ramp gives handicap access to the sanctuary.

The burying ground further up the hill predates the current church building by at least a century and a half. The older part, near the church, is dominated by a couple of tall cedars and an oak or two. Spread around them are the final resting places for whole lineages of Ogles and Galyons, Rogerses and Ballards, with an occasional Cutshaw thrown in for

good measure. The birthdates range from the early 1800s forward, the more recent the birth, the farther from the church.

Donald Rogers lies just inside the gravel road that circles the older part of the cemetery. His rock is highly polished blue-gray granite with the customary scrollwork and flourishes that mark modern gravestones.

He died on January 24, 1984, the stone says, and information from funeral records indicates that he died at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute in Knoxville.

Beside him on his right hand lies Zack Ogle, evidently his first wife, who died in the late 1950s. Nothing marks the burial as different from any of the other graves around it. Whatever demons drove

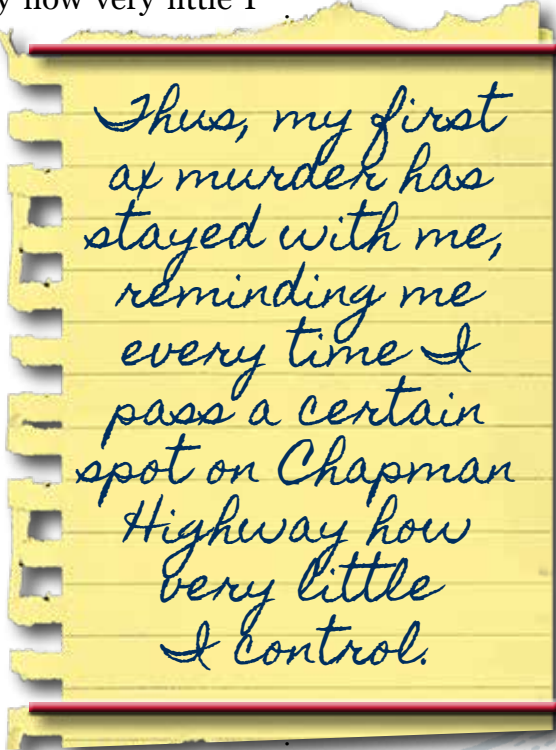
Donald Rogers are at rest with him.

There's no sign of Ruby Rogers' stone, and genealogists at the library indicate that she may be buried nearby in an unmarked grave.

Leaving the cemetery, I decided to visit the scene of the crime once more. I followed the same route I'd taken more than a quarter century before and soon came to the house and the small market across the road.

More small houses and mobile homes dotted nearby hillsides and I gingerly pulled up the steep driveway, hoping not to have to explain myself to an owner or neighbor.

The structure was pretty much as I remembered it. The brick had been painted cream and an ell had been added on the back that



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enclosed a patio. The porch on the front had been screened in. The one-car garage door was still there, as was the door beside it. I shot a couple of digital photos and started to leave.

“Are you lost? Can I help you?” A woman waved at me from the patio. Her voice had a Midwestern twang, the dialect that puts “CAHN” in the pronunciation of Wisconsin.

I put on the emergency brake and got out of the truck, keeping my hands in view. “No,” I said, “I used to know some people who lived here. They were Rogerses. They lived here in the ’70s.”

“I’ve just been here five years. I heard there was a Rogers family. The place was in bad shape when I bought it. Are you a real estate agent?”

“No, Ma’am. I was just seeing what the place looked like after all these years. I knew the people who lived here once.”

“If you were a real estate agent, I’d run you off. The real estate agents are always stopping by. They want to sell it for me. You’re welcome if you are not a real estate agent.”

I got back in the truck and rolled backward down the drive. At the bottom, I crossed traffic precariously to pull into the market parking lot. A nearby house had been turned into obviously unprofitable retail space, but the market looked pretty much the same.

I stepped to the edge of the four-lane and snapped off a couple of more shots. Nothing about the spot indicated the events that had gone on a quarter century ago.

The red clay embankment below the house had become overgrown with trash shrubs

and undergrowth.

I was getting back into the truck, when a man started stepping toward me purposefully. Thinking I was about to face another barrage of questions about my picture-taking, I got half way out of the truck.

“Buddy, I just spent my last sixty dollars fixing my truck and my family’s got a place to stay if I can get them to Maryville. His twang echoed that of the home owner on the other side of the road. Can you spare me a little money to help me get them there?”

Marveling for a moment that I had just been panhandled by a guy from Michigan at a country store in Sevier County, I found a dollar bill in my pocket and handed it to him, grateful that peace came so cheap.

Then I got back in the truck and pulled out onto the highway toward Knoxville, driving over the spot where Donald Rogers killed Ruby Rogers.



Bill Dockery was an East Tennessee writer, editor, publications manager, and photographer. He and Dolly Parton marched together in the Sevier County High School band’s drum line in the mid-1960s. He served as reporter for the Sevier County News-Record, science writer for the University of Tennessee, and editorial writer for the Knoxville News Sentinel. Bill passed away April 6, 2024.

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XII

Only Time Will Tell

by John Marshall Lancaster

G

rowing up Lancaster, North Carolina in the '70s was quite an experience. Initially, I was quite confused. Our groceries came from Roanoke Rapids, N.C., our mail from Littleton, N.C., but I was raised at a bustling rural crossroads halfway between them called Aurelian Springs, where much farming took place, as I understood by the equipment and tractors at the country stores.

Sadly, I never saw the gold or the spring water comprising the Aurelian Springs. We attributed much of our coming of age to Disney cartoons at least until *Jaws* and *Saturday Night Fever* arrived at the theater. Influenced by his peers, my father felt that he could supplement his income by being a peddler of secondhand things. I was in fourth grade when he started taking me with him to the weekly flea market in Raleigh, N.C. at the State Fairgrounds.

The term, *Yard Sale* was literal enough, but why would you call this place a *Flea Market*? Dad figured, like many in his age group, that every man needed a side hustle, a second income stream. This was a gigantic flea market where vendors would set up early in the morning, buy coffee, and while away the whole day, selling their wares and various junk, often until dark. The name of the game was *buy cheap, sell expensive, and keep the overhead low*. It was a crash course in profits.

In the mid to late 1970s, when I was around ten, my father's thoughts turned to becoming a collector and speculating about profits. Our garage was loaded with *stuff*, everything but the family car. *Stuff* was a good name for things whose value was yet to be determined.

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IA



Eventually, you might discover their value, but for now, you had to hold on to them.

You had all this space in the garage for storage: axe handles, toy cars, ceramic figurines in neat little boxes, and various types of rolled upholstery. Most of his wares he had bought from a cousin in southeastern Virginia. Dad must have figured someone would buy these things and on occasion they did. My father had at least one foot in the flea market/yard sale world for the duration of my youth. In fact, my first record player, used but functional, came replete with a forty-five of Cat Stevens's "Peace Train." Sadly, the needle barely worked.

One Sunday, my father befriended an older gentleman across the fence from my grandfather's house in Weldon, N.C., and then this man mysteriously appeared at our dinner table one night in 1977.

He had fought in the war, World War II, to be exact.

Dad called him Mr. Whitehead, so I did, too, when I was allowed to speak to him. He was close to a generation older than my father. It appeared to me that Mr. Whitehead was an older man looking for friends in his older years, and he seemed to be a bit of a loner. He surely enjoyed the time that he spent with us, and my mother went to great lengths to feed him well when he came to visit—always a dining room occasion with candles and dim lighting for some reason.

What was that about? I ate all my meals at a little table right off the kitchen. Before I had known anything, Mr. Whitehead was bringing over old weapons and handing them over to my father. *Why?*

"These are for you, Sankey." Mr. Whitehead told my father, handing over a sword from some war and a couple of "flintlock" firearms. Even a novice would tell you that these

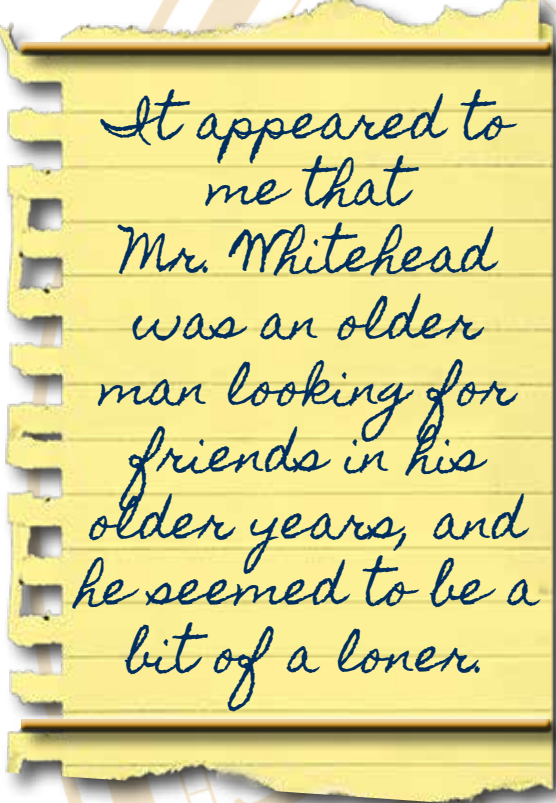
firearms held great value. One of these had a barrel like a bugle and fancy designs. Were they medieval or from the last one-hundred years? Had Mr. Whitehead used these? How would we know? Hopefully, they were not reproductions.

He would not spend time with a family, break bread at their table, and then hand them over reproductions, would he? A phrase of Dad's which continued to reverberate in my head was "*It's not*

what you know; it's who you know."

Maybe he was right. He had known Mr. Whitehead only a short while and here this man was handing cherished weapons over to my father. Had he merited such generosity? Kindness pays I guess, and the family had that by the barrel. Did Mr. Whitehead not have his own relatives to provide heirlooms?

As years went on, Dad showed friends and relatives these weapons with the greatest of pride. You would have thought that there, square in the middle of nowhere, N.C., where two roads crossed near three country stores,



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one defunct, and an aging elementary school, he was about to open his own museum. I had never seen a face light up like his. He would show the weapons off, using all the mannerisms of David Copperfield the magician or the smooth tactics of P.T. Barnum's tight-rope walkers.

I wasn't sure if those receiving this "tour," which had become common, were enamored of what they saw—these old weapons—or Dad's enthusiastic presentation. Mr. Whitehead passed only a few years after we met him.

My father attended his funeral and always spoke fondly of him to others who had heard about him or vaguely knew him. Mr. Whitehead had not been one for large groups of people. Meanwhile, Dad had wrapped these weapons in fine silky cloth with snug rubber bands. They remained safely out of sight in his closet until it was time for the next showing.

Out of nowhere, with the weapons safely ensconced in their places, Dad's new interest became clocks. We had inherited one from a neighbor after my mother spent weeks caring for her in her final years. *Was it possible to pay someone for services rendered with an antique clock?* That sounded medieval to me, almost like performing back surgery in return for five chickens. What stood out for me on this clock was that the numbers two and seven were exactly the same, the seven being a flipped version of the two. We had inher-

ited another antique clock from my mother's side of the family. This was an elegant black wooden clock with inlaid gold parts: a circular gold face, four Corinthian columns of various sizes flanking the face, and four gold feet. This clock had its own key for winding, and in my youth it would chime every hour on the hour until Dad decided that we did not need the interruptions. Essentially, the clock was for

looks. It sat lonely but stately on a mantle looking out over all of our family activities: dining, watching TV, shooting the breeze, playing cards, and cooking meals. Given its architecture, if I may use that term, it appeared to be something from ancient Greece or Rome, dignified and extravagant. The columns said it all. As with the weapons, Dad was convinced that this clock was going to

make us rich. For now, though, one must display it on the mantle and wait.

"There is no telling what that thing is worth—a pretty penny for sure," Dad often gloated aloud, making that face he often made of great delight. You could almost see him counting the bills. In his mind we were coming into some cash should this clock prove authentic.

For some time, it sat on the mantle until Dad was in touch with a famous clock repairman in Littleton. At twelve, I had no idea that there were people whose profession involved fixing clocks. I did not realize so many timepieces could be in a state of disrepair. The

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hyperbolic way that my father carried on speaking of this man's skills made an impression on me. His first name was Steve, but time and a foggy memory have erased his last name. My father took the clock to Steve for minor maintenance, and when we got it back several weeks later, it was working. Dad talked about Steve like he was a wizard, a man who knew his clocks inside and out. You would have thought my father had known Steve for years, given how he carried on. For at least a couple of years, Dad listened for the boisterous gong of that clock at every hour. It was almost as if Dad himself were decreeing the time in the event that you had not been conscious of the hour. If you were in denial about the time, he would ask, "You heard the clock, didn't you? It's ten o'clock."

At the time, I could only imagine Chicago singing: "Does anybody really know what time it is? (Care) Does anybody really care?"

In the '70s, Steve Miller offered a sage observation about time keeping on *slipping, slipping, slipping* into the future. You couldn't really see it, but that is what it was doing—slipping, stealthily.

Culture Club once complained in the '80s that Time wouldn't give them Time.

Even in the '90s, *Hootie and the Blowfish* once asked Time if it could teach about tomorrow.

So the warnings of time's passage had been

there all along, but we had been ignoring them, not even really that cognizant. Time is said to fly when you are having fun. Then it was flying!

Time, after all, was a bit like fate; whether you liked it or not, it was ten o'clock, and there was nothing you could do about it. These hours and minutes had to be measured. You were using time to your advantage or, regretfully, you were not. It was up to you. What do you have to show for hours passed? Does eleven o'clock judge those who are privy to the gong of this clock? Had you frittered the night away on small talk, or did you really have something to show for it? The clock was there to let you know. Dad savored his role as Time's messenger.

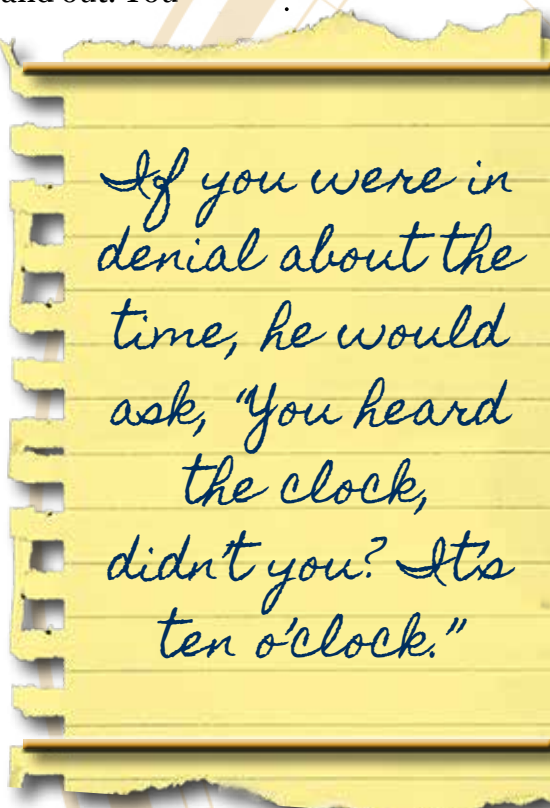
"Lord, have mercy! It's eleven o'clock (he said in great disbelief), and we need to let you guys go to bed!" the neighborhood visitors would often say.

"I love your clock, Sankey," others would add.

"That thing is a curiosity. It's worth a lot of money," Dad often said, grinning ear to ear.

Even back then we figured the clock was about a hundred years old. With great relish he told the story of that clock, at least what he knew about it. He enjoyed taking the key out of a special envelope and winding the clock up.

Whether on clock faces or human faces,



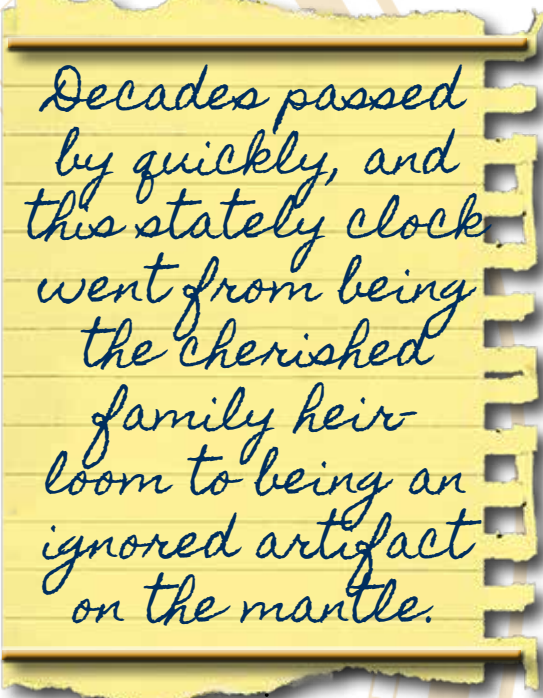
Time is the great Adjudicator. Time cannot be stopped. Decades passed by quickly, and this stately clock went from being the cherished family heirloom to being an ignored artifact on the mantle. People stopped asking about it for the most part, and Dad stopped talking about it. The years passed, and I found myself a married man with two young daughters.

“Yeah, it’s old” was about all that you would get out of my father concerning the clock. The story did not have one quarter of the gravitas that it once had. It might have still held a place in his heart, but he never talked much about it in later decades.

After sadly losing my parents in the 2010s, followed by my younger brother (the latter on July first of 2022 to cancer), the choice was mine as to what to do with not only this antique clock but the home where it resided. Yes, both held great sentimental value, and that was reason enough to hold on to them. *What if the clock really was worth a lot of money?*

Doing right by the family meant never selling the clock. It had silently loomed large when many an important conversation was had in that den. It stood back silently (except the chiming) while the ebb and flow of life proceeded for everyone in the family. We spent much of July and August of 2022 cleaning out the old family home and adjoining fabric shop (a small business my parents operated), where my brother had stored over two decades’ worth of his personal belongings

and where many relics from my youth sat awaiting a decision on their fate. The pressing concern became what to do with the family home. My wife and I made numerous clean-out trips by car back and forth from our home in Maryland, enlisting the help of relatives whenever we came back to the tiny town—the crossroads where I grew up (Aurelian Springs, N.C.).



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I had already discovered that the sword was not worth nearly as much as we had figured. I had handed it over to a specialist in medieval weapons while in grad school. This surely was not medieval as the engraved date had suggested. The date belonged to the Islamic calendar. Suddenly, it was proven to be a fairly modern sword from the twentieth century. My father sold the two other

weapons, flintlock firearms, to a family friend without checking in with his sons first. This was no accident. He knew that our reaction to his plan to sell the weapons would have been unfavorable. But he sold them anyway for a price I have never heard mentioned. Three or four stiff drinks might have been the culprit. I wonder now if a museum would have been interested in the weapons. We were lucky that the antique clock did not suffer a similar fate.

On the last trip down to N.C. that we would make that summer, in mid-August, we had arranged the closing on the sale of my old family home. A young couple had shown great interest. On this last trip, the car was filled

with furniture, knickknacks, and this famous antique clock. We had done our part of the paperwork at the attorney's office, but were still struggling sentimentally with the decision we'd made to sell the house and wishing for some sign that we were doing the right thing. No one was forcing us to sell it. But this nice young couple had shown serious interest throughout the summer, and that had made us feel good, envisioning another family there to love and nurture it. It would be in good hands.

My wife and I got a quick lunch while waiting for the attorney's office to call and confirm that the buyers' paperwork had been completed and the sale was a done deal.

The call came, and about fifteen seconds after we hung up, the clock, completely out of nowhere, having not chimed in at least forty years, chimed loudly, three times! We had our answer in the affirmative (three votes)! There's our sign! *I had not heard this clock chime in decades!*

We were bewildered at the occurrence of the chiming, but also confident and reassured. *Had we witnessed or heard something miraculous?* We think so. We have continued to see that moment as my parents and brother giving their blessing for all things related to the sale of the house. We sold the house without looking back once except at thousands of happy memories.

It is a story that my wife and I cannot stop

telling. In order for this clock to have chimed, it would need to have been wound. We had not wound it. The key remained in its special envelope and was never removed.

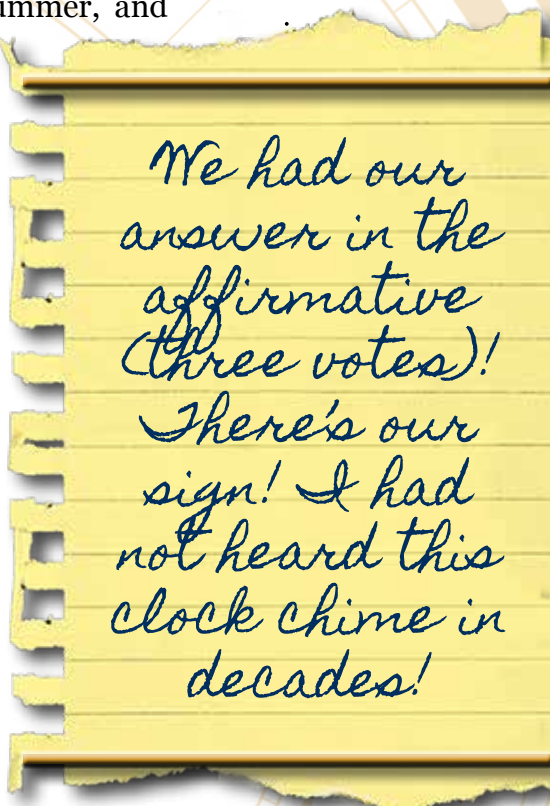
Like my father, we had taken some interest in the value of the clock, having heard stories all of my life, but no one was preparing for an early retirement. A clock repair shop in Kensington, Maryland said that, as is, the clock might be worth three-hundred dollars and refurbished to fully functioning it might be worth five-hundred. That was several digits less than what I wanted to hear!

Nevertheless, I will continue to guard this clock as a valuable heirloom, especially after the three chimes we heard in the car as we pondered the fate of the old family home. Going forward, I have vowed to take all clocks more seriously. *Is it possible that these old clocks measure so much more than time? Might they have a record function?*

The thing about old clocks is often they can fade into the woodwork, especially if we let them, but often they would prefer to be the elephant in the room or the chorus in the back seat of a car.



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





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