

Vol. 3, Number 1

Spring 2003

Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

Bigfoot Lives! The Southern Link

*Sightings from the Pacific
Northwest to a Carolina bar*

40 to Life With the Girl Next Door

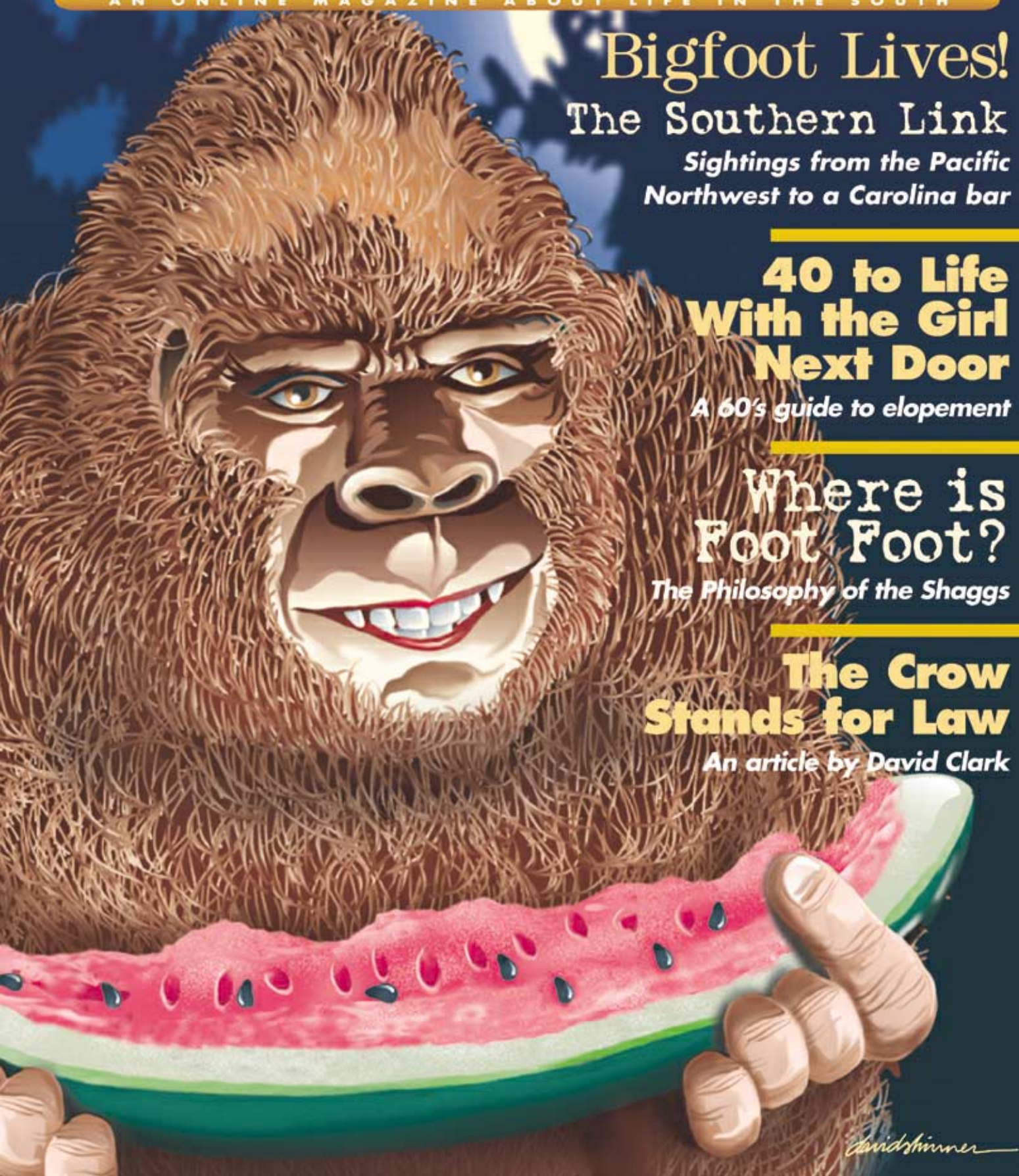
A 60's guide to elopement

Where is Foot Foot?

The Philosophy of the Shaggs

The Crow Stands for Law

An article by David Clark



David Skinner

Slowly Fading Into the Myth

The reality is, Bigfoot just died.” This simple statement, which was issued last December by no less than Bigfoot’s own son, hit me like a tree falling in a distant forest.

The person letting the ape out of the bag was a man named Michael Wallace (where is *60 Minutes* when you really need them?). Wallace and his family and friends had been sworn to secrecy by Bigfoot himself, a.k.a. Ray L. Wallace, the family patriarch. When the big man

they leave hanging on the passenger-side door handles of innocent smoochers?

And what about the haunted railroad tracks of Chapel Hill, Tennessee? How exactly did they manage to have the headless brakeman swing his lantern from one side of our stranded-on-the-tracks station-wagon through the gaggle of hysterical teenagers trapped inside to the other side of the car and on down the tracks? And did he ever find that elusive head?

And, more important, what about the strange and incredible legend of *The Shaggs* of New England and what really happened to their pal, Foot Foot?

When my friend Ben Greene (who lives north of our great Northwest, the assumed “stomping” grounds of the recently departed) mentioned



passed last November at the age of 84, the decades-old veil of mystery was finally lifted for the Wallace clan.

And even though I never met the man or the legend, I felt a wave of sorrow. If Bigfoot was truly gone, what does this mean for our other favorite myths?

For example, what about the crazy *Hookman* of Nashville’s Percy Warner Park? I later learned that he had dozens of copycat cousins. Just how many hooks did

that he, himself had a story of a Bigfoot sighting, this issue of *SouthernReader* began to move in a certain direction.

Ben’s essay, however, like the poor, misguided Chapel Hill brakeman, arrived headless via email. “What the heck should

I call it?” he asked.

“How about ‘My Pal Foot Foot?’” I replied, referring to an obscure song by the afore-mentioned *Shaggs*. Obscure as it was, I figured Ben would remember hearing the song in the musty confines of my Brooklyn apartment in the early 80’s. (Nobody ever forgot that song once they heard it.)

Ben’s response was quick and strange. When he emailed me his Bigfoot story, he had also sent a copy to his former roommate in North Carolina, both for his feedback and because he had referenced him in the article. Here is how his former roommate replied: “Great stuff. I thought for sure you might call it ‘My Pal Foot Foot,’ though the homage to *The Shaggs* would likely be lost on many.”

I told Ben that some things were meant to be. Although we elected to use a different head, the “Foot Foot” subhead would be perfect for this issue’s article about *The Shaggs*.

“And by the way,” I added in my return email to Ben, “I finished the Bigfoot cover illustration one day to the minute before I read the article with Michael Wallace’s “Bigfoot is Dead” statement.

Sometimes truth is stranger than myths.

David Skinner

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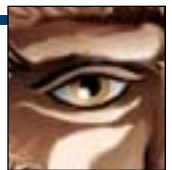
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SouthernReader

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Me and My Big Foot

An essay on the legend by Ben Greene

I think I might have seen a Bigfoot one drizzly spring night at a ribs joint in Memphis, off the beaten path. I was heading to the men's room down a corridor papered with faded bingo cards, when I noticed a dull light glowing from the back of a cluttered storage room.

At a makeshift table fashioned from cases of *Bud-bustin' Barbecue Sauce* sat what I at first glance took to be a tousled, thickly bearded gentleman in a liver-colored mohair sweater. His low brow was mired in shadows, cast by a single oil-lamp. When I saw the yellow gleam in his eyes, I stopped.

He had a sullen, rubbery face. The jaw was working, piston-like, as he studied an evangelical tract. This he held in liver-colored mittens, or so I assumed.

Just then a waitress brushed by me. The tray she carried bore a pitcher's worth of Bloody Marys. Two stalks of celery bobbed in the thick red liquid. Flanking the pitcher were an unopened quart of malt liquor and a heap of onion rings piled on a checked cardboard tray already soggy with grease.

The waitress darted a look at me, then quickly drew the storeroom door shut. She leaned against it until I shrugged and sidled on down the hall. I opened the men's room door, she at the same moment opened the storeroom door, and as she slipped inside to deliver the tray, I caught a distinct whiff of kerosene and wet dog.

It's been a long time since I heard anybody use the word "foot" as an expletive—"Ah, *foot!*"—and never outside of the South. Imagining a Southern accent

intoning that word that way, I can hear the subtle shading that draws the vowel out, so that the word has almost but not quite two syllables. Folks don't talk like that where



I live now.

I had a roommate, in a North Carolina city, who would get phone calls from his family back home on a Tennessee farm.

As soon as they connected, Jim's not immodest Southern accent would take on a slab or two of country, evocative of cornbread and sorghum. At the time, I thought this vocal quick-change was a little bit of a put-on to mask his fledgling urbanity. Not so. I know that now.

These days, when I call home (people in my current habitat don't "call," they "phone"), or home calls me, my voice sheds its sleeker coats right away, and gets down to something more wooly.

In Australia they call Bigfeet "Yowies." "Yeti" is the Himalayan variant, though that one, of course, is commonly referred to as the *Abominable Snowman*. In Florida, the *Skunk Ape*, according to at least one web site, could lay claim to being the "southernmost Bigfoot." The name we know second best in North America is "Sasquatch," an anglicized version of the Coast Salish word "sesquac," meaning "wild man." The Coast Salish Nation includes bands on Vancouver Island, in southwestern Canada, not too far northwest of Seattle. Vancouver Island in British Columbia is where I now reside.

James Brown, with his rasp and his choked howl, sang, "Get on the good foot," and you just know that's got to be so. I doubt I could precisely articulate what *Soul Brother #1*

intended when he exhorted us that way. (In JB's music, the bass guitar always had the best elocution.) Brown's title phrase calls to mind the notion of "getting off on

the right foot” and of “putting one’s best foot forward.” Given the heavy syncopation that accompanies it, though, “Get on the good foot” smacks pretty hard of dancing, dancing, dancing—ugh!—all over what ails you. In James Brown’s case, *foot* is *foundation*, pivot point for turning yourself around.

Apparently there are over four hundred Bigfoot sightings in North America each year. These range across the continent. The heaviest concentration, though, is in the Great Northwest, in other words my current locale. Even a small sampling of Internet sites yields a wealth of investigations into “Cryptozoology,” which has to be the coolest named of all the sciences.

I limited my research on the tales of Bigfoot sightings to those that occurred here in the Northwest or in the South where I grew up. The earliest report I found from British Columbia was an incident in 1864 when a fur trader and his party were attacked by “hairy humanoids.” In Campbell River on northern Vancouver Island in 1901, a “man-beast” was spotted washing roots in the water and placing them in neat piles.

In 1937, Mrs. Jane Patterson, a B.C. resident, observed a *Sasquatch* sitting in an abandoned garden. Ten years later, some men driving along a logging road on Grouse Mountain near Vancouver came upon “two tall beings with a skin wrapped around them.”

Down South now, in Tennessee in the spring of 1968 a seven-foot tall Bigfoot with “a nauseating odor” got within six feet of Brenda Ann Adkins and stared at her before walking away. In 1975 a farmer in Giles County watched a Bigfoot in a barn snuff out a calf by slamming it to the ground.

There was a rash of Bigfoot incidents in April 1976 near Flintville, Tennessee, where two teenagers saw the creature climbing a bank at night, presumably a dirt embankment, though I savor the image of a Bigfoot scaling a financial institution. Three days later a Bigfoot there tried to abduct a four-year old boy,

only to be chased away by a six-man posse including Sheriff Homer Davis. Later that month, again near Flintville, Bigfoot, apparently uncowed by the likes of Davis and posse, jumped on a car roof and made off with the radio aerial. (All these incidents are

you’d rather, the myth, was my Memphis encounter jarred loose from the fogs of my memories of the 1970’s down home.

Southern people often cultivate a complicated attitude towards refinement or “couth.” When we’re aware that outsiders are trying to come to grips with our Southernness, we might take added pains to help them know that we’re not backwoods rubes. An alternate strategy is to ungold the lily, deliberately aim for that vague roughneck aura or that off-kilter mobile home park vibe. I’ll grant the existence of more mature approaches.

There’s a grand Southern tradition, though, of Pulling Leg. And the easiest marks for leg pulling are those who are most likely to stick their variously sized feet into their invariably big mouths.

After Ray Wallace’s death last November, his kinfolks disclosed his long-kept secret: he, they say, was Bigfoot. He’d perpetrated the hoax starting back in 1958 when he strapped on a pair of huge alder-wood feet and left oversized tracks in Humboldt County California. Other Bigfoot pranks followed, culminating in his 1967 grand coup, the so-called Patterson film, depicting a furry man-ape sauntering away from the camera and, eventually, into American pop-consciousness.

I was raking the campfire, about to pack it in for the night, when my hound lifted his nose off the ground. I figured it was just a ‘coon or a fox rustling back there in the pines. When that thing come out, though, Blue sprung to his feet and bent forward, all quivering. Funny



derived indirectly from *The Bigfoot Casebook* by Janet and Colin Bord, 1982.)

Apparently, there are over four hundred Bigfoot sightings in North America each year.

This terse summary might lead one to conclude that Pacific Northwest Sasquatches are on the whole a more melowered breed than the Southern Skunk Apes. Would-be ethnocryptozoologists should note that such a conclusion might be merely a function of my selectiveness.

I confess I’ve never gone in much for Bigfoot lore. Only when offered the assignment to write about the beast, or if

enough, he didn't bark. Instead he whimpered, just the one time. Hush, Blue. And I noticed my voice was trembling too.

Finally I slipped a leash on him and hauled the both of us back to the truck. Even a good half-hour later he was still

I'm not sure why the stranger in the Memphis restaurant storage room would be wearing fuzzy mittens in May, or why the waitress seemed so protective of him. I do recall finding a stack of those religious tracts on the edge of the bathroom

sink. It was a part of that series which featured the crude cartoons of the unrepentant being shoveled into the fiery lake. "Do you know where

you're going to spend eternity?" was ever the salient question.

I remember that in my boyhood in South Carolina, students from nearby ultraconservative Bob Jones University would sometimes stake out the downtown street corners of my hometown. One

Friday night as I was walking there, aged ten or eleven, and had strayed a half block or so ahead of my family, I was accosted by a pair of these proselytizers. They always wore white shirts and dark ties. Almost always one or both sported horn-rimmed glasses.

"If you were to die tonight," this young man said to me, right off the bat, "do you know whether you'd go to heaven?"

The only way I knew how to answer was to turn around and bolt straight back to my parents.

Later a friend of mine told me that one of his friends had made a point of approaching a pair of the Bob Jones street crew. "Can you save a wild wild woman?" the teenager asked them.

"Certainly."

"Well can you save

me one for Saturday night?"

Lately it hit me that I may seem something of a Sasquatch, wandering out of the forests of the Great Northwest, making the odd appearance Down South, before slipping back into the mist. Writing all this has been my version of washing roots in the water, placing them in neat piles.

Almost always I feel at ease in my skin. I try to get on the good foot, though surely no human can stay there. I don't go out of my way to leave tracks nor do I take special mind to avoid such. But sometimes when I think about back home, I feel like I've scaled up a bank, and wandered into unfamiliar terrain. And now here I sit, quietly, in an abandoned garden.

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Imagine Ray Wallace's inner glee when he strapped on those carved wooden feet and went tromping around making those outsized tracks.

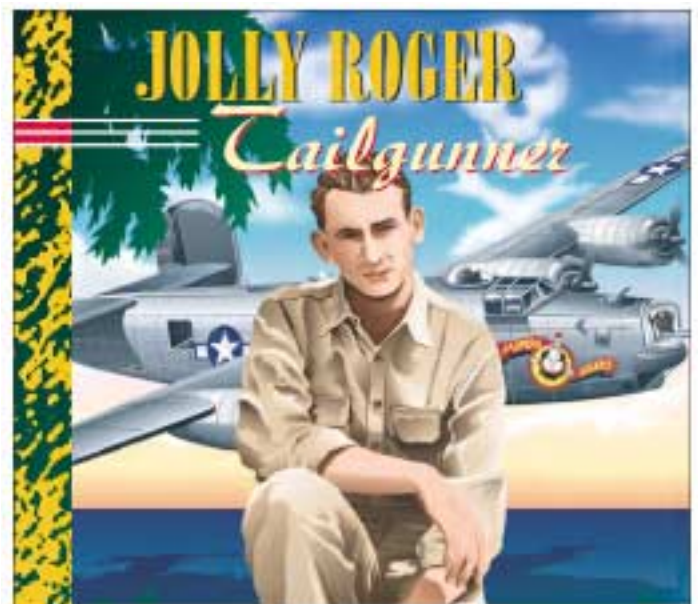
right worked up, panting and slobbering on the upholstery.

If Bigfoot isn't real, then the pervasiveness of the myth speaks to some shadowy human longing. Sometimes we crave sudden feral forces to shake us up, just as an especially polite boy might pine for an unbridled woman.

Imagine Ray Wallace's inner glee when he strapped on those carved wooden feet and went tromping around making those outsized tracks. Picture Ray's unvoiced mirth later, when he steered Roger Patterson armed with an 8 mm camera, towards the site where someone, perhaps Mrs. Wallace, was decked out in an ape suit, all cued up to lumber by.

Ray Wallace probably knew that the real fun would come, not when everybody got so stirred up about it, but as he kept his own inner counsel over the years. Imagine sitting tight for decades. Imagine acting tame about pretending to be wild.

That mysterious apparition I saw in Memphis in the early 80's, indeed the bulk of all the sightings of Bigfoot, Yeti, Yowie, Skunk Ape, and Sasquatch are not called into question by the posthumous revelation of Ray Wallace's hand in the Bigfoot hoax. Cryptozoology will keep trudging in and out of the woods, occasionally basking in the rays of respect from scientists such as Jane Goodall who, unless she was misquoted on the Internet (stranger things have happened), is among the camp who believe there's some as yet unidentified primate out there.



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The Philosophy of the Shaggs

by David Ray Skinner

When I took the paste-up artist job at the music trade magazine, *Record World* in 1977, I arrived in New York amidst the music industry's frantic frenzy to find and market *the next big thing*.

Pop was fizzling, and country had yet to go urban and was still being referred to as country western. But on the other side of the coin, *Saturday Night Fever* had just been released, and disco was waiting in the wings for a chance to dance. Then, of course, there was *The Sex Pistols*, one of the premier bands that ushered in *punk*, the British musical black sheep that could be counted on to throw up in the punchbowl and turn over the all the tables and chairs.

Record label starmakers rightly realized that punk was a force that would not and could not be ignored, so they set about the task of trying to figure out how to homogenize it and package it for the suburban youths of America.

The resulting tag was *New Wave*, as in the *second* wave of the British Invasion. The first British Invasion had introduced the Beatles and the Stones to America; the second wave included such diverse names as Joe Jackson, Dave Edmunds, *The Specials*, and Elvis Costello, to name a few. Not to be outdone, American new wave bands such as *Talking Heads* picked up the slack on this side of the Atlantic.

I grew up in Nashville surrounded by music, and although I was heavily influenced by that town's native sounds, I had also played in garage bands in the mid-60's doing bad imitations of *Herman's Hermits* and *The Dave Clark Five*. I took the *Record World* job mainly so I could be surrounded by music of all kinds. In that aspect, I was not disappointed.

My two roommates had been DJs at a popular New England college radio station, and they were both constantly bringing in music I could never have imagined before my arrival in New York. One of them worked with me at the magazine as a

"Oh, the rich people want what the poor people's got / And the poor people want what the rich people's got / And the skinny people want what the fat people's got / And the fat people want what the skinny people's got / You can never please anybody in this world."

This song was followed up by the curious "That Little Sports Car," and a couple of cuts later, the now-famous "My Pal Foot Foot." The latter was an ode to Foot Foot, the cat, who obviously had run away. There was even a picture of Foot Foot on the album's back cover—a half-cat, half-foot cartoon.

At the first listen, the musicians sounded out of tune as well as out of sync, and they seemed to juggle time signatures with wreckless abandon before discarding them completely. That being said, they were all amazingly in sync with one another as if the cacophony was incredibly planned and, well, *intentional*.

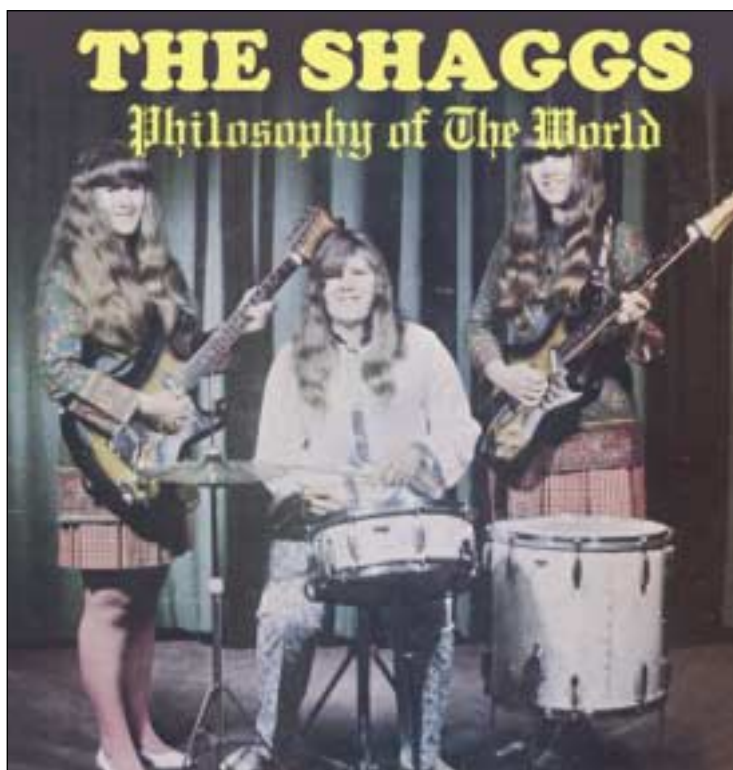
The artists behind (as well as *in front of*) this music were three New Hampshire sisters, Betty, Helen and Dorothy Wiggins, and they called themselves *The Shaggs*.

They had gone into a Revere, Massachusetts studio to record the album in the Spring of 1969 with the help and in fact, *insistence* of their father, a textile worker named Austin Wiggins, Jr.

The elder Wiggins was not a hip dude. He didn't

like hippies or loud rock music, and he forbade his daughters to wear short skirts and wouldn't allow them to date until they reached 18.

But Austin Wiggins, Jr. did have a superstitious side. When he was young, his mother, who dabbled in fortune telling, read his palm and revealed a strange and amazing future: he would marry a straw-



"And the fat people want what the skinny people's got. You can never please anybody in this world."

writer (as well as freelancing for *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*), and he was the one who brought home "Philosophy of the World," the most unusual album I ever heard. When he put it on the turntable, he simply said, "Listen to this."

Immediately, the title track leapt into the sound system:

berry blonde and have two sons that his mother would not live to see. What's more, Mama Fortune went on to say, he would have daughters who would play in a band.

After he married a strawberry blonde, his mother died before his two sons were born, and apparently he felt obligated to make good on the last prediction. When his daughters were old enough, they were required to take on the task of putting together the long-awaited band.

They cut their teeth in the Fremont, New Hampshire Town Hall playing for their neighbors, and before too long, Austin felt like it was time to get his daughters' sound down on record.

Once the sessions were completed, he paid a man for a thousand albums which were to be released and distributed. However, once the man was paid, he disappeared, leaving Austin and *The Shaggs* with a total of one box of albums. Most of the records ended up in the hands of friends and relatives; the balance ended up in the dumpster, or in some cases, used record stores. The girls continued to play, however, until their father's death in 1975.

Here's where the story takes its weird twist. At some point in the late '70s, Terry Adams, lead singer for the band *NRBQ*, stumbled across a copy of "Philosophy of the World" in a used record store. He was fascinated with the album and somehow managed to convince his parent record company, *Rounder* to release it on *NRBQ's Red Rooster* label. The rights to the album were bought, and the record was re-released on *Red Rooster* in 1980 with its original album art and liner notes intact.

Like every album released by *Rounder*, promotional copies of "Philosophy of the World" made their way to the major music publications including *Record World* (which is how my roommate happened on to it). The response was almost immediate. One critic called it "the first punk album," and *Rolling Stone* named *The Shaggs* "Comeback Band of the Year." More important, the album started selling in record stores.

Of all the people amazed at the success of the record, none were more surprised than the Wiggin sisters themselves. After their father died in 1975, the girls had put away their instruments and moved on with

their respective lives. Dorothy got married, had two sons and made a living working at a daycare center and as a house cleaner. Betty went to work as a school janitor, and later at a kitchen equipment



Where is Foot Foot?

"The Shaggs are better than the Beatles...even today."

—Frank Zappa

warehouse. And Helen eloped with a boy she met at one of the town hall gigs, but because of their father's strictness, they kept the marriage a secret for several months, and she continued to live at home. When their father found out, he was predictably furious, and he kicked Helen out of the band, but allowed her to rejoin a short time later.

After the album began making waves, the girls—at that point, middle-aged

housewives—began receiving fan mail from all over the world. Frank Zappa even weighed in saying *The Shaggs* were "better than the *Beatles*."

In 1999, the boys from *NRBQ* talked *The Shaggs* into playing a reunion concert in New York City, their first concert in a quarter of a century as well as their first one outside of New Hampshire. And, in early 2000, actor Tom Cruise secured the movie rights to an article about *The Shaggs*. Their music has spawned dozens (if not hundreds) of websites, complete with *Shaggs* paraphernalia and CDs, plus links to *The Shaggs'* email addresses.

As for my own experience in playing the record for the uninitiated, I was always fascinated with the reactions I observed. The responses were a mixture of incredulity, laughter, annoyance, anger and always curiosity. (In the early '80s I would typically play the Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights," the *Talking Heads'* "Psycho Killer" and *The Shaggs'* "My Pal Foot Foot" in rapid succession to confuse and amaze my friends from the South visiting me in New York for the first time.)

The Shaggs can best be summed up by a comment made by a fan posting to one of the websites dedicated to the band. "They are either mentally-challenged or geniuses," he wrote. "I've been a musician for 30 years and I still can't tell which."

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The Girl Next Door

A memoir by Ron Burch

This year, my wife, Valerie and I will celebrate our 41st wedding anniversary. New friends and acquaintances sometimes find that hard to believe. When they react, Valerie will always explain that she was a child bride. I simply nod in acknowledgment of a lot of years with the same woman.

The Prologue

For some strange reason, no one has any problem believing *I've* been married since Chevrolets, Fords and Plymouths all had tail fins.

Everything was different back then in the early 60's. A modest brick home in a good neighborhood could be purchased for less than the price of a new Volkswagen bug today.

The cost of utilities to keep it comfortable totalled less than forty dollars a

month—including the telephone. Since American-made automobiles were good for only about 60,000 miles, almost everyone drove cars that were no more than four years old. The original *Beetle* had become a popular alternative since it had a longer life span.

A major market had three—perhaps four—television stations, and about the same number of supermarket chains. Supermarkets sold groceries; gasoline stations sold gas. Drugstores sold ice cream,

candy, all-occasion cards, health aids and pharmaceuticals.

"Dime Stores" didn't sell "dimes," but a dime would buy a bag chock-full of something tasty and sweet. Doctors—not insurance companies or HMO's—prescribed all medical treatment.

Schoolteachers taught the four R's. Pastors and priests and rabbis were responsible for the spiritual well-being of their flock and they themselves were the moral leaders. Most corporate officers, politicians and professionals alike at least professed a code of professional ethics.

You could search the entire FM dial and only find three or four broadcast stations. Most of them had a classical music or an educational format.

The breakfast cereal displays at the

supermarket contained no more than half-a-dozen brands. It wasn't necessary to bend down to the level of a four-year old to get the sugarcoated stuff; or stretch overhead for the bran flakes for the old folks. Marketing focused on distribution—not on the demographics of the market, or on the quirks of human behavior. Things were far less confusing, for sure.

Perhaps the most important differences were cultural. And of the cultural differences, the most meaningful one to me was that marriage was forever—not until the new wears off, not until it gets old, someone sexier comes along or rough times set in. The wedding vows—for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live—weren't multiple choice. They came as a package, since over a lifetime together, common sense said that a lasting marriage would experience them all.

Getting Acquainted

My first memory of Valerie was as a pretty, blonde teenager, sledding on a light powder of snow down a hill in her back yard. My parents had purchased the home next door and I was at home, between my sophomore and junior years in college. My mom asked if I had seen the pretty little girl next door. I replied with a whine, "Ma-ah, she's just a baby!"

One day, Mom motioned me to a rear bedroom window for a peek. And while I was impressed with how cute she looked in the royal blue jump suit she was wearing, she was far too young for this college man. That didn't keep Mom from talking about the "pretty little girl next door" whenever she had the chance.

As a matter of fact, Valerie now says that my Mom arranged our marriage just to drive a wedge into a relationship she didn't like!

Regardless, on a cool, autumn Sunday afternoon, about a year later, I decided that the "pretty little girl next door" was worth another look. My parents were out of town, and after performing with our band at a college fraternity dance the night before, I'd planned to drive into town to retrieve a copy of some audiotapes made of the session, by our drummer. He was an enterprising young fellow who went to school, played in the band, and worked weekends at a local radio station.

Having made up my mind to test the water with the "pretty little girl next door," I paced the floor deep in thought, not knowing exactly how I was going to pull this off. Finally, I simply picked up the phone and dialed. Valerie answered, and I announced that I was Ron Burch, the boy next door. From there, she made it all too easy.

"I know who you are, I've got a picture of you in my wallet," she responded. (*Was this my lucky day or what?*)

Of course I expressed surprise and asked how the picture got there. She explained that it was taken at a sorority dance where our band had performed the previous Valentine's Day.

The coup de grace came later. She asked if I would like to see it.

"You betcha!" was my quick reply, and I quickly changed clothes from blue jeans into a white shirt, tie and three-button Ivy League suit with, *get this*, cuffs on the coat sleeves.

Looking "way cool" and feeling very confident, I drove the short distance from

at me, smiled, and said "sure." I felt like an NFL wide receiver who had just caught a 30-yard touchdown pass.

We walked to the car where I, of course, opened—and closed—her door. The drive into town was filled with chatter...me behind the wheel, and Valerie way over on the passenger side. She was practically hugging the right-side door.

At the radio station, while Valerie looked away, Freddy, the drummer in our band, gave me a "thumbs up." I was thinking the same thing, and I was already planning to extend the drive back home. About half way there, I placed my arm on the back of the seat behind the pretty little blonde. She responded by scooting over toward my side. My heart did a thump.

The Courtship

We began to date almost immediately...right after I said "goodbye" to the old girlfriend that my mom disliked. In fact, we were soon together whenever we had the opportunity. And living next door—there were plenty of opportunities.

Soon it was time for my next move. I invited Valerie to tag along with me to window shop at the local boat store, Stovall Marine. She liked the red one best.

That night, Valerie told her Mom that I was going to buy her a boat. "Right," was the sarcastic reply. The next day, when I drove up with the red, 16' Glaspar ski boat in tow behind the *Big P*, Valerie—but not her Mom—was ecstatic.

Over the next few months, the little blonde next door and I became best friends. We were nearly always together. If we weren't on the lake or out on a date, we were waxing the boat, washing the *Big P* or just sitting out on the patio, listening to music.

The Proposal

Rumors of a war in Southeast Asia and a renewed draft call had my pals and I thinking a lot about our futures. That spring and summer I was honored to be "best man" at several of their weddings.

By late summer, much to the dismay of Valerie's parents, she'd said "yes" to my proposal and we, too, were shopping for an engagement ring.

After much moaning and groaning and crying and pleading, her parents allowed her to accept the ring on one condition:

My first memory of Valerie was as a pretty, blonde teenager, sledding on a light powder of snow.

our driveway to hers in the shiny, black-and-white, '57 Plymouth Fury Golden Commando we called the *Big P*. It was a prized possession and something none of her current boyfriends had.

I gave the doorbell one short ring. The prettiest girl I'd ever seen opened the door.

A little shy of five-feet-tall and perfectly proportioned, she was a honey blonde with creamy skin and sparkling green eyes and couldn't have weighed more than 90 pounds. She invited me into the den where we sat down on the sofa and chatted for a few minutes before she showed me the photo. Sure enough, there I was—red tuxedo, tenor saxophone and all—rocking out at the *LaVista Women's Club* on the 14th of February, a year or so earlier.

A few exaggerations later, I looked at my watch a bit pensively and asked if she would like to accompany me on a drive downtown to the radio station. She hesitated for a moment, then asked her Mom if it would be okay.

Drying her hands on her apron as she came out of the kitchen, her mom looked

she could wear it when she was out with me, but she wasn't allowed to wear it to school or at other times.

By Christmas, we were making wedding plans. We wanted to get married sometime after her birthday in February. Even though Valerie was still a high school student, I was employed fulltime by BDA/BBDO Advertising in Atlanta as a production artist. I earned a good salary—at least enough for us to make it on our own, without anyone's help.

Sometime around Valentine's Day, we informed our parents of our plans.

"Ron, you're both just too, too young!" exclaimed her Dad.

"I won't hear of it," her Mom announced emphatically.

"Son, I wish you'd wait, but you're old enough to know what you're doing," shrugged my Dad.

"If you're going to get married, I want to be there to see it!" my Mom chimed in.

Getting a License and Making it Legal

In preparation, we'd applied for a marriage license several weeks earlier. We had decided to apply at a county some distance away from our home, just in case Valerie's parents were snooping. On a cold and windy day late in January, we drove to the courthouse in a little town some forty miles outside of Atlanta.

Once inside, the signs told us where to go. We walked uneasily passed a pot-bellied stove in the center of the room, and into the *Office of the Ordinary*. The Clerk eyed us both up and down, then gave us an application to fill-out and complete.

Paperwork complete, she asked for our IDs. To speed up the process—and to avoid having our names published in the County paper—I had fabricated a counterfeit driver's license ID for Valerie that said she was eighteen. There would still be a three-day wait. However, that was better than the two-week wait they would have required had we listed her real age.

On the day after the waiting period expired over a very extended lunch hour I drove back to the little courthouse to pick up our Marriage License. I parked the *Big P* between two gray-and-blue cruisers belonging to the Georgia State Highway Patrol.

"Wonder what *they're* doing here?" I pondered.



Although Jacksonville was rainy, windy and nasty cold, we wanted to have some pictures of our honeymoon.

I didn't have a topcoat and it was another cold and blustery day. I literally ran from the parking area into the Courthouse. There I saw two burly Highway Patrol Officers standing close to the pot-bellied stove in the center of the room, warming their rather large backsides. Each one was armed to the hilt with two holsters. They even had handcuffs hanging from their wide black belts.

Now one thing my mama taught me

was that "discretion was the better part of valor." So remembering that Valerie had used a fake driver's license as proof of her age, I nonchalantly walked over, joined them beside the stove, and struck up a conversation.

"Cold out, isn't it?"

One said, "Yep," the other just nodded in agreement.

"Uh, are you guys here all the time?"

One said, "Nope," the other shook his head. My heart skipped a beat.

I went further, "Then what brings you here on a day like this?"

"Driver's Licenses." Now my heart was pounding.

Nervously clearing my throat, I commented, "Oh yeah?"

"Yep," the talkative officer replied, "It's that time of year."

"What time of year is that?" I asked trying my best not to look like a criminal.

"Renewals. Son, you'd be surprised how many people put it off until the very last minute, then have to come out on a nasty day like this to avoid breaking the law."

Whew!

Five minutes and sixteen dollars later, I had our *Marriage License* and my heart resumed beating at a normal rhythm.

The Elopement

Thursday night, March 1, 1962. While a temporary lock-down was occurring at Valerie's house, I was busy with a screwdriver under a dark carport, changing the license tag on my car, to the

Florida plate it displayed when I purchased it.

The next morning, before leaving for work, my Dad gave me a hug, shook my hand, patted me on the back and said, "Good luck, son. Drive carefully, and let us hear from you when you get to where you're going." Meanwhile, next door, Valerie's dad was getting ready to drive her to school.

At eight-fifteen, he let her out by the

entrance to the gymnasium—unaware that I was lurking a few cars back. After waving goodbye and going into the gym door as expected, Valerie dashed back out to my car, climbed in, and crouched down underneath the dash to keep from being spotted by the crossing guard. While she remained out of sight and hidden from view, I pulled away from the curb and merged back into the line of school traffic. To avoid suspicion I smiled and waved at the crossing guard as I passed and made a left turn onto

"Ron, Valerie isn't here right now...
they were to take drill team
pictures after school..."

the main road.

We'd met with our minister several weeks earlier. While he cautioned us about getting married so young and reiterated all the problems we'd be facing, he had reluctantly agreed to perform the ceremony. In the past week, the denial of parental permission as well as the lock-down at Valerie's house had spoiled our plans for a small church wedding. So we called and convinced our minister to marry us at his home.

As we drove down the main road and distanced ourselves from the high school, the clock on the dashboard read eight twenty-five. We were somewhat ahead of schedule. The minister wasn't expecting us until nine-thirty. We needed a "safe house" for about an hour. We drove to a cousin's home nearby and camped-out. At nine twenty-five, it was off to the minister's house, a scant eight blocks away, for the shortest recital of the wedding vows in history.

Afterwards, I paid the minister, said goodbye to Mom (yes, she was there) and we headed south to Florida, and a five-day honeymoon.

The farther south we drove, the harder it rained. Driving state roads with questionable tires, the going was slow. Roughly seven hours later we were approaching the outskirts of Jacksonville. We decided that was where we'd spend the night. During the last hour or so of the drive, we'd hardly spoken at all.

"Are you going to call and tell my Mom?" Valerie asked.

"Sure, no problem," I replied.

"Are you sure? Do you promise?" she

wanted reassurance.

"Yes, I promise." I just hoped I could do it.

Five minutes later, the same questions would break the silence once again.

The Confession

Just after five-thirty, we pulled into a Howard Johnson's Restaurant, next to the Arlington Motor Lodge, on the south side of the St. John's River Bridge. We knew we'd find a public telephone that was out

of the weather inside the HoJo. Besides, we were both hungry.

It was all you can eat "clam night," and even though it was well before the traditional dinner hour, the place was packed. The only public phone was wall-mounted, near the end of an L-shaped serving counter. I elbowed my way to it, deposited sufficient coins for a three-minute call, and waited for Valerie's mom to answer. It didn't take long.

"Mrs. McDonald, this is Ron."

"Hi, Ron," she responded—almost warmly.

Without me saying another word, she continued, "Ron, Valerie isn't here right now...they were to take drill team pictures after school, and she hasn't gotten home yet."

"I know she isn't there, Mrs. McDonald. Valerie and I...uh...we got married this morning. Here, would you like to speak with her?"

Valerie gasped and took a short, quick breath. She shook her head "no" but eventually took the phone. The only thing her Mom said before hanging up was that she felt sorry for her.

Everyone at the counter was silent. Everyone was looking at us. While Valerie cried softly, I replaced the receiver and checked the coin return for a refund. Even though the call was far less than three minutes, Southern Bell kept all the money.

Valerie dried off her tears and we shrugged off the wet blanket her mom threw on the occasion. We checked into the Motor Lodge next door, unloaded the car, and went back to HoJo's for dinner. By now the news about the "little couple

that eloped" had spread. Several folks came over to our booth to wish us good luck. I suppose that was our reception.

After dinner, Valerie said she wanted to go shopping for clothes.

Perhaps this should have been a sign to me of what was to come. However, since her dowry consisted of twenty-five dollars and a pocketbook full of hair curlers, she obviously did need a few things. We bought clothes and a camera. Although Jacksonville was rainy, windy and nasty cold, we wanted to have some pictures of our honeymoon. I suggested we take them by the palm trees that lined the pool. No one had to know the temperature was only forty degrees.

The weekend flew by in a hurry. On Monday night we were lying in bed, wondering what would befall us once we arrived home in Atlanta. Suddenly the bedside phone rang loudly. We both jumped a foot into the air. It was my dad with a message from Valerie's parents: they said to come back home—they were

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The advertisement features a photograph of an astronaut in a white spacesuit floating in space against a blue background. The astronaut is holding a small, framed picture of a purple hand holding a yellow chain. The text "You are what you wear." is at the top, "IMBRAS" is in large yellow letters in the middle, and "Clothing for Mind and Body. www.imbras.com" is at the bottom.

now “in our corner.”

And so they were—even though they referred to me as “hey you” for most of the next twenty years.

Over the Threshold

In April we bought furniture and moved into our first apartment. In June, Valerie got her diploma and went to work. In August, we bought our first little house, only blocks away from our parents. In October, we were all drawn closer together as the *Cuban Missile Crisis* unfolded and we all practiced the “duck and cover.”

A year later, Valerie’s parents relocated to Dunedin, Florida. Whenever we happened to run into one of their former church friends or a neighbor, they acted surprised to learn that, A) we were still together; B) that we didn’t already have a kid; and C) that Valerie wasn’t pregnant. (I guess that’s all those good Episcopalians had to think about.)

I don’t know if “love conquered all,” or if sheer guts and determination got us through. Either way, we made it over the rough spots during those early years, and the two of us, as well as our marriage, matured greatly.

40 Years of Good Behavior

Our accomplishments since have been as a team. So have our failures. Valerie completed the course of study and passed the *Dental Hygiene Boards* in 1970. I became a partner in the graphics arts production firm where I worked. I learned to fly, got a *Private Pilot’s License* and an *Instrument Rating*, and bought an airplane. Over the next thirty-five years, I acquired and sold several businesses—all the while staying involved in the graphic arts.

Along the way, Valerie and I tried to maintain a balance in our lives—personally, professionally and spiritually. We gave each other the space we needed to be individuals, our own persons. We’ve seldom argued or had angry confrontations.

When we had problems—and every marriage does—“calling it quits” was never an acceptable option, or one that was even considered.

As strong individuals, we some-

times held onto our strong opinions. When they differed, we both had to learn to pick our battles. Our philosophy was “major in the majors” and “minor in the minors.” We learn to appreciate the value of compromise.

Over time, the passion, the hormones, and the hot-rod Plymouth we called the *Big P* have all been replaced by a little security, lots of contentment, and a big old Buick. My love and admiration for that “pretty little girl next door” I married over four decades ago has grown deeper with each passing year.

At least for now, I’m retired—having

sold the last business, the airplane, and quit my day job. I’m what you’d call lazy—fat and lazy, but that’s okay...that cute little blonde still loves me, and she places her fuzzy house shoes under my bed every night!

Forty-to-life with the same women ...*who would have ever thought it.*

rlburch@attbi.com

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www.KeyOnMusic.com

The Children of the Sun

by Steve Batson



Who were these children of the sun that reached so high and that dared so much? Men and women from around the world. People who found our dream so compelling, so enduring, so beyond reproach, as to journey here from afar, only to journey on.

Why is it that we feel the need to reach out and touch them at this late date, and feel the wind of time blow by all of us as we journey to the stars with them? What made them so willing to give so much, study so hard, and work beyond measure, just to see the night sky beyond the clouds...and why do we even care about this thing, this nothing, that they reached out to embrace?

Is it possible, could it be, that somewhere deep inside we see and feel the things that they felt? Could it be that a part of each of us died in early morning sky over Texas? Do you suppose that what

died was a part of the better angels of our nature?

Perhaps a mural says it best...painted long ago, when men first walked on the moon. A great mural of the men who reached to the stars and walked on the moon, and then behind them the men and women so close—who earthbound helped them on their way. In that mural, there, deep in the background of this vision of who caused this...way back in the back, so far as to be nondescript stand I. You are there too in this mural, for they were and we were...then, American's all.

Today that is not the case, and perhaps

more than any other reason that is why we will go on. By and large Americans deliver our unique message in the form of reaching for the stars and in the best things that we build as a nation...that dream, their dream, is the best of America, the best of the city, the best of the heartland, the best of north, south, east, and west.

The ability for the first time in the history of man to have people embrace a vision, not at the point of a sword, but in reaching for a distant point of light. If man can fly, then he will forever seek his way higher.

God Speed *Columbia*, we didn't have to know your names or understand your experiments...we knew your mission, and therein you will find our stamp of approval.

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The Crow Stands for Law

by David Clark

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There are various laws that have been around a long, long time. Some of them found their way into English common law. These formed the basis for our present set of rules. Many of the old laws dealt with the basics of doing right by another person.

Before most of America's population moved to the cities during the Great Depression, everyone understood certain things about living together. Anger with one's neighbor was to be avoided if possible. If anger couldn't be avoided, it was worked out man-to-man in the back yard. In most cases, men did right by one another.

This taking of responsibility forged trust and respect between neighbors. In the worst cases, men were selfish. This is when men shot each other.

There was usually no need for the courts. Most problems were easily solved because both parties could easily see what was important.

Being a good neighbor was the rule. Fairness was the order of the day. Pain of one party was shared by another. Survival dictated the priorities. Survival meant having neighbors one could count on.

Some would say life was cheap in the old days. If one spends an afternoon reading rural newspapers from the late 1800's and early 1900's, one will see what folks were up against. Not a week went by that there weren't attacks from mad dogs, flu epidemics, snakes, angry men, or lightning. Death was quick, unless you got bit by a mad dog. Then it took a couple of months to die.

Maybe it would be better to say that the currency of living was not so much cheap as it was in short supply. It was highly val-

ued by all concerned. Living things were held with more respect in general than they are now. Humans were bound to the living world around them.

The lowly chicken, for instance, was vitally important in those days. The yard-bird could go a long way towards feeding the children. The eggs were valuable. They were gathered carefully. Nothing was wasted. Everyone looked after the

things which fed them. Those chickens were tended with love.

The family dog was more than a pet. He was part of the family--he guarded the family by guarding the henhouse.

It was universally understood that once an animal got a taste of blood, nothing would stop him from tasting it again. The dog caught killing chickens or other livestock was like a man convicted of treason. He was shot.



Whatever was damaging to the respect shared by the neighbors was as good as treason.

It's hard to think of treason. There have been times when it's been a commonly used word, but it's not the sort of word people use lightly.

In modern times it applies to betraying one's government, like a National Judas. In olden times the government was the respect shared by men who were joined in some way by property.

These were your neighbors.

Whatever was damaging to the respect shared by the neighbors was as good as treason. Sometimes the Benedict Arnold was a dog.

My Aunt Betty Trail lived in Basehor, Kansas. She was a small woman who grew up in Colby, Kansas, during the Dust Bowl years. After she married, Aunt Betty got some chickens. She gathered

eggs twice a day.

They helped put my cousins through college. I'd bet fifty dollars right now that Aunt Betty could hit a dog on the run a half mile across the wheat field out back if she caught him stealing one of her hens. Besides college money, those eggs fed at least five mouths at least twice a day. There would be no treason against feeding the family as long as Aunt Betty could

help it.

In the old days, it was the women who guarded the day to day life of the household. Virtually all women were good with a rifle. They knew how to use it. They knew when to use it. If it needed using, they didn't hesitate.

As I move into the year of my fortieth birthday, I can begin to see the mythology in life. I reckon one can see it anywhere at anytime, but for whatever reason I'm seeing it now.

I can imagine that someone would think: "Oh, are you just now seeing it?" And someone else would wonder what I was talking about.

Someone who is a little more connected to the everydayness of what is called normal life would tell me I was seeing things and making things up. Someone who is a little too connected to the everydayness of that normal life might ponder dreamily about what it would be like to have the time in their mind to see the mythology around them.

One of the luxuries of being a writer is that it's part of my job to see these things. One of the hardships is describing what I see.

The week before Christmas, I was complaining long-distance to my girlfriend about being lonely. "All I've got is my dogs," I said.

It has occurred to me that while God may answer prayers, Murphy answers complaints. This same Murphy helped draw up some of the original laws.

Maybe complaints are like upside down and backwards prayers. Murphy will always answer us.

Maybe what God does is give us a God-shaped-mirror, which helps us transform the upside down and the backwards into something we can make sense of.

I live on a gravel driveway. One thing about a gravel driveway is that you can almost tell how a person feels by the sound their vehicle makes when they drive up.

So when I was startled out of sleep two mornings before Christmas by the

sound of the gravel, I knew the man in the truck lurching to a stop outside my window was mad.

I threw on some clothes. He banged on the door until I pulled it open. He said: "Those goats of mine are worth money."

I went out on the back porch and asked him if he was sure it was my dogs.

His voice broke when he told me about carrying his son in his arms to see a young goat that was born the same day as the son. They arrived just in time to see my best friends tearing the young goat to pieces.

I reached for my neighbor's hand, and we shook hands for a long time. This

This grown man was crying openly.
So was I, because I knew
what came next.

grown man was crying openly. So was I, because I knew what came next.

I've learned I can't really tell this story. Some of my city friends think I'm cruel. They've never heard of any such law as the one I obeyed. Their suggestions ranged from putting the dogs on a chain to telling the neighbor to go to hell. They've never heard of their Grandma's certain expertise with a rifle. They have no conception of the cruelty of a chain for a dog who is accustomed to running in miles of open space. In our modern society, where neighbors don't even know each other, it's no wonder there's not much understanding of being or having a neighbor who can be counted on.

It's no longer part of the national experience to share the understanding between two men that comes after one takes painful responsibility for the pain of the other.

I turned left onto Mr. Billy's road. I had borrowed his .22 rifle and had to take it back. There's a bare spot on the side of the road on that corner, where the clay is red. There on the bare spot, sat a crow.

It was the first crow I'd seen all year. Usually a crow will land in a field where there's something to eat. One won't normally see a crow on a bare spot of clay.

I took my hat off when I passed that crow.

When I got back home from Mr. Billy's, I looked in my book of American Indian mythology. According to this book, animals seen at certain times have meaning.

The crow stands for law.

When I went for a walk that night, I saw a sort of shape out of the corner of each eye. One shape was next to me on the right and the other was slightly ahead and to the left. What I saw can only be described as little balls of energy, which might sound ridiculous if you've never seen one.

As I walked on down the dirt road, the moon cast a shadow on my left in the ditch. Slightly below the plane of the road was the shadow of the road. I could see myself--a solitary shadow of a man walking. I looked back at the road. Something caught my eye about the shadow of myself and I looked at it.

Some folks would insist it was an illusion. But I'll always believe that on Christmas Eve I saw, for a brief moment, two smaller shadows walking beside the solitary shadow of a man. After that brief moment, the two smaller shadows ran happily off into the larger shadow of the cotton patch.

David Clark is a writer, guitarist, and storyteller living in Cochran, Georgia. His weekly column appears in a couple dozen Southeastern newspapers. His essays have run on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." He performs regularly for all kinds of groups, telling his stories and singing his songs. He also tells Uncle Remus stories. Clark has released nine CDs and 3 books. You can write David Clark at P.O. Box 148, Cochran, GA 31014, or send him email at dclark@outofthesky.com. His website is www.outofthesky.com.