

## MEMORIES OF OAKHURST

By John F. Hall

My stories come from events that I have experienced and observed over an amazing life time of adventures and risk-taking. Like a pendulum, I like to take the readers of my stories on a roller coaster ride of emotions. Murray State University will host an "Oakhurst Centennial Celebration" on December 3, 2021, from 4 to 6 p.m. One may wonder, what kind of memory could I possibly have about a 100 year old house on the campus of Murray State University? To answer that question, I first need to give the reader of this story, a brief history of that old house.



It was in that old house that the idea of Murray State was envisioned by the university's founder, Dr. Rainey T. Wells. He and his family began to build the house, then called Edgewood, on their nearly 22 acres of land in 1918. In 1939, Dr. Wells left the University to become the general attorney for Woodman of the World in Omaha, Nebraska. That year, the Murray State Board of Regents purchased the house for \$20,000 and renamed it Oakhurst. In 1978, Oakhurst was named to the National Registry of Historic Places.

My old house is located five miles west of Cadiz on Dyer's Hill. It was constructed in 1860, during the American Civil War. In 1919, the owners tore down the Antebellum house's portico to make a long 58-foot front porch with gutters to catch rainwater into a front cistern. I made so many renovations to the historic house, that it may be disqualified from being listed on the National Register. But it is my old Kentucky home and I have lived in the old house for the past 43 years.

So how did I make the journey to become a Murray State Racer? It began during the time that the University of Kentucky supervised, for lack of a better word, the Hopkinsville Community College (HCC). I became a student there, during the second year of its existence, in the fall semester of 1966. I enrolled as a freshman and I transferred one English Literature course from Austin Peay College. It was a night course that I completed in 1964. I was a former paratrooper and I served in the 101st Airborne Division from December 1962 until June 1965, as an enlisted teenage soldier. I was able to matriculate only because I was an Army veteran going to college on the Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966. That GI Bill was passed March 3, 1966.

One thing needs to be mentioned when I transferred to Murray State in 1968. Whether it was working too many hours as a student Postal Assistant on Fort Campbell, or just not being wired enough to pass the chemistry course at HCC, but I failed chemistry. I had to retake the course at Murray State. My first day at Murray State, in the dreaded chemistry course, something unusual happened. The professor walked into the large round classroom that had at least 50 or more students. He said, "I want to see a show of hands of the students that don't like chemistry." Everyone raised their hands. I was amazed because I thought that I was the only dumb student in that class. I don't remember the

professor's name, but he said, "I am going to teach you to love chemistry." He did and I made a "B" in his class. That is one of the secrets of Murray State.

I was married and I had a one year old son, John. I worked part-time in the campus post office for Postmaster, Hal Kingins. I also worked extra hours during registration, controlling student lines. Those were the days before laptops. Punch cards, paper and pencils ruled back then. My major was business and I commuted from Cadiz to the campus.

Alpha Kappa Psi, a professional business fraternity, was having pledge week and I was asked to pledge. I was accepted and it came time to be initiated into the fraternity. The dress code was a business suit with a black bow tie. I had my business suit in my car. Thirty minutes before the start of the initiation, I went to my car to retrieve my suit and bow tie. I realized, after I opened the car door, that I left the bow tie on the kitchen table. I was frantic. There was no time to drive back to Cadiz. It seemed that all was lost.

I don't know if people believe that they have a guardian Angel. I suspect that mine whispered into my ear and said: "Go to Oakhurst and talk to the President." Now, at that time in history, the GI Bill only paid for my tuition and books. I had a mountain of student loans and I was as poor as a church mouse. I also felt that I had as much influence as that tiny mouse. I thought to myself, "What do I have to lose? The worst that the college President can do is to tell me to get off his front porch."

So I ran the two blocks from the business building to Oakhurst. I ran up the front porch steps and knocked on the front door. I was sweating from running so fast. Dr. Sparks opened the front door and said: "How can I help you, son?" I replied: "Dr. Sparks, I am about to be initiated into Alpha Kappa Psi in about 25 minutes. I have to wear a black bow tie and I left my bow tie in Cadiz. Can you help me?" Dr. Sparks got a big smile on his face and he invited me into Oakhurst. He told me to follow him into the downstairs bedroom. He opened up a chest drawer and pulled out a brand new black bow tie, still in its plastic wrapping.

He handed it to me. I said: "Dr. Sparks, I'll get it back to you as soon as the initiation is over." He said: "Son, you can return it tomorrow. Now go and don't be late for the initiation." I thanked Dr. Sparks when I returned the bow tie the next day. During those times with Dr. Sparks, I realized the empathy that he had for his students. Dr. Harry Sparks handed me my first college degree, the Bachelor of Science in Business in 1970. When I was doing my student teaching for the Master of Arts in College Teaching (MACT) degree at HCC, I remembered how Dr. Sparks treated me. I treated those 42 students the same way. They were all special to me. Dr. Constantine Curris handed me my MACT degree in 1977, and my Specialist in College Teaching (SCT) degree in 1978.

I would bring my wife, Paula and our grandchildren, Andrea, Heather, and John-John to the Murray State University Homecoming parade. We would eat breakfast with the Murray State Education Alumni in the Murray Middle School, before the parade began.

Murray State held its first classes, on the first floor of that school when it was founded. At the Homecoming breakfast they gave out college souvenirs as prizes.

I have a few things to write about the 6th President of Murray State University, Dr. Constantine W. Curris. In 1979, I was given a Direct Commission in the Kentucky National Guard as a First Lieutenant. I was given command of the former 614th Military Police Company in Murray, Kentucky, from 1982 to 1984. I provided traffic control assistance during the Homecoming parade. Dr. Curris and I became friends and we would meet at Oakhurst. I told him, in so many words, to “beware of the ides of March.” I was sad to see him leave Murray State. I felt that he valued our friendship. I won a print of Oakhurst and I had it framed. I put it in my tiny office when I worked for the State. I would drive my oldest granddaughter, Andrea from Cadiz to Heritage Christian Academy (HCA) in Hopkinsville. I would then drive to my office a few miles away. I made a promise to Andrea that I would eat lunch with her every day, that I was not working out of town or away on military duty. I kept that promise for ten years. I transferred from the Kentucky National Guard to the Army Reserve in 1984. I retired from the Army Reserve in 2005 in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

I would pick up Andrea after school and bring her back to my office until it was time for my work day to end around 4 p.m. One day, Andrea was sitting at my desk and looking at the print of Oakhurst hanging on the wall.



I took her picture without her noticing what I was doing. She has called me “An-Father” since she was a little baby. She asked me a question: “An-Father, who lives in that big red house?” I replied: “A very special man named Dr. Harry Sparks use to live there.” Shakespeare wrote, “The good men do is oft interred with their bones.” Christ has given this Murray State University Alumnus so much grace upon grace upon grace. Oakhurst holds a

special place in my memories and in my heart because of the kindness of Dr. Sparks and my friendship with Dr. Curris.

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\*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>